



Class PZ3

Book C7387

COPY 2



Class PZ3

Book. C7387

COPY 2

03

J 20604
4676 A
73

SMOTHERED FIRES

BOOKS BY
HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

A LITTLE DUSKY HERO
A SON OF THE HILLS
AT THE CROSSROADS
CAMP BRAVE PINE
JANET OF THE DUNES
JOYCE OF THE NORTH WOODS
MAM'SELLE JO
PRINCESS RAGS AND TATTERS
SMOTHERED FIRES
THE MAN THOU GAVEST
THE PLACE BEYOND THE WINDS
THE SHIELD OF SILENCE
THE TENTH WOMAN
THE VINDICATION
UNBROKEN LINES

Smothered Fires

by

Harriet T. Comstock



Doubleday, Page & company

Garden City New York

1924

[Copy 2-7

PZ3
C7387
Sm
Copy 2

Handwritten title or header text, possibly "Handwritten Journal".

Handwritten header text
Handwritten entry 1
Handwritten entry 2
Handwritten entry 3
Handwritten entry 4
Handwritten entry 5
Handwritten entry 6
Handwritten entry 7
Handwritten entry 8
Handwritten entry 9
Handwritten entry 10
Handwritten entry 11
Handwritten entry 12
Handwritten entry 13
Handwritten entry 14
Handwritten entry 15
Handwritten entry 16
Handwritten entry 17
Handwritten entry 18
Handwritten entry 19
Handwritten entry 20
Handwritten entry 21
Handwritten entry 22
Handwritten entry 23
Handwritten entry 24
Handwritten entry 25
Handwritten entry 26
Handwritten entry 27
Handwritten entry 28
Handwritten entry 29
Handwritten entry 30
Handwritten entry 31
Handwritten entry 32
Handwritten entry 33
Handwritten entry 34
Handwritten entry 35
Handwritten entry 36
Handwritten entry 37
Handwritten entry 38
Handwritten entry 39
Handwritten entry 40
Handwritten entry 41
Handwritten entry 42
Handwritten entry 43
Handwritten entry 44
Handwritten entry 45
Handwritten entry 46
Handwritten entry 47
Handwritten entry 48
Handwritten entry 49
Handwritten entry 50

Handwritten mark or signature.

Handwritten text, possibly a date or location.

Handwritten text, possibly a name or title.

Handwritten text, possibly a page number.

A 803529

SMOTHERED FIRES

CHAPTER I

THE atmosphere of the dingy court room seemed grimmer than usual in contrast to the brilliant autumn daylight that flooded through the barred windows, making narrow ribbons of brightness across the place; picking out, here and there, a face, a group, and leaving the rest in shadow.

Oddly enough both the prisoner at the bar of justice and the judge, leaning slightly forward, were touched by the revealing gleams. They two held the attention of all present and the room was very still.

Judge Barnard Austen was about to pronounce sentence and there was upon his young, keen face the expression that always marked it at such times. There was concentration, sympathy, too, of the higher type, an earnest attempt to get the offender's point of view, and, by so doing, mete out at least comparative justice.

The case of Delmar and Carlin had been one-sided, and, as it turned out, a disappointing one. It had been mercifully brief and devoid of the slime that many had expected and which usually marks such trials.

Delmar, the wealthy clubman, had been shot in his town apartment; shot by Mary Carlin, the prisoner now at the bar of justice.

The taxicab driver who had brought the woman from the Pennsylvania Station the day of the tragedy had identified her. The hall man of the Grantland Apartments had identified her as the woman who had dashed past him and entered an elevator, just about to start, with the remark that she "was expected."

He had followed her in the next car, had stood outside the Delmar door, hearing quiet voices within—waiting until such time as the visitor should depart and he might explain his connection in the affair; for the privacy of the tenants of the Grantland was sacred, and for any one to reach an apartment unannounced was considered a crime for which the hall man was held responsible.

The hall man had also heard, in due time, the pistol shot, had run for a pass key and had given the alarm. Had been the first to enter the apartment where the accused stood staring at the dead man.

To all of this testimony Mary Carlin had made no denial; she merely added that she had not intended killing Delmar and that the pistol she had used was his.

Why she had gone to Delmar's apartment she refused to say; how she had obtained the pistol she also declined to explain.

That the pistol was Delmar's there was no doubt. A friend, to whom he had shown the weapon earlier on the day of the shooting, identified it and told where Delmar had bought it. It was a costly inlaid toy.

At the time of her arrest Mary Carlin declared that she was friendless and penniless, and so young Theodore Lewis, a protégé of Judge Austen, had been appointed to defend her. The Delmars were represented by the best legal aid obtainable.

Their services, however, had not been needed and Lewis, much to his disappointment, had not been given opportunity to prove himself with this, his first criminal case.

"There isn't any money in it," Austen had said to him when the trial opened, "but if you manage the case well, it will give you some reputation. Make the woman talk. There is something behind this. You ought to be able to give the Delmar people something to buck up against, at least. You know my opinion of these killing affairs, but I'm dead against a systematic gagging and blinding of facts by money and influence."

And so Lewis had entered the fray with the ardour of one who, in defending the weak, was to establish his ideals.

But there had been no fray; his ideas had not been set forth, for he had failed to make Mary Carlin talk. She had expressed regret that she must seem ungrateful; she appeared to be more concerned about his disappointment than about her own tragic state.

“What does it matter?” she had asked. “I did the shooting. I’m through—why not let it go at that?”

There was more indifference than hardness in the woman’s words. She was “through,” she kept repeating; “through with everything.”

Lewis had managed to extract the fact that she had not seen Delmar for ten years, prior to the day of the shooting, but try as he might he could get no evidence of Delmar’s early life that could tarnish the decency of the ten years in which Mary Carlin had held no part. If Delmar had trod devious ways, he had hidden his steps well. He was happily married, had two children, lived out of town, but kept the Grantland apartment for the convenience of his family. The Grantland was above suspicion.

Lewis had offered the insanity plea, but that failed. The woman was sane. The case had gone to the jury without instructions. The judge knew, the people in the court room knew, that the twelve men would be swayed as much by the evidence withheld as by that which had been brought forth. Judge Austen, alive and keen to every impression, had felt this to be unavoidable, not because of any appeal the wretched woman made, but from lack of it.

Certainly the reason for any mercy shown her could not be misconstrued. He, himself, was about to temper justice with mercy. The jury had brought in three days before the verdict of “manslaughter.” And now the prisoner stood awaiting her doom with the ribbon of sunlight lying bright across her face, bent under the brim of her shabby hat.

It was a piteous face, thin, white, and indifferent. A deep scar running diagonally over the left cheek had so drawn the muscles as to give that side of her face a sinister expression, while the right side held still the suggestion of softness and

past beauty which the eyes—wonderful eyes they were—intensified.

The woman looked older than the age she had sworn to, but her evident ill health and unbecoming dress might easily account for this. Her hair, abundant and brushed back defiantly from the sad face, had been bleached at one time, and now at the roots a dark line lay along the brow like a narrow frame.

She was apparently friendless as she had said; at least she had summoned no one to her support. Alone she stood, in that patient attitude of the trapped, and with everything at stake, she seemed the least interested person in the court room.

“Five years. With possible reduction for good behaviour.”

To the listeners the sentence seemed absurdly light; amazingly so until the appearance of the drooping figure at the rail was considered.

Five years or one, what did they mean to her? She was “through”; that was evident to all. It was nothing less than a life sentence.

The woman was hurried away. Her slouching form faded into the shadowy corridor. The Carlin-Delmar case was finished.

At five o'clock Austen left the court house. Just outside he met Theodore Lewis and stopped to speak to him.

“I'm sorry, Lewis, that you could not get the woman to talk,” he said. “There's a big story back of her, I am confident. She's shielding someone at her own expense, that's clear.”

“Oh! there's a story right enough,” Lewis agreed. “The case has pretty well used me up. I've felt all along that another—someone with more experience or ability—might have served her better.”

“Nonsense!” Austen slapped Lewis's back almost impatiently. “She killed her man; if she preferred to keep her reason for doing so to herself, that was her own affair. She left the Delmars rather flat.”

“And me, too,” Lewis murmured. “It looked like a chance at the start.”

The two men walked on together.

“There was a kind of dignity about the wretched woman,” Austen said presently, as if he could not shake off the day’s clinging impressions. “I suppose she is one of those derelicts that still preserve some kind of a code while they are ground in the mill.” Austen’s manner changed abruptly, as he asked: “Where are you going, Ted?”

“Oh! up to the Kismet, I think. My folks are out of town. I’ll have dinner there and find someone to play bridge.”

“Good-night, then. I’m going up home.”

Austen had thought of going to the Kismet Club himself but he suddenly changed his mind. He would go to his apartment, order a dinner to be sent to his rooms, and—rest. He felt unaccountably weary; almost old. Lewis for the moment emphasized the difference between twenty-four and forty-two; there is a chasm which, at times, yawns and cannot be bridged. This seemed to be, for some unknown reason, one of the times. Usually Austen felt at his ease with the young, and Lewis was particularly congenial; but he wanted now to be alone.

He walked on slowly while Lewis hailed a passing taxi. Lewis felt old and tired, too. Older by far than Austen and more dejected—at twenty-four one is capable of such tragic slumps.

As Austen left Lewis’s youth behind him, he walked faster; felt less and less weary. He had been thinking of his first cases—that was what had overpowered him; not Lewis’s years, or lack of them. He had, in his sympathy, gone back; lost the courage and assurance that his fifteen years in New York had given him. That was always a dangerous thing to happen to him. He could not go back with impunity. The man he had slowly builded, over the wreck of what he had once been, had its sharply defined limitations. Fifteen years of patient, conscientious building on—détris! Having now been forced to look back, Austen could not free himself. He continued to look back. Back to that time when at twenty-seven he had come from Los Angeles with his profession and a modest income. Had come to the

East because he was of the East. Had never really cared for the West.

He had brought several business letters of introduction and had eventually entered a famous law firm in an inferior position in order, he said, to plant his roots in the right soil. He had worked desperately hard, devoted himself to the interests of his firm, made few social connections, but those he made were well chosen and deeply prized. Because he sought no social recognition, but bent his energies to deserving it, recognition became inevitable. He had much charm, of a quiet, humorous kind, and was always cordial and friendly.

In due time he became a junior member of his firm, distinguished himself in several important cases, branched out into civic affairs, and eventually won for himself an enviable reputation and a good income.

Austen had, among his associates, no intimates—unless Lewis might be considered one; and his life was, under its cheerful appearance, almost austere. The making of his home had been his greatest distraction and dissipation. Like many lonely people who apparently have no need for such luxurious quarters, he devoted his leisure hours and his talents to obtaining them.

His apartment was up in the Eighties, overlooking the Hudson River and the Park. It was on the top of the highest building in the vicinity, and it was furnished with the exquisite skill that was the outcome of natural and acquired good taste. He had studied rugs in order that he might select intelligently. He had respected "periods" until he was capable of blending them without jar or confusion. His rooms, while individual and artistic, were, he knew, "right."

Having achieved confidence with rugs and furniture, Austen had given himself a free hand with books and pictures. The draperies and hangings had been selected by Lewis's mother and aunt—women of conservative and safe ideals.

In this home Austen had lived, now, ten successful years. Year by year a sense of safety had grown upon him. He had taken courage for his friend—someone long ago had given him that phrase—and it had led him, if not to happiness, at least

to peace. He entertained rarely but always delightfully. He liked young men and they returned his liking; sought his companionship and gave him their confidence in frank and simple fashion. He never lectured them, never openly reprimanded them, but, as Lewis explained, he "looked at them and confined himself to giving them another try while he sought to get their point of view." He never let go of any one in whom he became interested, and often, from sheer despair of shaking him off, a man would succumb to the demand Austen made upon him rather than confess himself less than Austen believed him.

Women did not figure largely in Austen's life. The Lewis women he regarded with genuine respect and liking—he had served them, as they were never to know, and so, in a sense, they belonged to him. They presided at his dinners and introduced younger women to his circle. They were often doubtful as to the propriety of giving the stamp of their approval to one of such recent date as Austen, but then "coming out of the West," as Mrs. Lewis remarked, made a difference. The "West" was so new. Austen never referred to his New England ancestry. His parents had gone West; he had been born there. He let it rest at that.

Lewis had come to Austen's notice in a dramatic way. With family, position, and education all in his favour, Lewis had, upon completing his college course, fallen into loose company and become the tool, rather than the leader, of men keener and more unscrupulous than himself.

Austen's firm conducted the business affairs of the Lewis family and when, eventually, young Lewis became involved in a disgraceful gambling escapade and was threatened with exposure unless a considerable sum of money was forthcoming, he, to the surprise of himself and Austen, faced the situation squarely in the latter's private office.

"Why did you come here?" Austen was interested and curious. "Have you any way of getting this money you need?"

"No. Unless you can arrange it for me." Lewis was looking frankly, if rather desperately, at Austen.

“Any woman involved?”

“No!” Lewis’s head lifted unconsciously. “They don’t happen to be my special temptation.”

“I’m glad of that.” Austen looked it.

“I can hardly expect you to understand,” Lewis continued, “but in coming to you I am thinking more of my mother and my aunt than of myself. I don’t want the thing bungled for their sakes.” He paused, fearing that Austen was about to remind him that he should have thought of this before, but Austen did not, he simply looked at the boy before him and waited.

“Of course, I dread facing the music. Who wouldn’t? But I hate worse to have them face it—my mother has suffered enough.”

At that moment Austen recalled things he had heard about Lewis’s father, and he dropped his eyes.

“Sometimes I think,” Lewis went on, “that you have to get something out of your system—I had to, though you may not believe that—and it’s out.”

“How do you know?” Austen enquired simply.

“Because I do. That’s all. It’s out.”

“I believe it is!” Austen said quietly, unexpectedly. Then he added: “I’m glad you came here, Lewis. It was a wise thing to do. Let me see, you took a law course, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to use it.”

“Well, come here with us.”

“You mean——?” Lewis stared.

“Come here and prove yourself. I began at the bottom and worked up.”

“But the money?”

“I’ll give you my personal check. I shall expect you to pay me at your convenience. Don’t ask me why I am doing this for you. I do not know. That ought to give you confidence in yourself.”

All this had happened three years before. When Lewis

took Mary Carlin's case he was out of Austen's debt but deep in his affections.

Something of all this was running through Austen's mind as he reached his home; it accounted for his depression at Lewis's failure to succeed with his first case. He wanted Lewis to succeed. The irritation arose from affection and sympathy; the sensation was painful. It caused him to remember as well as to anticipate.

He left his order for dinner with the girl at the desk and took the elevator.

His quiet rooms held a welcome for him—the mute welcome of dearly cherished, inanimate things. Someone was moving about in the kitchen—that was the maid, Sheila O'Neil. She always awaited Austen or a telephone message before she left for the day, and while she moved about she was singing softly.

Austen went to the west windows and raised the sashes. The cool autumn air rushed in; off in the near distance the river lay tranquil with a broad path of golden light from shore to shore. He watched it dim and fade.

“Did you call, sir?”

Sheila, a compact, cheerful person, stood in the doorway.

“I will dine at home to-night, Sheila. I have left the order for dinner.”

“Very well, sir.”

“I—hope”—Austen was always considerate—“I hope you had not planned to go early. I had intended to dine out.”

“I keep to my hours, sir, with plans and wishes.”

“That is most businesslike.” Austen smiled. Then: “Serve the dinner at once, Sheila, when it is sent up.”

It was while he was finishing his coffee, later, at the library table, that the telephone rang. Austen put the receiver to his ear.

“This is Lewis. I must see you. If you have an engagement I'll wait. May I come up to your place?”

“Of course. I'm not going out. Anything wrong?”

“I'll tell you when I see you. Thanks.”

Austen leaned back, sipped the rest of his coffee, and felt drowsy. In the distance Sheila was again singing. How cheerful the sound was; how it mingled with the city noises that came into the opened windows, like musical notes blending with the song of the girl in the kitchen. How peaceful; how——

“Is there anything else, sir?”

Austen started. He had been asleep. He felt wonderfully refreshed—almost exhilarated.

“Nothing, thank you. Good-night, Sheila.”

Then how quiet the house was again. The girl seemed to have taken all sound with her.

At eight-thirty Lewis arrived. He had a key to Austen’s apartment and entered at will. He came directly to the library. Austen was startled by his appearance.

“Something *is* wrong!” he said. “Sit down and take it easy, Ted. When you see a black horror creeping up the string you hold, let go! That ends the horror. You look as if you’d seen a ghost. There ain’t any such animal. You think so at twenty-four. After forty you know there isn’t.”

While he talked Austen went to a cabinet, brought out a bottle of wine and a glass. These he put on the table and pushed them toward Lewis.

“Not now.” Lewis shook his head. “It’s the Carlin case.”

“I thought that was ended, Ted. What’s the matter?”

“I thought that it was ended, too, but I was wrong.”

“She has talked at last—when it is too late?” Austen asked, sadly.

“No, but she wants to talk—to you.”

“She cannot be sane. This is preposterous.”

“I told her that, but she insists, and I have come to urge you to see her. After she went back to her cell she had a bad attack—heart, I think. They thought that she was dying. She asked for me and they had some difficulty in finding me. When I got to the prison she told me that she had intended to write to you after she was put away, but that now there might not be time. She wants to tell you why she shot Delmar. She says that it means life or death to an innocent person.

I think myself that she is dying. She told me that if she had spoken before she might not have been believed, might have been suspected of seeking leniency for herself, but that now——”

“But,” Austen broke in impatiently, “she is out of my jurisdiction.”

“We can easily arrange that, Barney.”

“It is grotesque, a cheap anti-climax.”

“Barney, will you do this for me?” Lewis gave up reasoning.

“Very well, Ted, for you then, though I dislike taking part in the affair. Order a taxi while I get into my coat.”

CHAPTER II

IT WAS after nine when Austen was shown into Mary Carlin's cell and the door clanked to after him.

The light from the corridor fell full upon the woman seated on her cot, her head bowed in her hands. Austen took the stool and drew it near, and sitting down said, hardly above a whisper: "I have come."

As though she had not realized it before, Mary Carlin looked up and then got upon her feet, choosing, as she did so, to stand in the light.

Austen had never seen her before without hat and coat; he noticed now how emaciated she was, how deadly pale. Then she spoke, her words coming unevenly, feverishly: "Now do you know me?"

"Yes—no!"

Austen was fending off a menace; he was confused by the question.

"Then keep on looking until you do." There was a piteous appeal in the words.

As one looks into a dark room until his eyes become accustomed to the gloom and can discern objects, Austen looked. Gradually it was as if he were penetrating into the gloom that lay back of the last fifteen years—the woman must belong there! The silence was sickening; it got at the heart and seemed to still it, but the brain worked fiercely. Suddenly all the guarded safety of Austen's life crumbled, he seemed to stand naked and alone in the ruin, with this woman. Off in the distance someone gave a mad scream, and both Austen and Mary Carlin started and came back to the present.

"The scar," she whispered in that sick, guttural voice, and touched the disfiguring mark with her trembling hand. "It

has saved me, that and the life I have led; but you know me now?"

"Yes. I know you." Austen's words came in a thick undertone. He and the woman sounded like conspirators. Then, savagely: "And you let me go through with this—my God! You permitted *me* to sentence you—my wife! Kathleen, how could you do so monstrous a thing?"

Then Austen closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the woman who had wrought so evil a thing after all the years of silence.

Mary Carlin swayed as she sank back on the cot. She had passed her Rubicon; had strength only to reach her goal by the least possible effort. "I—I could not help it," she moaned. "And when I saw that you did not know me, it did not seem to matter. In a way, I was almost glad that you, not another, had it to do. It was like—well, a kind of awful justice."

"Don't! For heaven's sake, spare me, Kathleen." Austen got up and walked the narrow space of the prison cell. Presently he came back and sat down upon the stool. "Will you leave us out of it and tell me what you have sent for me to hear?" he asked in a dazed, helpless way. He knew that all the future must bear the mark of this hour, but he pleaded for delay. Later he could adjust the suffering as he had adjusted other agony of spirit.

"I wish that I might. But if I tell you about Delmar, I must tell the rest. I shot him because—first, because he would not give me money, and secondly, because he would not go to you and tell what—I must tell you now."

"Why should he come? I never heard of him in my life until this trial."

The woman on the cot looked up desperately. There seemed so little time to tell what must be told and yet she must make the attempt.

"Delmar was Tilden," she said faintly.

"Tilden!" Austen sprang to his feet as if an electric current had gone through his body.

"Yes. When Tilden left Los Angeles that time, and after

the scandal that followed my being found with him in San Francisco, he went to England. A cousin had died; a man of his own age; there was money, and in order to get it Tilden had to assume the name. It all took time."

"I begin to see!" Austen groaned, and Mary Carlin went on:

"When you married me, you thought you saved me. But I—I couldn't give Tilden up. There hadn't been any wrong. Before I married you, I was just a fool; but afterward you would not believe that, not even when the baby came."

"No, I *could* not." Austen breathed the words.

"You—you believed the—the baby was not yours. I saw it in your eyes, and that look drove me back to Tilden. I was afraid of you. I had tried to do right for the baby, but I couldn't bear that look in your eyes day after day. When Tilden became Delmar, he wrote to me; wanted me to come to him—but I—I couldn't give the baby up—I did not know what you would do."

The haggard face twitched painfully; the scar became livid.

"And then Tilden played high. He was like that. He'd pay any price in counterfeit coin for what he wanted. He told me to come to him and bring the baby. That he'd marry me—and adopt the baby."

Austen could not speak; his bowed head was buried in his hands.

"And—you did—nothing," the woman continued. "Just let us go. Told me to take what was mine and go!"

"What was there for me to do?" The question was wrung from Austen.

"You—you could have got a divorce—anything but what you did do—nothing!"

"I did not want a divorce—then. I was too busy trying to live; to forget!"

"I was desperate, for Tilden held it over me. He would not do anything either. For a time he supported the baby, but he would not let me keep it. I could only go to see her—I placed her as well as I could; people believed she was Delmar's child."

A cold, groping fear was entering Austen's numbed brain; something elusive, sinister, but creeping nearer.

"Tilden and I were in England when I was injured in an accident. This happened." The woman touched the scar. "Tilden couldn't bear the sight of me—he was tired of me, anyway. He left five thousand dollars for me with his lawyers and disappeared. I promised the lawyers to leave Tilden alone. I wanted to—to be good for—for the baby. After awhile I came home. I think I must have been mad, but I kept thinking of the baby and you, and the old, safe life. I wrote to you, but you never answered!"

"I was away—in Vermont," Austen muttered. "The letter went to Los Angeles, was forwarded to New York. When I got it I tried to locate you, but you had gone."

"Well, I let go then," the woman continued. "The money went and there were other men—men less particular—and I changed my name with my address. I couldn't go to—to the baby. I wanted her to remember me as I was before I was disfigured. It was queer, but I wanted that more than anything!"

"Then I became ill. They told me I would die. I had kept Tilden in sight and I went to him! I was desperate. He was frightened at first; then he grew ugly. Said that he would have me arrested for blackmail. I begged for a little money. He taunted me. Then I begged that he would go to you and tell you the truth about the baby. I told him that I had written and asked you to see me, but that you had not answered. It was he who told me that you were in New York; told me how you had succeeded. Then he said terrible things to me, things that drove me mad. There was a pistol on his desk. He reached out, played with it while he taunted me, and then I got it from him. I——"

The words ended in a dry, clucking sound.

"I shot him!"

Off in the distance that crazy, drunken cry again sounded, but neither Austen nor Mary Carlin moved. Like figures carved from stone, they sat and stared ahead of them.

"What more is there for me to hear?" Austen was warding off that elusive and threatening menace.

"There is the child."

"The child?" Austen braced now for the blow. "Delmar's child?"

"The child is yours."

"You lie!" Austen drew back as if a physical, polluting touch had stung him. "You lie! Do you think, after all these years, you can drag me down again?"

"The child is yours." Pitifully, hopelessly the words fell. "You see, I had to keep it. I loved it. There was no other way—and I saw by the look in your eyes that you did not believe the baby was yours. Not until I ran away the second time was I anything to Tilden. I know. I know I was a fool. Things were against me, but something had held me back, and I suppose that was what made Tilden play high. He wanted me."

Looking at the wreck near him, Austen shuddered.

"That is why I let the thing go through—this, this trial. When I saw *you*, I *died*. Really, it seemed that I died. And then, just as if I were dead, but was allowed to come back for a moment, I thought—if he sees that I want nothing for myself he will believe about the child. You know I am speaking the truth. The worst woman *can* speak the truth at times. Oh! can you not *tell* that I am speaking the truth?"

And Austen knew, at last, that she was! As one knows death when he sees it, so at times one feels truth although it may be enmeshed in evil.

The woman's voice ran monotonously on.

"I will soon be dead. I cannot hurt you any more—but she, oh! go to her; save her or God will never let you rest. I do not matter; I deserve what you—you have sentenced me to, but——"

Austen could stand no more. Burying his face in his hands he groaned aloud.

"Hush! Someone will come," Mary Carlin cautioned; already she had learned the cunning of the trapped.

Someone was coming, the matron paused by the door and looked in. Austen sat up rigidly. A deathly calm came to his aid.

"Where is the child?" he asked.

"I've written it down. Here!" From out her bosom Mary Carlin drew an envelope and passed it to Austen.

"I—I cannot go to prison and be shut in a cell—it will drive me mad—unless you will promise."

"I promise." Austen staggered to his feet. His white tortured face turned away from the crouching form on the cot.

"I promise." So might he comfort the dying.

"Good-bye. And—never let her know. Let her keep me as she remembers me—children *do* remember things that happened when they were five or six. Let her keep me as I was. You'll be glad some day if you do, for unless they have let her—go wrong—she is lovely. She is the lovely kind; it would be hard to kill the loveliness of her. You must save her!" Mary Carlin drooped back on her cot. "Go now," she murmured. "That's all."

A few minutes later Austen and Lewis were out in the cool, starlit night.

"Shall we walk?" Lewis knew that something tremendous had happened to Austen. It was as if he had passed through an experience that had changed him chemically.

"Yes, let us walk."

For a few blocks they strode on in silence, and then Austen spoke:

"Ted, are you willing to let me use you without much explanation? Can you, are you willing to stand the final test of friendship?"

"If you will honour me by testing me, Barney."

It was very simply said, but it warmed Austen's heart.

"Ted, Mary Carlin is shielding someone; we were right about that. Years ago I knew Mary Carlin by another name. Dissipation, illness, an accident, have changed her beyond recognition, but she has convinced me of the truth of her identity and the reason for her sacrifice. She is shielding someone she cruelly wronged. The shielding must go on. For the sake of the wretched woman's family I must respect her wishes, but I must not be identified with her case at present. As her counsel——"

"Of course!" Lewis broke in. He was thinking of the damnable trick Fate had dealt Austen. "And you never guessed—during the trial?"

"Not for a moment. She is unbelievably changed—not only in looks. She has just enough decency left to want to shield them she has harmed. Naturally this is a great shock to me, Ted. Make it as easy as you can for this woman; get her in hospital, if you can. That would be more bearable."

"I think I understand, Barney. As her lawyer I can do this without causing comment."

"Of course."

For a dozen blocks more the two swung along in a silence that drew them together rather than drove them apart.

"All this occurs just when I have other and most important business on hand." Austen was the first to break the silence. Already, as he had done once before when his life was shattered, he began to build on shifting sand. His mind worked quickly, recklessly; he must go on, but he felt that at any moment he might sink if he paused too long to consider his next step.

"A client has left to my supervision a daughter. The girl has no one but me to look after her interests. I am going to see her, place her in a school, if that seems best. I gather that she has been neglected. Naturally this business will absorb me for the time being."

Austen, driven by desperation, planned better than he realized. He diverted Lewis from Mary Carlin by this new turn of affairs.

"You're always taking up dead men's burdens, Barney," Lewis said. "Can't you slip from under this one?"

"Perhaps, after I've looked the matter over." Austen was getting control of himself, reducing things to normal. "And just keep in touch with this Carlin case," he said, gripping Lewis's hand. "I tell you, Ted, the death strangle a weak creature can get on the strong is the very devil. Innocent suffering *with* the guilty? Why, they oftener do all the suffering. But in this case there is something to be said for Mary Carlin."

Austen raised the shield, wrought through his safe years, between him and Lewis, but he smiled over it in friendly appreciation of Lewis's coöperation.

"Are her people ever likely to find out?" Lewis asked.

"Not if we do our parts well, Ted."

"I'll try to serve her better in the future than I have in the past, Barney. Good-night!"

Austen, on reaching his rooms, sank wearily down in a chair by the library hearth. It was a clean-swept hearth with kindlings and logs laid ready to light. Austen stared at it as if it were symbolic.

The shock he had received had benumbed him. He was slowly recovering, but each sensation gave him pain and an almost fierce determination to preserve, at any cost, the position his hard-fought fight had gained. He meant to do, to the uttermost, his duty, but he would so include that duty into his well-ordered life as to avoid a second calamity. He was not hard—every nerve quivered when he thought of Mary Carlin's fate and his part in it—but in saving himself he would in some way save her, he argued. She would die soon. After that he could go on without fear if he left nothing behind him that later might betray him. Better to accept anything, even the child, than to leave a clue.

As feeling asserted itself through the numbness, like the pricking of a sharp instrument, certain things Mary Carlin had said made him wince. With everything against her she had *tried* to be good for her child; the child that, in his young and hot rebellion, he had spiritually denied before he had verbally expressed himself. She had seen it in his eyes! Had lived with him while he silently denounced her. She had been afraid of him. Well! if there was a hard streak in him, if he had once failed where he might have saved, he had suffered and paid, God knew. He must not fall again this side of mercy. Perhaps if he did what he could now he might again, sometime, know peace and happiness.

Paid! Yes, he had paid. In turning his back on the ruins of his life, in refusing to set his wife free, he had but

lengthened the chain which held her to him. He had forged a ball that dragged him when most he had longed to go on unencumbered. He had realized that when it was too late.

He had been so young; so cruelly disillusioned; had believed that never again would he have faith in woman. But there had come a time when he recognized his error. At that time, with everything at stake, he had been forbidden, by the father of the woman he loved, to speak until he had cleared his life of any claim that might be made upon it.

Then it was that Mary Carlin had written to him—appealed in her desperation to him. The letter had gone astray, had been long in reaching him, and when he at last set forth to do that which he should have done years before, the trail was lost. Under an assumed name the discarded mistress of Delmar had escaped. And, in misunderstood silence, he had accepted his doom.

Yes, he had paid. Dropped chains were not broken chains he had learned to his sorrow. He had dragged on fearing, hoping, then dully accepting; thankful that he had not spoken, hoping that the woman had forgotten him; had never really cared—she had been so young, so sheltered! Always he hoped that she had escaped suffering, but always he had remembered her, paid lonely homage to his ideal of her. He had kept in touch with her, superficially, for a time, and then had accepted what seemed to him inevitable, and plodded on alone.

Yes, he had paid. And even prison bars could not restrain the reaching, devastating power that had all but wrecked his life, and might yet do so unless he controlled it. That was it. Until death ended the tyranny of weakness he must never again let it elude him.

The child—that it was his, he now believed—did not move him. It must be the force, however, to control the situation. Everything must be in his hands from now on. Never again must he make the mistake of thinking that he could escape. One had to return and take up dropped burdens; he had learned that. Better bear them, disguise them as blessings if possible, but never turn one's back upon them.

Slowly, painfully, reaction was setting in. The carefully constructed man of the past fifteen years was reasserting himself. Austen drew a deep breath as one does emerging from an anæsthetic.

The wind was rising. In the living room beyond the library, the curtains, at an open window, swayed to and fro, like a slim white ghost seeking a familiar scene.

A ghost! The idea caught and held Austen's fancy. He meant to close the window in a moment, but . . . The clock ticked slower and slower—was it running down? He must wind it; he was careless about clocks and watches—they were always running down. Running . . . down. Still he did not stir.

And then a strange experience claimed him. He always was able to realize, by certain memories of hearing and seeing, that the state he fell into at that moment was like that which might follow immediately upon death and before the spirit has taken entire command.

There was only one conscious sensation and that was the lack of sensation. How long he sat, leaning back in his chair, quiet, unresisting, Austen never knew, for when he next looked at his watch and clock they had ceased to record time! But suddenly he was awake—vitaly, painfully awake. Every sound hurt him—the street noises and the flapping of the shade and curtain over the open window. He smelled—faded flowers. Yes, there they were in a bowl on a small table—faded flowers!

In moving his limbs, Austen was at first conscious of a tingling discomfort, and then it was as if he were released! His mind and body functioned as they had not in years. He was free! Free as only the dead can be who have realized the resurrection.

He need no longer play a part to himself, at least. Had he been playing a part? He was to be as other men were who were not bound by an invisible tie. A real danger had passed. From now on he need not listen to the clanking of a chain; he would never again know the tugging of the ball! In a sense the links were broken.

Austen sat up, drew another long breath, and took from his pocket the envelope Mary Carlin had given him.

Strange that he should have this sense of release while the woman, by his sentence, was behind bars and her burden had fallen upon him. But in spite of all he did feel the marvellous relief as he tore the envelope open and read:

She is with a Mrs. Anna Thomley, Bluff End, Cape North, Mass. I only dropped your name—she is known as Verity Leighton; she is believed to be Delmar's child.

Verity Leighton! Austen read and re-read the name.

It had been his mother's. He remembered that at the child's birth he had tried to strangle his suspicions and doubts; had even sworn, to himself, that he would accept and protect if so he might save. Looking at the pale, lovely girl on the bed in that tragic chamber of birth, he had risen to heights never before or since attained. In giving the baby his mother's name he had sent a challenge forth.

Well, the name had not been taken from the child.

Austen got up and went to close the window in the living room. As he did so he heard a clock from some distant tower strike—two!

He looked out into the night "always darkest before the dawn." He paused, peering into the blackness that seemed solidly pressing against the window.

The dawn! Somehow the word had new significance.

Forty-two—and still the dawn was possible.

"I must start for Massachusetts," Austen decided as he wound his watch, "as soon as I can arrange business."

CHAPTER III

THE soft October breeze passed over Bluff End without stirring the long beach grass—it was a high, frolicking wind with ambitions above the dunes and the anchored boats in the lovely harbour.

There was no hint of frost in the air, but already the undergrowth that persisted, in spite of sand and rock, was red and glistening. The ocean rolled up against the Point at full tide; it had touched its highest line—not more than a hundred yards from the white fence of the little churchyard which nestled by the small chapel known as St. Mark-on-the-Dunes. This church had once been supported by the summer colony that had appreciated its artistic appearance.

When strangers suggested that the chapel and graves were perilously near the ocean, old Ezra Taber—a man who walked with God—remarked that “the sea knew its Master and that its tides were in His hands. And as for the dead,” the old man added, “no harm can come to them. We lay them facing the sea and when their calls come, they rise and seek the havens where they would be.”

Ezra knew no book but his Bible, and he drew his inspiration from it in thought and speech.

“More than once,” he confided, “I have fancied at morn or evening that I have seen them rise, pause, and reach out to follow the call.”

The simple people of the Bluff believed this to be literal truth, and it was always a pretty fancy for the colony.

It was high noon of an October day when a fifteen-year-old girl stood beside a grave in the old churchyard looking down at the work of her little earth-stained hands.

She was a slender thing, with her scant garments, like a winding sheet, lashed about her by the wind. Her hair,

light as the foam, but amber in colour, blew across her face—a wonderful face with eyes that matched the hair; black-lashed they were and set wide apart and filled with a tender sadness that was belied by the laughing, joyous mouth.

Her eyes had the sadness of an inherited past, the mouth proclaimed the divine control of the future with its promise of life and happiness.

The grave at the girl's feet was covered with moist and glistening seaweed interwoven with purple asters and golden-rod. The blanket of flowers had been carefully selected and placed. At the head of the grave was a plain piece of board bearing these words:

Here lies an Unknown Woman
Washed ashore December——

The date was obliterated.

The girl knelt and read and re-read the words as if she had never seen them before, and yet that sunken grave was a shrine to her; a possession that she had appropriated and cared for with fantastic devotion.

“Some day,” she had confided to old Ezra, “I am going to have a beautiful stone put here, and it is to bear a lovely name. I do not like the ‘Unknown Woman’; it seems so lonely.”

“I reckon,” old Ezra had comforted, “that He who counts the hairs of our heads and notes the sparrow's fall hasn't lost sight of this woman what drifted to us. He'll call her by name when He bids her arise.”

That had given the child comfort but had not altered her purpose. She drew now, from the tall grasses at her feet, another board, on which she had carved, in crude and crooked characters, these words:

Here lies my Mother.

It seemed desecration to remove the old mark and replace it by the new but it must be done, and so the girl set to work.

Rarely did any one but herself come to the deserted spot; no one would ever know except old Ezra, and he would understand. She could always convince Ezra.

It was done at last, the daring deed, and the despoiler stood off to regard her handiwork.

"Maybe now," she whispered, "I can believe; maybe now I can stop watching and longing; maybe now I can make you seem dead."

There were hot blinding tears in the wide, lovely eyes of the girl, and presently she crouched down by the flower-decked grave and recalled certain sacred memories as though they were tangible things that must be buried with the holy dead.

A garden and a little summerhouse! The picture arose clearly. In the summerhouse was a table—there were eight corners to the table—just eight! There were three stiff rustic chairs that hurt one to sit on, if one wore short frocks and abbreviated socks, but there was one rocking chair quite comfortable and roomy, large enough and strong enough to hold a wonderful woman and a very remarkably small girl.

The small girl was always waiting and watching for the wonderful woman who came seldom but who was the one great happening in the small girl's life. A happening worth waiting for; worth being painfully good for, and remembering above all else.

One must never cry when the wonderful woman came, because that wasted time and made things blurry. One must laugh and dance and be very jolly and promise anything while the wonderful woman was with one. Afterward, in the long spaces of time when nothing mattered, one could cry and yearn and no one would know. And the wonderful woman was named Momsie. That meant Mother, of course, but it sounded so much more private.

And the small girl was Ducky-darling. That was private, too. No one but Momsey and the small girl knew why cunning little ducks were embroidered on tiny handkerchiefs and delectable little nighties. Why, those magic symbols could dry tears and drive shadows away when nights were long and dark and the waiting in the garden became tiring.

"I cannot seem to make you dead," the girl in the high grass moaned, "but it's better to believe you dead than to believe that you've cast me off."

Yes; those were the words that had driven the girl to the doing of what she had done.

And presently, because she was exhausted by her emotions, she sank by the grave, and fell asleep. And as she slept, old Ezra, sitting in the sun by his cabin door, looked up from the net he was mending and saw a stranger close to him.

"Could you tell me where a Mrs. Anna Thomley lives?"

It was Austen who spoke, and his glance wandered over the clutter of huts stretching along the beach.

Without dropping his net, Ezra replied quietly:

"Well, now, sir, you won't be finding her hereabouts." Ezra was estimating the stranger; sparring for time. "You must take to the highway, walk a bit toward the Point; there you'll come to what's known as the summer colony—it's closed now, mostly falling to ruin. On the near edge of the colony and before you come to a little church and graveyard, there's a trifling-looking yellow house—that's Mrs. Thomley's. There ain't anything 'twixt this and that. You won't find her, as you might say, to home, for she passed this way yesterday and took the night boat to Boston. In a day or so she'll drift back—that's her way."

"Is there a child living with Mrs. Thomley?"

"Set, sir, set!" Ezra pointed to an upturned lobsterpot near by. "I reckon you're asking after little Verity—little gal Verity." The old, quivering lips trembled. What distrust Ezra might have had for the stranger disappeared at the mention of Verity.

"Yes." Austen took the indicated seat. Here was a golden opportunity, and his legal mind grasped it. "Yes, little girl Verity, that is her name."

"Well, sir, she allas useter hold that something was going to turn up and like as not it has. You have turned up and are asking for her. Many's the time she's run to me and told me that she'd had a queer feelin' and knew that something was about to happen. Lately she's left off having the

feeling, got sorter discouraged, like as not, but I've allas told her to hold to her faith—that the *feeling* was the God in her—and she's done her best, poor lass. You've come friendly-wise, sir?"

Austen nodded.

"Then ye be sent by God, sir, for the time has come when the men and boys set their eyes on little gal Verity. She's growing up, sir, and I've feared for her. I've laid it before the Lord and like as not you're His answer. You'll likely find the lass at the yellow house, sir, or failing that she'll be drifting about the Point. In passing, look into the graveyard: the lass might be there. She takes rare comfort there at times."

"What do you know of Mrs. Thomley and the child?" Austen felt safe enough questioning the old man. In an hour after leaving him the incident would, in all probability, pass from the ancient creature's mind.

"We don't know, what you might say, anything. Living and dead float on to the Bluff betimes. We bury the dead and make place for the living. We don't ask no questions; we don't borrow trouble." Ezra was again on guard. "Mrs. Thomley came some years back and built the comical yellow house and took boarders." This with a sniff. "Boarders! I allas hold it's best to leave that business to them what understands the trade. They was drippings as Mrs. Thomley got; sometimes they stuck and overlapped their welcome among us all, as is the way with off-enders. There was some young fellows and women once as had to be dealt with for loud actions, but after that Mrs. Thomley was more particular. Then there was a mess of sickly folk that didn't last long, and then some witless ones, and allas the little gal Verity. She's persisted unto now like something God Himself sorter left to be called for; just her and Mrs. Thomley."

The dim old eyes overflowed.

"Little gal Verity. Lord 'a' massy, sir, the whimsy ways of the critter. She can make your hair stand on end—'lowing you have any—by her tales. Seeing things, she calls it. And she has the gift of healing. She drifts about, pass-

ing her little hand over an aching head or a hot body and, God hearing me, she cures like Him as did the same by Galilee's sea. And her singing, sir! God a'mighty, I've heard her, as she stood on the Bluff singing her wild songs, till the heart of me leaped in my old, stiff body, fearing as she'd be blown, song and all, past the ken of us here."

The old man was garrulous enough where Verity was concerned.

"And then, again, sir, the gal Verity seems like the limb of Satan let loose. She can clip an oath with the best skipper on the Bluff, she can run wild with the boys till they lose their heads, and then——" Here Ezra chuckled and choked and went on brokenly: "And then I've seen her take an oar and beat the rascals off like they was birds of evil prey—them cursing her and she cursing them."

"I think"—Austen rose as if he had tarried too long while a soul was in danger—"I think I'll try and find the girl Verity: have a talk with her, win her confidence if I can before Mrs. Thomley returns. Is there a place where I can stay until Mrs. Thomley comes back?"

"There's the Lord's Room in my cabin," Ezra got up stiffly and spread his arms as if in welcome; "there's a room in my cabin and a plate at my board for any one the Lord may send us. Of late the Lord has used them but rarely, but they are ready—you are welcome."

Austen was touched.

"And how," he asked, "can you depend upon your guests being sent by God?"

"The Lord is mindful of His own." The old man raised his head with quaint dignity. "I've seen many a miracle performed in the Lord's Room, sir, more than once. 'Tis the Lord's way to work out His plans in His own fashion. I've welcomed them as came to harm me, but I've seen them depart with the light of heaven in their eyes."

"I can imagine that." Austen offered his hand. "I will accept your hospitality," he said, "and try to prove my gratitude for the privilege of sharing your roof."

And then Austen took to the sandy road and set his face

toward the Point, where gleamed the tall, slim lighthouse against the calm blue of the peaceful sky.

The tang of the sea was in his nostrils. Not in years had he felt the enjoyment he now felt in the touch of the breeze on his face, the *feel* of the warm, dry sand beneath his feet. His senses seemed tuned to the environment, and the weariness and noise of the city were but memories in his thought.

He felt that he was going forward led by a power that he, strangely enough, was content to submit his will to; his mood was one of reverent acquiescence. He was not conscious of being dragged to his task but gently pushed to it by unerring wisdom. It was a new sensation, one which, a time back, he would have resisted.

Presently he came to the clutter of cheap bungalows known as the summer colony—they were all closed and boarded, only one, a giddy yellow house, larger than the others, showed signs of life. Tattered awnings fluttered from a broad porch upon which opened doors and windows guiltless of shades or screens. Flowers bloomed about the weedy paths—late asters and goldenrod.

Austen went to the front door and knocked repeatedly, but only a seven-toed beach cat responded with a trail of gray kittens at her heels. She meowed in friendly fashion, curved her back sociably, and disappeared.

Then Austen walked on—fixing his thought upon the lighthouse. The highway becoming sandier and dustier, he sought the graveyard as a short cut and gratefully set his tired feet upon the sunburned grass. He had walked but a few yards when he stopped, transfixed. Rising, apparently from a grave, was a young, weird thing who gazed at him through a tangle of gold hair with eyes that held him by their beauty and pathos.

He knew instantly from the old man's description that Verity Leighton stood before him, and he went directly to her.

"You are Verity Leighton," he said, offering his hand. He desired, above all else, to avoid startling the apparition before him. She looked capable of drifting out to sea or retreating into the grass from which she seemed to have arisen.

“Yes.”

The girl stood motionless with that poised, indefinite attitude that suggested—disappearance. She did not seem to see the extended hand.

“Who told you?” The voice was friendly enough.

“An old man.”

“You mean Granddad Ezra?”

“Yes.”

At this the girl gave a slight, thin laugh; it was like the tinkle of a silver bell. Then she came forward, her hands outstretched to meet Austen's.

“I believe something has turned up at last,” she said, “just when I was losing hope.”

Austen was prepared for this, somehow, and banked upon it for his success with the girl.

“Let us sit down and talk,” he said. “I have come to see you. I bear a message. I want you to trust me, if you can.”

This was daring, perhaps. The girl's eyes looked startled as she and Austen sat down with the flower-strewn grave between them.

Something subtle held the two—but held them apart. A false step might cause trouble, and Verity Leighton was on guard. By instinct she was cautious and clear-headed—her flights of fancy were but outgrowths of her drab and starved life.

“Why do you come here?” Austen's glance fell upon the rough headboard. Instantly the girl was alert.

“Because”—she replied, keeping her eyes on Austen's face—“because, can't you see?—my mother is buried here.”

Austen caught a note of defiance in the tone. The girl meant to defend something sacred.

“I—I knew your mother.”

For a full moment this sank into the girl's consciousness. Her face twitched and her eyes fell. It was not a sense of shame that moved Verity Leighton at being discovered in a falsehood, but the sense of loss in the holy thing this stranger was about to wrench from her. Was she not to keep even her dead mother?

But Verity was no coward in the face of disaster. If she could not bask in the luxury of her imagination, she could grip facts fiercely. She could relinquish, but only if she were compelled to.

“Is my mother dead?” she asked, and her wonderful eyes were raised to Austen’s. “Mrs. Thomley said at first that my mother had forgot me. I knew that was a lie. Then she said that my mother was dead, and I had to have something, so I made believe she was buried here.”

Austen looked away. He who a week before had recognized the futility of burying what was not really dead, shrank from exposing to this child the ghastly truth.

“Your mother sent me to you!” he said gently; and determined again to inter, for the present, what he dared not reveal.

“Then she *is* dead!”

“Yes.” Austen had chosen his course. Later, he temporized, when he had won the girl’s confidence and faith, when the statement would be a fact, he would tell all, or as much as he must.

“You were my mother’s friend?”

“Yes.” This more assuredly as if in the hope of it justifying everything else when the truth must be faced.

“Was—was she far from here when she died?”

“Yes.”

“Was it long ago?”

“Not very long ago. She was ill for a long time.” The story grew as need urged.

“Oh!” The word was a mere sob. “That was why she—she could not come.” At this the girl crept across the flattened grave and knelt by Austen. “But why did she not write? Tell me about my mother—tell me the message.”

It was too late now to retrace any step. Austen, for a time, must meet this girl upon a foundation of his own erecting. Even while he hesitated, he was upheld by a belief that she would understand by and by, and pardon the necessity of the present.

“Your mother’s only thought was of you.” Austen looked

over the young head at his knee as if to gain inspiration. "Above all else she wanted you to be happy; to remember her as you knew her. She sent for me, at the last. She trusted me with her affairs—I am a lawyer. I hope that you will learn to have confidence in me, too, though I realize that my sudden appearance must seem strange to you. It was better for me to come than to write or send another."

Austen was surprised at his own words. He was speaking to the child as if she were a woman, but her reply made him feel that he was on the right course.

"Yes; that was better," she said, slowly. "Mrs. Thomley might have whisked me away." Austen was soon to become familiar with Verity's quaint speech—it was coloured by old Ezra's companionship and literature.

"Why didn't you come before? You might have been too late, for Mrs. Thomley is going to send me away. I'm always threatened with being sent away. It's like having my roots torn up. Sometimes I feel as if a monster was pulling me away from anything I clutch. I've stayed here longer than I've ever stayed anywhere else."

The girl began to cry forlornly, and the sight moved Austen to pity.

"I only knew a short time ago," he explained. "I came as soon as I could."

Then, like the shadow of a passing cloud, Verity's tear-wet face darkened.

"Are—are you the same one that Mrs. Thomley was going to send me to? She said it was a man."

"No. I am—your friend." This seemed to re-instate the child's growing confidence.

"I am going to remain until Mrs. Thomley returns, and then you may want to go with me. If you do"—Austen smiled—"I promise that your roots will be safeguarded in the future. And now, will you tell me when it was that you last saw your mother?"

"It was years ago. I was so little, but I see her quite plainly when I try."

“Try now, Verity. It will help me.”

And then, as if recalling the dream of her lonely hours, the girl depicted the garden, the summerhouse, and the rocking chair big enough for two.

“For she was little—a very little mother.”

“Yes, she was little,” mused Austen.

“But strong,” Verity added.

“Yes—strangely strong for any one so small.” Austen’s mouth grew stern.

“And she was so pretty.” Verity was taking no heed of the interruptions. “Her hair was in little curls that danced. Her eyes danced, and when she talked her words danced on little laughs. She called me Ducky-darling and I called her Momsey.”

A dry, hard sob shook the pathetic voice. Then with a quick change:

“Oh! It was awful, the waiting in the garden after the last time she came. I seemed to stop right there—everything waited. And then I was sent away where there was no garden, but something in me kept waiting. I must tell you everything. I grew bad when my mother did not come. I didn’t care. If I could get something by lying, I lied; I even stole when I was hungry or wanted something very much, and yet”—Austen was watching the tragic young face with compassion—“and yet the badness did not get ’way down deep where the memory of my mother was. Can you understand?”

“Yes, my child.”

“And when I came to Mrs. Thomley I was frightened, frightened by the people in the house. They were terrible, and I was going to try to die—but I found Granddad Ezra. He let me talk to him—talk as I’m talking to you; it let things out—the bad, frightening things—and then I could think of my mother again. Granddad Ezra knows God—not just knows *about* Him. There is a difference, and he told me that the thought about my mother, and the feeling that something would happen, were God in me, and that I must keep them alive by being good. As good as I could; but I’m

not very good. Granddad Ezra gave me clothes; he taught me to read—he saved me.”

Austen did not speak. He was absorbing the girl near him; appropriating her in a marvellous manner. She was giving herself to him without reserve; a word of his might turn her from him.

“If I have to go away,” Verity said slowly, “and I suppose I must for no money comes now—I believe I would like to go with you. It might not be so bad as some places.”

“Thank you, Verity.”

“But who are you? What shall I call you? Where are you going to take me—and when?”

The helplessness of the girl, her pitiful attempt to understand, moved Austen deeply.

“All this must seem strange to you,” he said, “and yet by and by you will realize that it is not as strange as it seems. I have known your mother, your people, for years, but I had lost sight of them until a short time ago. I have all authority to—what shall I say?—well, care for you. I will do my best. If you will be patient I promise to explain everything to you when the time comes.”

So little seemed to satisfy the girl. Austen saw trust in him growing in her eyes.

“I wish,” he said, quizzically, “that you’d call me what your mother did—Barney. I—I am rather queer about names.”

“Barney? Just Barney?” A smile touched the lips of the girl. “I wonder if I can? It is queer.”

“Try.” Austen, too, smiled his most friendly smile. “I’m rather a queer man, I suppose. Names do not mean much to me—just handles, you know.”

“I’ll try.” Verity looked away, then repeated: “Barney. Barney. Barney.” Suddenly she turned full upon Austen:

“I’ve got the handle!” she cried.

CHAPTER IV

THAT night Austen lay in God's Room in Ezra Taber's cabin. He did not sleep much but he was at peace. He had talked long with Ezra and gained much information concerning Verity Leighton's temperament and character; her loose upbringing and the dangers she had run.

"She's old and yet mighty young," Ezra had explained. "All neglected young critters get a mighty keen twist to them either for good or evil. Little gal Verity, with an ill wind blowing on her, has yet managed to sail safe. I shall miss the lass deep and long, sir, but there'll be joy mixed with the pain, for I sense that she's headed at last for the open seas and she's of the kind that never naturally hugs the shore."

"What I must say to you, Taber," Austen had said during the conversation, "will hardly agree with the appreciation and gratitude that I feel, but I know that you will understand. For a time I must detach this young girl as completely as possible from—well, this place and what it represents, outside, of course, yourself. She will remember you, I feel sure of that. There are grave reasons for doing this, or I would not say so."

"I feel, sir," Ezra returned, "that rightfully you are keeping much from me. I sense that you are doing God's work for the lass and I'm not one to meddle with what is His. Little gal Verity will never forget—I know the lass; and should a time come when she needs me again the Lord will send her to me."

"You are a big man, Taber." Austen smiled.

"Big enough for the job I was sent to do, I trust, sir. You are the lass's friend; you come to take her to her own. I wish you Godspeed!"

"I am her friend, Taber."

Ezra accepted this without question.

"I gather," Ezra wandered on, "that the little lass is to be taken where life comes easy?"

"She is to be given her chance. Life is never any too easy; we know that; but there is preparation and opportunity for living it understandingly, and Verity shall have every chance."

Taber nodded.

"I'll miss the lass!" he repeated, the human longing overcoming him. "She's been like a gift of God to me—something to help along while I waited to drift out!"

"She will always know that, Taber, and I will see that you are kept in touch with her. I have much to thank you for. You have helped her when she most needed it."

The following day Mrs. Thomley returned and Austen had his interview with her. All the peril of Verity's life seemed emphasized when Anna Thomley sat before him.

They were in the shoddy living room of the yellow house. Verity was safe with Ezra Taber—Austen had demanded that—and now he looked at the woman across the table without fear of being overheard. Her painted and powdered face was hard and expressionless; her clothing was cheap and gaudy—he noticed that her hands were lined and soiled, the nails broken and black. She listened to what Austen said without interruption, and when he finished and leaned back she remarked calmly:

"Of course you don't expect me to take what you've said without proof?"

"I ask you to take it with recompense."

This was risking much, but Austen believed he knew his woman.

"If the mother is not dead—if she turns up——"

Anna Thomley was on guard—not for the child; Austen saw that and realized the necessity of firmness. He believed she knew perfectly where Mary Carlin was.

"You may send the mother to me!"

This was very disarming, and the glance of Austen's eye was disconcerting. He did not intend to argue.

"But how can I be sure where you will be?"

"You must take some chances, but I will leave my address—my business address—with you. You can easily verify it if you consider it necessary; but I should advise you to forget a good deal when you accept my terms. This is not a threat—it is merely legal advice. This all seems high-handed and questionable, but it is less so, probably, than what might have occurred to the child had I not come."

Anna Thomley winced.

"I've had no money, not a cent, nor an explanation, for over two years," she muttered.

"That is the basis upon which we will transact our business." Austen drew nearer the table and took his check book from his pocket. "And by the way, I am showing great faith in your understanding of our future relations by giving you a check," he added.

The woman dropped her eyes.

"For board and clothing——" Austen began to figure.

"And care!" Anna Thomley broke in.

"Care, of course!"

Austen jotted down items and figures, then passed the slip of paper to the woman, who glanced at it; looked up at Austen; estimated her man and remarked:

"Very well. I agree."

"Thank you. You simplify matters greatly by your intelligent acceptance." Austen made out the check. He arose. "And now, good-bye."

"I'm not to see Verity?"

"No."

"Her clothes——"

Austen waved the suggestion aside and passed from the little yellow house.

Anna Thomley watched him until a turn in the road hid him. She clutched the crisp check in her hand and her eyes glittered. The name was familiar to her—she had followed the Carlin case from a safe distance.

"All right," she muttered. "You've lied like a gentleman, Barnard Austen, and taken a gambler's chance. Why in

God's name you are shielding the child I don't know, but you have your reasons, all right. The mother is not yet dead! Why have you bought her off? For whom?" Then Anna Thomley laughed. "For the Delmars, I reckon. But I'll know in good time. I'll know, and then we'll have another séance, Mr. Barnard Austen."

Anna Thomley's acquaintance with the mother of Verity was of long standing but intermittent, and always it had been confused by change of names—a trick which complicated every phase and period of the woman's life. As Mary Leighton, Verity's mother had lived her years with Delmar, and consequently Mary Carlin's connection with the tragedy of Delmar's death had been a conjecture to Anna Thomley until she saw the pictures in the papers. But she held herself aloof.

She had always believed that Verity was Delmar's child; she concluded that Mary Leighton's downfall began when Delmar cast her off, and now naturally she believed Austen to be a representative of the Delmars.

"Somebody in that bunch," she reflected, "must have a tender conscience, and is ready to look after the child and pay hush money. I'll get in touch with Mary. That's the big idea. There's no telling what might happen."

But there was about Austen and the size of his check that subtle something that warned Anna Thomley to move cautiously and in the dark. And, as often occurs with natures as sluggish and self-centred as hers, she presently lost interest in the affair; took some comfort in the romantic idea that she was acting in Verity's interest and from a devoted and self-sacrificing motive.

She closed her home, went to Philadelphia, and was soon submerged, as far as Austen was concerned, by new and demanding interests. But she had located Mary Carlin.

The day following his interview with Anna Thomley was a trying one for Austen. To his dismay he discovered that in the heat of the dramatic severing of old ties and the forging of new ones he had not considered the plain, commonplace

duties and events that must always, even under the most extraordinary circumstances, play the major part.

With Verity definitely on his hands, with Ezra Taber's faith-demanding eyes upon him, he considered his private life and associates with positive awe.

He knew that he could rely upon Lewis for unquestioned devotion, but the curiosity that would naturally follow the introduction of a strange young girl in his bachelor life was, now that he contemplated it, little less than appalling.

Verity, windswept and tattered; Verity the appealing figure in a sad tragedy, was compelling and captivating; but Verity arrayed in her shabby best, excitedly facing the next stage of her career, was a staggering reality.

There was something pathetically ridiculous about the girl as she stood before him, her eyes reddened by the tears she had shed at her prospective farewell to Ezra; her brave smile twisting her lips, and her thin little hands clutching her old bag which contained her few treasures.

Her beauty was blurred; her future less easy to arrange.

"My God!" thought Austen, and visions of unsuspected dangers loomed darkly.

To introduce her into his home unannounced and arrayed as she would be but to hazard her best interests. By way of Lewis—— He considered for a hopeful moment Lewis's mother and aunt. They might help him, but a second thought drove him away from that possible assistance. The Lewis ladies must not be shocked or have suggested to them anything more dramatic than must of necessity be inevitable. Like most rarefied beings they were capable of marvellous flights of fancy—it were best to clip their wings rather than rely upon them for protection. He must cling to his original story of his client's demands, but Verity menaced it.

Of course, Austen reflected, clothing could be procured in Boston. He could smuggle the girl into some shop—the boat made an early landing—and throw himself upon a shop girl's mercy. But Verity, shod and clothed in appropriate garments, would still, Austen felt, be rather unnerving to an

unsuspecting bachelor environment. He would have to account for her at the best.

Paternalism is often an acquired virtue, and to be worn with dignity and grace should be slowly achieved. Whatever Austen may have had of unawakened emotions along this line had from the beginning been subject to such shocks as to destroy it. Only by regarding Verity as a human being, one to whom he owed much, from whom he might hope in the future for loyalty, could he proceed. Never between him and Verity was there to be the bond of father and child even when a great and beautiful love held them. Their first contact precluded that.

As she stood before him in Ezra's cabin arrayed for her big adventure, Austen was frankly dismayed.

Sensitive and fine, Verity detected the change in him at once, but instead of shrinking before it, she rose superbly. She saw only Austen's position; the few days she had known him had brought her to a reverential aspect of him. He was doing a marvellous thing for her dead mother. Of course she would be a burden and source of anxiety to him unless—and here the girl raised her lovely eyes to Austen—unless she could overcome every obstacle and achieve a place for herself in his life and heart. She owed to him, she believed, her only chance in life—well, she must prove herself.

From that moment her efforts had been so pathetically brave that they shamed when they had not amused Austen. She seemed to be shielding him from herself; she had kept out of sight, but if he insisted upon her presence, she came cheerfully, though shyly.

"You see, Barney"—and oh! how delicately and sweetly she breathed the name which was more often on her lips in prayer than in word—"I'll look a good deal better when I have other clothes"—she had anticipated him—"and you must let me stay by myself just at first, until I get over being frightened. I am like that—I have to find a way to do things; just showing me doesn't seem to help much."

"But I want you with me, Verity," Austen insisted; he did not mean to let her bravery outdo his! They were pacing

the deck of the Boston boat, for the farewells had been said and the night was closing in on them protectingly. "I want you to get acquainted with me—like me, if you can."

The girl gave him her swift, sweet smile.

"I like you now, Barney. I like you so much that I am going to be—be worthy. I like you—madly."

"Come, now, little girl, you mustn't talk like that, you know."

"But I must, Barney. When I'm alone I take myself by the shoulders and look squarely at myself. It's like holding someone else and seeing what's wrong. When I am all fixed up, Barney, then you *will* want me with you!" She was comforting him, poor little soul, while her own lonely self was being relegated to limbo.

In Boston the clothing question was temporarily solved. An inspired saleswoman rescued them and turned Verity out a dazzling surprise. Austen took heart. Again he caught the glimmer of her loveliness and the witch-flash that in a child may so easily lead one astray.

On the train from Boston to New York Austen had another inspiration. Gazing at Verity in the chair next his own, he regained some of his first impressions of her. Outwardly she was presentable; he recalled what he had told Lewis; he must keep to that story, if he could. More and more he was determined to shield the young girl and himself from Mary Carlin. He was conscious of a certain exhilaration as he plotted and planned.

He would devise some method of associating money with Verity. If he were conducting the financial affairs of a client's daughter it would simplify matters and give credence to his story.

Delicately he broached this matter to Verity as the tedious journey progressed.

"You will be quite independent, in a modest way, child," he explained slowly. "I am going to do the best that I can for you."

"I—I do not want to be independent," faltered Verity, to whom money meant little and human support much.

"I hope you'll like me well enough to—to keep me. But of course, if I have money of my own, it would help, if you didn't want me."

Already the little storm-tossed creature was gripping the nearest spar, thankful that it seemed so seaworthy.

"Of course," Austen hastened to explain, "I only want you to feel from the beginning that I am carrying out your mother's wishes as regards what she left for you. As she trusted me, I hope you will, and perhaps you may grow to care for me. I'm rather a lonely man."

Then suddenly Verity broke in:

"If there was money, why didn't my mother send Mrs. Thomley some?"

The keenness of these questions daunted Austen. He turned his eyes toward the outer gloom, through which the long, brilliantly lighted train was sweeping like a comet's tail. Then he leaned close to Verity and in a low tone said:

"I am going to ask my first great thing of you, Verity Leighton. I wonder if you will be able to grant it?"

How natural it was to attempt reasoning with the girl. Austen even then was conscious of the mental attitude between them.

"I'll try, Barney."

"You are entering a new phase of your life, my dear, and much, much depends upon your confidence in me and upon yourself. There are reasons why it is best that you should not know any more about your past than you now know; reasons why much of what you know should be forgot. All this may sound strange to you; it is most unusual. When you are older I intend to take you into my confidence; in the meantime I desire above all else to protect you, make you happy, and prepare you for a useful future. Few young girls have to meet life as you will, Verity, but this I can assure you: you have no need for shame or unhappiness. Whatever of misfortune has come to you, I am capable of removing, in time. Will you help me?"

"Yes, I will help you." The rattling train drowned the slow, even words.

“As you remember your mother, Verity, continue to remember her. I wish it were possible for you to forget the years when she was kept away from you. At least do not let them hamper you.”

“My—my father—did you know him?”

The question that had never been asked but once before broke from Verity's lips.

She had asked Anna Thomley once about her father. She had never forgot the cruel reply.

“Less said about *him*, the better.” And then the laugh that had killed something in Verity, young as she was.

“Yes,” Austen was answering. “I knew your father.”

“Was he bad?”

“No!”

A deep sob-like sigh reached Austen above the roar of the train.

“Is he dead?”

Then Austen dared much.

“When we find your father, Verity, everything will be made plain.”

Suddenly the girl reached over and laid her hand on Austen's arm.

“I begin to understand.” Her eyes were like fire; her breath came in little gasps. “I read a story something like it once, but I did not believe anything real was ever like it. I'll never ask another question, Barney. I'll just fit into the story as it goes along.”

With a touch of impatience Austen said:

“You must not let your fancy run away with you, my dear. On the other hand, you cannot too early learn to keep your own affairs from prying eyes. I have told you what I have for your own protection and comfort.”

Instantaneously, Verity caught the change in tone and manner and she withdrew her hand while the colour rose to her face.

Watching her, Austen realized the sensitiveness of the girl even while he again admired her bravery and control.

When he reached New York he went to a quiet hotel on a side street and telephoned to Sheila O'Neil.

He wondered why he had not thought of Sheila before as a counsellor and aide—Sheila the cheerful and reticent; who “kept to her hours” on business principles.

While they awaited the coming of Sheila, Verity astonished Austen by another burst of mortifying understanding.

“Barney,” she said, and her queer little smile was sympathetic, “we seem to have run away, and now that we are here we don't know what to do.”

“I know perfectly, Verity, and if you will work with me——”

“I will, Barney!”

“And, my dear child, you must not trip over yourself in your determination to meet my wishes. After all, you are a person, you know, and must have wishes of your own. I do not want to eat you alive!”

They laughed without reserve. By that laugh they had won their first common ground.

“Oh! When I am the person I'm going to be, Barney, you'll find me quite a handful, but you see I'm just odds and ends now; when I'm put together like a puzzle, why——”

Austen was regarding her with interest.

“You'll still be a puzzle,” he said. Then: “How old are you, Verity?”

The girl flushed.

“I am not sure, Barney. That's awful, but no one ever told me—no birthday parties, candles, or things like that. How old do I look, Barney?”

“That's it. You look, the body and face of you, very young, child, not more than ten or twelve; but your eyes, your mind——”

“Barney, I can think back more than ten years. I am lost in the years before that.”

“Well, Verity, let's drop the age question. We'll settle that by and by. For the present, I want you to stay here.”

“Alone, Barney?” The wide eyes grew dark.

“No, and only for a week or so at the most. I have sent

for a young woman whom I have known for some time. She will take you about, buy a trunkful of clothes for you, and—well, train you a bit. You see I have lived alone, no women in my home, but I want to prepare a place for you and I want this Sheila O'Neil to prepare you for the place, and then we'll set up housekeeping together—you and I."

"Yes, Barney."

"You don't mind, Verity?" Austen looked anxious.

"Oh! I mind, yes. But I'm going to do it—the preparing, you know; and I like the name of Sheila O'Neil."

"And, Verity, because people are curious there is no reason for your gratifying their curiosity."

"I understand, Barney."

But more and more was Verity becoming involved in misunderstandings. Gradually it was dawning upon her that Austen knew very little of her past or her mother; more and more she was conscious of becoming part of a confused condition, but with sagacity hardly to be looked for she met the situation quietly, unquestioningly. She made no demurs nor seemed longer to doubt.

"I'm in for it," she thought when she was alone. She recalled a time when she and old Ezra, out alone in a fierce storm on the ocean, faced the danger grimly.

"All's being done as can be done, Verity," the old man had explained. "We're using all the knowledge we have, it's up to Him as holds the winds in His hands now, so don't fash and fume. This may be a testing."

"All right!" Verity was pacing her small bed-chamber, awaiting Sheila. "All right! The God in me that Granddad Ezra talked about has a chance now to—to shoot up!"

The interview with Sheila O'Neil did more to reduce conditions to normal than anything Austen could have expected.

She accepted what Austen told her with simple faith. An employer's reputation is often more justly established among his employees than anywhere else. Sheila listened and nodded. To herself she was saying:

"Another kind turn he's making! The *ways* of him, to be sure!"

Sheila was looking back to a time when the "ways" of Austen had solved the troubles of her sister's family; rescued the brother-in-law from the clutches of the law and seen the thing through.

"I want you to see that Miss Verity has proper clothing. Give her a good time, Sheila; take taxis everywhere. The roar of the city frightens her almost to death. Get her used to it and then bring her home. If you get on together I would like to engage you as a—well, as a kind of companion-housekeeper if there is such a thing, and perhaps you can secure a cook, for I'm going to set up a regular home."

Sheila O'Neil, sitting stiffly on her chair, swallowed all that she heard and relegated digestion to the future.

When she saw Verity the kindly heart of her was touched and her Celtic imagination fired.

She undertook the task of clothing Verity with romantic enthusiasm. In dramatic "asides" she conveyed the idea that Verity was a younger sister just "brought over"; she wanted to give the pretty lass the best.

And Sheila knew the "best" in a way that sales people respected.

"These prying shop folks," Sheila confided to Verity, "they gape so wide that it takes a lot to fill 'em. I'm passing you off to them as a kind of Cinderella—do you know about her?"

Verity nodded.

"Well, then, ye look the part, and there ain't going to be any twelve o'clock alarm set for you, either."

As to taxis, Sheila was lavish—she was having a glorified time herself, and soon won Verity entirely.

And then at a week's end Sheila, flushed with pride of achievement, presented Verity to Austen.

He was sitting in his library one late afternoon when a slight noise caused him to raise his eyes. In the doorway leading to the hall stood—Verity.

"Here I am, Barney! Will I do?"

"Will you do?" Austen leaned forward in his chair. "Why, my dear, what has happened to you?"

Eagerly he was noting the pretty shining hair, the plain, becoming gown, the slim ankles and shapely feet.

"I—I do not know, Barney, what *has* happened. I'm afraid that I am going to wake up and find it all a dream."

"This is no dream, Verity." Austen spoke feelingly.

"I wish it were!" The lovely eyes widened. "I could manage it then. All this seems too big for me; too big."

Verity was looking about the stately, beautiful room.

"You're not going to fail me, Verity?" The laughing appeal reached its goal.

"No. I'm going to play fair."

And all her courage was needed in the readjustment. With the excitement of change and mystery subsiding; with Austen away all day and every day and Sheila engrossed in establishing regular housekeeping, Verity wandered through the silent rooms like a shadowy little spirit seeking, it knew not what, among strange and awesome scenes.

"I suppose there *is* something for me," she mused, "something I can make my own," and for that she was seeking.

She read and looked from the windows. Life from that angle and height became more and more dreamlike. She walked with Sheila in parks and through crowded streets—a shade among unreal creatures.

"It's like being in a glass house," she confided to Sheila. "I can see, but I do not seem to hear, and I cannot touch things."

"You'll smash through," Sheila comforted. "You're getting your aim ready or I miss my guess."

Sheila could always make Verity laugh. And to the few who might be interested Sheila had explained Verity so simply that she soon ceased to arouse any interest.

When Austen appeared at the day's end, Verity's greeting was little less than a physical collapse. It irritated him. He had meant to preserve his independence, but this seemed to be impossible. If he remained away and telephoned, his thoughts clung to the memory of the tone of Verity's voice as she said: "All right, Barney." It so tragically proclaimed that everything was all wrong with the poor child's world.

“Something must be done!” he began to realize. “So far I seem to have torn her up by the roots and have failed to replant her.”

So he invited Lewis to the house and, by so doing, opened the door of Verity's cage.

CHAPTER V

LEWIS, more than any other of Austen's small circle, was regarded intimately; more like a younger brother whose affection could be depended upon, whose honest judgment might be accepted or repudiated without resentment.

He appeared with the gratitude of a pardoned exile. Verity was being carefully groomed by Sheila when he strode into Austen's presence, having admitted himself by his private key.

"Well!" he said, smiling broadly and flinging himself in a chair. "I thought it was about time. How does it feel, Barney, the heavy paternal act? You look fit as a fiddle."

Austen caught the contagion of Lewis's mood but the words had startled him.

"It's absorbing," he said. "You see, she has been rather neglected—brought up in an out-of-the-way place—and she takes time. Don't expect too much."

"Got her broken in yet?"

"Well, she doesn't shy at strangers any more. At first she did."

Then suddenly Lewis turned grave eyes upon Austen and said unexpectedly:

"Mary Carlin is in hospital. I've managed fairly well. She's sick, right enough, but she'll be retained as assistant in the infirmary if she recovers. I thought you'd like to know."

A grayness rose to Austen's face, but Lewis was not looking at him. Then quietly Austen spoke, adding a bit more to what he had already confided. It was his way to go slow:

"Ted, that woman had good cause, if such a thing is possible, for killing Delmar. He was a scoundrel; the world's better off with him out of it; but his wife and children cannot be expected to believe that."

"Ah!" thought Lewis. "There *was* something between Delmar and Mary Carlin! I wish to the Lord Harry that I could get her story." Aloud he said:

"Sometimes I believe that all murder, unless it's done by some crazy creature, is justifiable."

"Oh! Come, Ted, don't introduce red in this room, it would jar with the colour scheme." Austen struggled to cast off his anxious mood, but he continued quietly:

"The death of Mary Carlin must be devoutly hoped for. More perhaps for her own sake than another's."

"It's rotten to know that that is true of any one." Lewis spoke feelingly.

After another pause Austen went on:

"I'm going to leave this matter in your hands, Lewis, but in order that you may not be hampered I am arranging to have an account opened in your name at the First National. Draw upon it as you think best for the woman's advantage."

"That's an elastic order, Barney."

"I know what I am about, Ted."

"Of course, Barney, I appreciate your confidence; and I'll try to deserve it."

"I'm sure of that. We need not discuss this case further unless something new comes up."

"All right."

"You see, your first criminal case is taking on importance, Ted, and now I must get you interested in this new business of mine—this Verity Leighton."

At that best of all moments Verity presented herself at the door. Lewis regarded the apparition with solemn eyes.

What he had expected to find he could not have told—but he had not expected this! He was confused, and he looked helplessly young and awkward.

Verity contemplated Lewis with awakened interest. From the first glance he appealed to her as a life-line might have had she been sinking in an actual wreck. All that she had hoped for in her changed life; all that she had struggled blindly to achieve had been menaced by the stark loneliness of her days and Austen's very evident dismay at her presence.

And here was this young, laughing fellow creature flying a signal of hope. She responded tragically, and this sudden friendship was eventually to draw her nearer to Austen.

It brought her to shore! It was quite another matter to live after that; she had made her first contact.

Lewis early demanded that he be called Ted. Simple names seemed to be all that was expected in this new world.

"It's all in the family," he explained. "When you cannot call people by their given names, look out for bumps! Tell me, Verity Leighton, when you think about me, do you think in terms of Lewis or Ted?"

This after the first week. Verity laughed, really laughed. It startled Austen who, behind his evening paper, was listening.

"Why, Ted, of course, because Barney——"

"Leave him out," Lewis commanded in a side tone; "answer honest."

"Well, Ted, then."

"Ted, it is. Ted and Verity. You've got a ripping name."

"It means truth, Barney says."

"Something of a job, living up to that name."

They were presuming upon Austen's detachment and grew confidential.

"Yes, an awful job, Ted."

Then another laugh. Lewis had stridden in where wiser and older people might have hesitated. He presently began to regulate the strained relations between Austen and Verity which his keen interest detected. At the end of a fortnight he was prepared for the next move.

"There's one thing about Barney," he confided, "that you have to tackle with gloves on—that's his independence. He'll do anything for you, but he won't be driven, and if you get a strangle hold upon him there's the very devil to pay. Excuse me, Verity."

"I like you to talk like that, but I don't know what you mean." Even as she spoke Verity began to know.

"You mustn't hamper Barney, Verity. He's annexed you, but you're not a belonging yet. See?"

"Yes. I've never really belonged anywhere, Ted. I mean"—hastily—"that I've always been sort of a responsibility. I suppose I've been trying too hard to be a belonging."

"That's it, Verity. Now you're going to belong like all creation. You're that kind. But the more you try, the more you're getting in your own way. It's the very mischief for Barney to feel you tugging at him when he has other things on hand. See?"

"Yes. I begin to see and I'm not going to tug. You help, Ted. I was so lonely."

"Good! Now let us make a covenant. Tug me, if you must tug, but don't pull at Barney. We'll have him toddling after us yet, take my word for it."

And from that hour Austen was conscious of a relaxed hold upon him.

In due time the Lewis ladies were invited to meet Verity and inspect Austen's new régime.

Now the Lewis ladies were ladies; not women! Like their good but antiquated clothes, their manners and morals were indicative of that station to which an intelligent and Episcopalian God had called them. Clothes and morals and manners had from their beginnings been selected for the wearing quality rather than the beautiful and adaptable.

"It sounds queer to me!" Mrs. Lewis remarked; "and questionable. Such an innovation must have some explanation to justify it."

"But my dear sister-in-law," Miss Jane Lewis whispered, "Mr. Austen has always, himself, been unaccounted for. He does *not* seem to need excuse. He came among us without, so far as I've been able to discover, any tradition whatsoever; but that is no disgrace. I've heard that some people do not have traditions; they are new, of course, but not necessarily unworthy."

"Sister"—Mrs. Lewis sat up very straight—"you don't suppose——"

"Certainly not!" Miss Jane flushed.

"But, sister, it was fifteen years ago that Barnard Austen entered the firm of our legal advisers and this—young girl—"

and his aversion to women—and such things do happen. A bad penny, you know.”

“Theodore thinks this girl is not more than ten.” Miss Jane floundered helplessly.

“What do men know of girls’ ages, sister?” Mrs. Lewis set her lips grimly.

“Well,” Miss Jane broke in, “we must have some faith, and since the girl is an established fact, I suppose she must be educated.”

“I’m not so sure of that, sister. Education does much damage——”

Mrs. Lewis rarely finished her sentences. It was in her pauses that much evil had birth.

She discarded, however, Austen’s confidence concerning Verity and replaced it by an interpretation of her own which she defended stubbornly.

“Such men as Austen do not espouse the cause of young girls for sentiment,” she sniffed. “Client indeed!”

Jane flushed and moved uneasily.

“I cannot see why you should want to create a situation, sister-in-law,” she said.

“Create!” Mrs. Lewis glared. “I do not create evil, Jane, neither do I condone it. We are asked to dine at Judge Austen’s. We are asked to recommend a governess for what? For what?”

“For a young girl, sister-in-law.”

“Exactly! And *what* young girl, Jane?”

“Why, the ward of Judge Austen. You know, sister-in-law, wards used to be very fashionable.”

“In the days of chaperons, yes, Jane. But with the passing of the one the other has become extinct.”

Another sniff and a pause.

Something of this conversation became known to Lewis and he reacted to it violently.

“Well, of all the damned rot!” he exclaimed. “Making messy strings of lies out of a business affair.” Then he rose to imaginary flights.

"Perhaps you'd like to have Mr. Austen show you all the legal data of this case? Well, he jolly well won't do it. But I happen to have the facts and I do not propose to have my mother and my aunt make themselves ridiculous by handing out cheap melodramatic stuff about a perfectly commonplace transaction. I declare there are times when you make me sneeze."

"My son, my son!"

Mrs. Lewis trembled with pride when her son asserted his masculine superiority, but she hid her emotion under a guise of despair. She always uttered the words "my son, my son" as a Biblical character might have, and the words marked her subjugation by, not her love for, her son.

She and Miss Jane dined with Austen, and Mrs. Lewis stared stonily at Verity, while Miss Jane melted.

In the end they advised Austen to engage a certain Miss Truett as governess for his ward. The advice was accepted.

"Schools are hotbeds of immorality," Mrs. Lewis confided. "Spare her that ordeal."

And to Miss Jane the good lady later added:

"I may be all wrong, Jane. If I am, I shall be glad to know it, and if anybody can get at the truth of this matter, Eleanor Truett can."

But Miss Truett, apparently, got nowhere in the matter, outside her legitimate and professional lines. She arrived at the Austen apartment at nine, instructed Verity until twelve, and then had lunch with her, Sheila hovering throughout the meal. From one to four Miss Truett conducted her charge to carefully selected art exhibitions and concerts.

Verity absorbed what was offered in the way of education as a desperate person might consume a disagreeable portion of food, in order to get it over with.

The pictures she enjoyed and often the music affected her deeply. It was after a concert that she once suggested to Miss Truett that she should have singing lessons.

"For," she explained, "I think I will either be a great singer or dancer some day."

This, when repeated to the Lewis ladies, was stored away, as evidence, among suspicions and doubts.

"We'll have the truth some day, Jane. Was there *ever* a moral actress?"

"Oh, I hope so, sister-in-law," Miss Jane quivered.

Miss Truett left her duties at four unless entertainment detained her, and then Verity, somewhat flattered and chastened, emerged and gradually revived. By the time Austen returned, often accompanied by Lewis, she was in a state of hilarity that should have aroused alarm.

"You're growing up!" Lewis once remarked to Verity as she sat across the table from him at dinner.

This was apropos of nothing and Austen glanced in Verity's direction.

"What have you done to your hair?" he asked inanely.

"Pulled it down over my ears." Verity beamed radiantly. "Ears seem to be out of fashion."

"You do look as if you were growing up," Austen said, looking puzzled.

"Funny," he said, turning to Lewis, "just when you think you've got a nice little doll to play with, you find it's a meat baby. What do old bachelors do with meat babies, Ted? Ask your mother and your aunt."

"Don't, please don't, Ted." Verity clapped her hands excitedly. "They might send something worse than Miss Truett."

"Verity!" Austen tried to look stern. "What's the matter with Miss Truett?"

"Nothing, Barney, nothing that she can help. Someone poured education in her and she tips over and pours it in me—but you see it doesn't get me anywhere."

Lewis laughed, but Austen seemed to have lost his appetite.

"Get you anywhere?" he repeated. "Where do you want to get?"

Verity's eyes looked dreamy. She was thinking of old Ezra and harbours where people would be. She never spoke of Ezra. She had accepted his loss as a necessary adjunct to her duty to Austen.

“I don’t know, Barney, that’s just it. I get thinking why things *are*, and there does not seem to be any answer. We’re all playing around, like those children Sheila and I see in the Parks. I wish I did *know*! I’m tired of guessing.”

“Guessing what, Verity?”

The three at the table looked suddenly serious as they bent forward.

“Things. Things I want to know but do not know how to ask about. Just why, why, why, Barney? I’m different, you see, from other girls. Why? Oh!” Verity got up and tossed her arms wide. “I want to feel my feet on something solid.”

“What are they on now?” Lewis asked with grave interest.

“I’m only flapping about now, Ted.”

“Bunk!” Lewis struck a match sharply and set fire to the end of a cigarette. He did not merely light the weed, he made a conflagration of it.

“Let’s go to a movie,” he added.

Sheila O’Neil, passing from the room, paused at the door and looked at the group. Then she shut her lips close.

CHAPTER VI

AUSTEN, after Verity's entrance into his life, seemed to pass from one experience to another without any vital connecting link.

Only his business life seemed static and familiar. Once he entered his offices or the court room, he was himself, the hard-won personality that had been gained by much perseverance and which had withstood the shocks dealt it until the Carlin case.

But apart from that everything was in a volatile condition. His quiet rooms held the echo, if not the actual sounds, of laughter and banter. He felt younger and, at times, older than he had felt for years; more as if he were playing a part.

The brightness of his home was set against the grim background where dwelt Mary Carlin and what she represented. He was conscious, constantly, of warding something off, while he played his part. There was always an ache under his laugh. He was beginning to feel; to resent and send forth human appeal.

With his acceptance of Verity he emerged from the emotional phases relating to her and she became, in a sense, a vital and potent factor in his life. He had at first resented her, repulsed her mentally, then became fascinated by her. Her beauty and charm, her vivid personality and adaptability, aroused his pride and admiration. In his relief, he believed he was beginning to feel love for the girl, but it was at the best only an earnest desire for her happiness. This brought with it renewed alarm, for her happiness must be guarded, must depend upon his interpretation.

No longer did he contemplate taking her, at present, into his confidence. He withdrew into his secret place, but he could not bar the girl out.

"I've paid the price!" he groaned. So he had—*his* price.

"I've foregone love and happiness. I do not intend to let her pay." This seemed, in a sense, to justify him.

The helplessness of the girl cried out for his protection. There were moments when he recalled old Ezra's words about taking Verity to her own. Was he giving her her own? Was he preparing her even for what she might some day have to face?

"Verity is forgetting," he tried to make himself believe; but in his best moments he knew that she was not. So, for a time, he built a high wall about the girl and himself and went his strenuous way doggedly.

It was that talk at the dinner table that first set him thinking straight. Lewis took Verity to the theatre and Austen sat alone and thought. In a clear-visioned way he took account of stock.

He had detached Verity from the past. He was not entirely comfortable about Ezra Taber. He had letters occasionally from the old man: dignified, quaint epistles in answer to his carefully typewritten ones.

He knew that Anna Thomley had gone away. That the yellow house was boarded up and deserted. The items cheered Austen; seemed added safeguards.

"I wander up there, now and then," so Ezra's letter ran, "and peep through a knothole. A haunted place, sir, is the yellow house, but I thank God it ain't haunted by the little gal Verity."

Austen had never shared these letters with any one. He regarded them purely as data.

"A place of dreams!" thought he dully. "Nothing real. No wonder she wants to get her feet upon the ground. But——"

And then the reverse of the picture was contemplated.

To tell Verity the truth meant . . . Austen saw the lovely, vivacious face before him; saw it blanch and die as it faced reality.

"My God! I cannot," he muttered. "As long as I can keep her free, I must." He knew that he must, in order to do

this, detach her more and more, not only from her past, but the narrow present that he had brought her into. Somewhere, somehow she should be prepared by another to face the truth, but if he could postpone the inevitable, what might not occur? And so his confusion grew.

He would, he avowed, do his best, but in the meanwhile keep silent. He saw no further than that. He had struggled through black waters himself by this method. There had been lonely, desolate times in his own past when he had longed for human sympathy and understanding, but had he made a cry then, he might have brought down upon himself that which would have destroyed, instead of supporting, the little he had won by concentrated effort.

"There should be a woman in her life," Austen floundered on, beating away every new and perplexing doubt by an effort of will. "Not Sheila, nor the Lewis women, but someone young, vital, wise enough, and above all tender enough to help her as no man can just now."

But it was Sheila who, at that moment, tapped on the library door and entered. She had never looked more capable and comely—nor more determined.

"Will you sit down, Sheila?"

Sheila sat down as if the yielding chair was an everlasting rock.

Always Austen feared that something might sever Sheila from him, marriage most likely, and he had grown to depend upon her to a dangerous extent.

"It's about Miss Verity, sir."

"Oh!" And Austen relaxed. "Yes, Sheila. Has she been kicking the traces? She's young and heedless, but surely——"

"Mr. Austen, she's the blessedest creature along those lines. She doesn't ever do such things—I wish she would!" Sheila became rambling. "I do be hoping, sir, you won't think what I'm saying is out of place, but speak I must."

"I hope you will, Sheila, and freely."

"Well, sir, Miss Verity shouldn't be here—though it hurts the heart of me to be saying it. There ain't any men on the face of the earth, sir, be they as good and noble as yourself

and Mr. Lewis, that can live along with a pretty thing like Miss Verity, sir, without seeing the *woman* in her and tugging at it until it hurts the child of her."

Austen gripped the arms of his chair. Was he never to have done with this worry? He could think of nothing to say. The picturesqueness of Sheila's speech stilled commonplaces.

"You're always seeing the woman she's going to be and playing up to it, and Miss Verity, sir, all unbeknown to herself, is seeking to meet you, she being that loving and worshipping, sir. She reads the most fearsome books. I declare when she talks about them, they chill my blood, but as long as she *does* talk to me, things haven't gone far; but when she stops, sir, and goes to brooding, oh! Mr. Austen, can't you see what I mean? Miss Verity should be among young, romping, unfeeling things for a time—she ought to be turned loose among creatures like herself."

"You mean"—Austen was grasping some tangible things in the light of Sheila's illumination—"you mean that Miss Verity should be sent to school?"

"Something like that, sir."

"But, Sheila, what's wrong with Miss Truett?"

"Nothing, sir, God forgive the idea. There isn't neither right nor wrong about Miss Truett, sir. She's putty in Miss Verity's hands, sir, because of that. I think—and I hope you'll pardon me—I think, sir, that Mrs. Lewis is not a good picker for the likes of Miss Verity."

"I see. But, Sheila, what school would you suggest?"

Sheila seemed to Austen at that moment a very present help in a troubled time. The only one holding out possible solution.

"Now that, sir, is beyond me to say. Maybe it isn't a school that Miss Verity needs—maybe it's only young things to scratch along with."

"But, Sheila, my friends—I have no friend to whom I can go for assistance along this line. I do not know any children—I've always been glad that I didn't. I never considered them necessary before." Austen felt positive relief in opening his mind to Sheila.

“They have their place, sir, distracting as they are. They’re mighty educating to themselves. They have a lingo that only themselves understand, and through it they get to things that us older folks don’t know the way to.”

Sheila rose and so did Austen.

“I will think of this, Sheila,” he said, “and I am deeply grateful.”

Left alone, Austen went over all that Sheila had said; it seemed now to be but an echo of his own previous thoughts that he had tried to still. She had introduced nothing new, she had simply emphasized everything; focussed it. Yes, but she *had* struck a new note. What did she mean by that nonsense about tugging at the woman in Verity? The more he pondered this the more nervous Austen became. Here was definite danger, but from what he could not clearly define.

An hour later Verity and Lewis returned. Austen regarded the girl now as if by her appearance she might still his doubts and set the shadows flying. She did nothing of the sort.

She was radiant and she looked as if in some miraculous fashion she had escaped from the familiar child he had known and was revelling in her escape.

“Barney!” she cried, dancing about the room, “I am thrilled. Ted took me to see such a wonderful play. Simply wonderful.” She darted across the room and perched on Austen’s chair arm. There were moments when Verity could overcome the shyness she often felt and be quite simple with Austen.

Lewis, from across the table, regarded her with admiring amusement. She was doing him credit, he mused.

“You see, in books,” Verity rattled on, “you have to do your own fixing of the scenes, but to-night there they were right before you. All you had to do was to look and know. I almost died of joy, didn’t I, Ted?”

“You nearly broke up the meeting,” Lewis returned.

“What was the play?” Austen asked. “I thought you were going to a movie.”

“‘The Dawn’,” Lewis lighted a cigarette. “Silly stuff.”

“It was not!” Verity darted a fierce glance at him. “It was life—a big slice of life. Everyone waking up and seeing things—*real*, not make-believe. Seeing *why* things happened and one woman—oh! but she was a dear—she made up her mind that she would *dare*, not *wish* she might dare. Barney, the woman looked like me, didn’t she, Ted?”

“She did not!”

“She did, Barney. Ted’s got a grouch just because I wept and laughed—as if I cared what people thought! I *am* that woman, Barney, and when I am older you’ll see!

“Why, Ted, even *you* grew terribly still when that woman stood out under the stars and said just as if she was talking to God: ‘I’m not afraid of life.’ Oh! Barney, that’s what stirs deep down in my heart—I’m not afraid of life. I adore it!” And Verity struck an attitude.

“You’re a ranting little goose, Verity.” Austen could not take his eyes from the vivid, illumined face. “Get to bed—and these theatre parties must be cut out.”

“I tried for a movie,” Lewis explained, “but they were jammed.”

“Off with you, Verity. It’s half-past eleven.”

“I’m going, Barney.” Verity rose, shyness again overcoming her. “But I’m not afraid of life!”

She went dancing and laughing from the room.

Left alone, Austen and Lewis leaned back and laughed.

“Ted, I’m afraid we’ll have to ship the child off to school—or somewhere.”

“She’ll rear at that.”

“No, she will not rear or revolt—she may do something more serious, but she must be held back. She had the wrong start. She’s not being prepared for life; she’s being smuggled into it. It’s all wrong, Ted, all wrong. I took her from bad conditions, God knows. I rescued her and then shut her up—that’s what I’ve done, shut her up. You and I have played with her, amused her, and found some pleasure in her as we might have in a stray dog we’d given shelter and taught tricks.”

Austen suddenly stopped and then asked helplessly:

"What do they do with girls like Verity, Ted? I cannot ask such women as your mother. They don't know. They think along lines of governesses—and that's part of the shut-in method; the harem kindergarten, by gracious!"

Lewis looked grave.

"What's done you up, old man?" he asked curiously, but feeling, at the same time, some vivifying truth in it all. "Has Verity been up to any mischief? All youngsters do—but she seems such a good sport that I never suspected she could give an undercut."

"No. That's just it. She's doing something more serious than dealing undercuts. She's been thinking, Ted; thinking things that no mere man can help her to work out, I fear, and she's been giving me things to think of that prove to me how unfit I am to tackle this. By Jove! It was Sheila O'Neil who opened my eyes, and now I must do something about it."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

The pronoun had a peculiarly soothing effect.

Austen gave his rare smile.

"Thanks, Ted, I'm going to tackle this, now that I have gripped the situation. You see—" he paused as he always did before he took a new step—"there are reasons why, in Verity's case, it is necessary that no further mistakes be made with her; none that can be avoided. Her inheritance is not such as can be disregarded."

Lewis dropped his eyes and waited. Was he to get another instalment?

"Both her parents, in a way, shifted their responsibility to others who were not the proper sort to train the child. She was left to herself to scramble and snatch and she's gathered rather a varied crop. She's beginning to sort and choose, but she needs help. She comes of good stock, but her transplanting was all wrong." How pitiful it all sounded.

"I see!" Lewis murmured, and he did not see at all.

What really happened after the night of the theatre party was rational enough. Austen considered schools and corresponded with the heads of several that interested him.

Information flooded in upon him; it became rather exciting to eliminate, select, and approve from the mass.

Lewis naturally was drawn into the business and proved a great asset.

"If it's got to be done," he advised, "do it right. As I see it, you want to amputate her from us, in a sense."

"Well, yes; in a way, yes."

"It's going to be a major operation, all right, Barney. Cutting deep and all the rest."

"I suppose so, Ted."

"Now if you put her near by she'll cling—run back too often——"

"That's right!" With this, Austen swept aside a litter of advertisements of schools near New York.

"She ought to go where, in self-defense, she'll have to make new connections," Lewis continued.

"Or not make them," Austen suggested rather forlornly.

"Never fear, Barney. She's like one of those vines bound for the light and upper heights. She may get twisted and snarled as she climbs, but she'll grip as she goes and she'll come out all right on the top."

"You believe that, Ted?"

"I know it!"

"How?"

"Lord! Barney, I'm not on the witness stand. This is inspiration I'm giving you."

"Thanks."

To a limited extent Verity was consulted as to the future plans. At first she was startled; alarmed as she always was when confronting change. She grew thinner, paler, smiled more, and often nodded at Austen, when he was not voicing his thoughts, as though to convey to him that words were not necessary between them.

She did not mean to be any trouble—that became more and more evident; she would not make demands—the thought hurt Austen, but he could not combat it. As a young girl she interested him, amused him, appealed to him, but if

Verity suffered under the conviction that she in no sense *belonged*, Austen suffered under the realization that he could not *make her belong*, do what he might.

To every just claim she made upon him for her protection and his own, he responded. But from the closer tie he recoiled. He saw in her not only the sweet, unquestioning girl whom he was seeking to serve, but the child of the woman who had ruined his life; who had shut all doors of escape to him and who must for ever remain a menace while she lived—the woman who would not die!

He could not forget Mary Carlin. She was gaining power over him. He believed that with Verity removed, he might bury himself in work and regain once more the peace he had known.

Eventually a school was selected. Happily it proved to be the right one for all concerned, for at its head there was a woman capable of directing without controlling; a woman who realized that it was wiser to equip the young for hewing their own way than to attempt the impossible task of leading them over paths which, she frankly admitted, usually ended in a blank wall.

“The future form of transit,” she smilingly confided to Austen, “is likely to be wings. Of course there are bound to be weak wings, broken wings, mere flapping wings; but if the dear things have to grovel in the depths, they may also touch the heights. At the worst they can do better than we have, I truly believe. I keep them healthy, happy, if I can. I let them talk. Usually they do not know what they are talking about when they begin, but occasionally one of them has a vision and she knows how to pass it on to the others. They will take it from one of their own.”

Austen decided upon this very modern place of learning with some misgiving. There was much to commend it, but the wing theory caused him hours of thought.

“She sounded so confoundedly practical,” he mused. “That is what disturbs me. It ought not to sound so practical, that wing stuff.”

When Lewis heard this he was amused.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, "the army and navy have accepted the idea as practical—why not schools?"

"This is no time for levity, Ted."

"That's true, Barney. But, honest, have the elders of the tribe done so well that they should feel competent to direct others, who may, you know, have ideas of their own?"

Verity was from the first enthusiastic about Austen's choice. In letting go, she reached forth, and to be able to clutch anything that promised what *this* school promised did much to console her.

And so Verity was sent away. She went bravely, with uplifted head—she comforted Austen and Lewis to the last and then wept all night in her berth from that terrifying sense of being torn away from what really did not belong to her.

"Just like a weed," she sobbed, "when I get where I am noticed, I'm pulled up."

But she rose on her wave of misery and struck out for her next point of vantage, thus proving that her wings were sprouting.

"A most dramatic little creature!" That was the verdict of Mrs. Winslow, head of the Winslow School, after she had greeted Verity. "She'll be worth watching—not *bear* watching, mark you." And this proved that Mrs. Winslow was capable of caring for winged things.

CHAPTER VII

VERITY came home twice before another vista opened in Austen's life.

The first time she appeared she rather appalled him and Lewis, but Sheila O'Neil, after regarding her for a day, gave a chuckling laugh.

"Don't be taking her too serious, sir," she confided to Austen. "Can't you see what a bluff she's putting up? She was never one to give herself away, and she's learning a new language now—so she's showing off."

She managed, however, on that visit, to arouse Austen anew to his responsibility and duty. The girl was a permanent factor in his life. In a way he was in league with her to preserve what he valued and what she was learning to appreciate. In giving her opportunity to prepare for what life offered, he had placed her where life presented a charmed aspect. More and more he saw that in her acceptance of what he was making possible he was tragically unfitting her rather than fitting her for the grim reality that brooded over her life and his; for Mary Carlin did not die, and the future loomed menacingly. What was to be the outcome at the end of Mary Carlin's sentence? This became an added torment.

On Verity's second appearance in Austen's house she had the effect of a galvanic battery.

She had, to a certain extent, found herself. She had been accepted by her schoolmates; she was popular, brilliant, too, in an all-around way. She had developed; was rather startlingly lovely in her pale amber and white beauty.

She had arrived at the stage of progress where every day is greeted with joy and released with regret. She sang and laughed before breakfast, she was keenly alive all day, and was surprised when her attention was called to bedtime.

Austen, to his relief, found her stimulating as a human being; he mentally fenced with her, laughed at her as he might at an equal; was inordinately proud of her appearance.

“She’s a gilt-edged investment,” he confided to himself and appeared in public with her, strutting a bit, if the truth were told.

Lewis, for his part, took Verity gravely; was tremendously polite to her; sent her gifts—which she received with supreme satisfaction, not noticing, apparently, the change in Lewis’s manner.

In short, Verity on that second visit interfered with business and again set in circulation doubts and questionings in the Lewis home.

It seemed, apparently, that there was no phase of life that Verity had not delved into and solved to her own satisfaction. She discussed everything frankly with whoever would listen.

Austen gazed fascinated upon her audacity; Lewis flushed, his mother bridled, and Sheila O’Neil did not laugh any more. But above all else, after Verity had returned to school, Austen recalled her tenderness, her frankness. She had lost for ever her shyness with him; she held him as a dear equal.

“Oh! Barney,” she had confided to him on a memorable night when he and she, by his fireside, had together watched the day break, “I am trying to grow up to you. You are wonderful, and some day you will understand how I feel about you. I may be able to do you a good turn—how I’d love that! I must have made a terrible eruption in your life, dear man. I was such a greedy, demanding little beast, I tried to choke love out of you, but oh! Barney, I did so want the belonging feeling.”

“Have you got it now, Verity?” Austen asked, feeling somehow that inevitably he had always given twelve ounces to the pound instead of sixteen, while honesty had always been his constant intention.

“Yes; I belong to myself, Barney.” This came simply, proudly. Then: “Barney, I wish that you would tell me everything; everything. Tell me about my mother; my

father. Tell me"—here Verity hesitated, fearing a misunderstanding— "just how much money I have—of my own. I hate mystery, and I seem to be deluged by it. Hasn't the time come?"

"Do you want a larger allowance?" Austen started, clinging to the lesser evil.

"No. I have more than I need. But you see, Barney, when it is over—school, I mean—I must take my future in my own hands."

"Why, Verity? Have I failed so miserably?"

"No, dear, you have won out."

"Meaning?"

"That you have done your blessed duty—when it must have been hard for you. You will see by and by how thoroughly I appreciate it. I cannot understand how my people"—here the exquisite flush touched the fair, drooping face—"could, well, dump me on your doorstep and hide. Why *did* they hide? Why dump me?"

"My dear girl"—Austen reached out a yearning hand—"I must have failed completely if I have permitted you so utterly to misconstrue things."

"Don't, Barney, dear." Verity patted the outstretched hand comfortingly. "At least you shall not blame yourself."

At that moment Austen longed to take the girl into his confidence; she seemed, for the first time, more truly his than ever before. But he hesitated, and with delicate reserve Verity changed the subject. She always disarmed one by her non-resistance.

"I see; you are not ready to talk freely to me," she said in a soft, hurt way.

"Not yet, Verity. Trust me a little longer."

But after she went, Austen could not lightly shake off the impression she had made. He looked forward to her final homecoming with tingling excitement. Where heretofore he had dreaded the necessity of acknowledging his responsibility, he now feared that it might escape him.

What Verity had done was this: she had broken through the shield that Austen had built about himself; she had shat-

tered the wall, flimsy at best, that he had raised about him and her. His affections stirred; life took on a new meaning to him—he wanted what was his and he fiercely began to fight for it, where once he had resigned himself to forego it.

At first this took the form of planning for Verity's future in such a way that she could not escape him.

“We'll have a home—a real one, cellar, attic, and kitchen”—this was amusing. “We'll go abroad. I'll take her absolutely into my confidence and she'll stand by me!”

This conclusion rather thrilled Austen. To face life with something of his own with him! Was he, after all, to know this comfort?

And then Fate took Austen in hand. Softened, vibrating to demands he had long since renounced, he drifted back to the time when he had dared think that he, like other men, could shatter the ties that bound him and begin afresh. With old emotions revived, old environment made its demands. He thought, with a sick longing, of the hill country where, years before, he had passed his summer vacations. He had first gone there after a severe illness, had regained his health in a farmhouse where a blessed old soul had mothered him.

Not for years had he dared recall those summers, for they held the perilous memory of a desired woman—the woman for whom he had gone forth to clear his life of débris.

“But now,” thought Austen, “that is dead and done for—the old hopes. I'm throttled securely.” He groaned as he recalled Mary Carlin. “Ties are not easily struck off, but there is no reason why I should not take a vacation and look up old friends.”

By such erratic decisions does Fate seize her opportunity for weaving surprising romances.

Austen set about arranging for his absence from town. Lewis eyed him keenly. Being Austen's confidential man had its perquisites and drawbacks.

“Verity used you up?” he asked.

“No—she's taken years from my life.” Austen drew a deep breath.

"She's bowled me over, Barney." Lewis set his jaw and Austen dropped his. "I just thought I'd mention it. It will be something for you to chew on."

"But, Ted! Good Lord!"

"Exactly. Just maul the idea, Barney. Have a good time, everything will go smoothly here; you couldn't have chosen a better time for beating it."

Ten days later Austen stood on the station platform of Coverly, Vermont, and looked about him. It was almost more of a shock, after the years of his absence, to find everything so unchanged, than it would have been to contemplate the reverse.

Apparently Coverly had not been discovered. It lay just as he had last seen it. Even the shabby station, lighted by oil lamps, was the same. There stretched the road past the triangle of grassy Common with its rickety bandstand, its flag pole, and its monument to "Our Brave Dead."

There was the straggling tavern, with its twinkling lights—how early it always displayed its beacons!

For a moment Austen contemplated going to the Tavern and having a night's rest before starting on his adventure.

But a homesick longing for the old house where he used to spend his vacations overcame his caution.

There was a short cut across the meadows, a half mile beyond the Tavern—how well he recalled it! It wound by a noisy little stream, rambled through an enchanted wood, and abruptly joined the highway by the Goodalls' front door.

Austen knew that the Goodalls still lived at Lower Farm and were well and hearty: he had been sensible enough to obtain that information before starting. He could get back to the Tavern that night, he reasoned, if, by any chance, his old bed-chamber at Lower Farm was unavailable. So, clutching his bag he strode on, feeling younger than he had in years; more energetic and interested than circumstances seemed to justify.

Life was a strange trickster, he thought, playing upon human beings as though they had no choice in the game. With everything as it had been, confusing and blinding, here

he was walking briskly through the fragrant autumn twilight whistling cheerily. He paused to listen to himself, then laughed and went on, feeling as if his burdens had fallen from him.

Perhaps it was psychological, for he recalled, just then, that in the old days when he had dropped business and left the city behind him, he had become a boy among the hills, had lived a happier, more normal life—he had simply come back! Suggestion spurred him on. His old self had met him, taken him in hand.

To appear unexpectedly before the Goodalls would not be the calamity it might be to many, Austen smilingly thought, for Nancy Goodall, living her lonely, detached life, was always, as she declared, prepared for accidents.

.. “Just so many are due folks,” she had once humorously explained. “Some folks get ’em scattered and thinned out, but ’pears to me as if I am allas booked for regular freshets, but I ain’t going to be taken off-guard.”

Austen laughed aloud at the recollection. Now that he was back among the old scenes, how Nancy and her quaint philosophy and sayings rose to strengthen his desire and longing to see her.

“Beds aired and ready; the larder stocked. Them is safeguards against shock,” she always held.

The brief gloaming had become evening by the time Austen reached the meadow path. Other feet than his had kept the trail trodden and clear. To the right and left quiet-eyed, munching cows regarded him dreamily; overhead the stars sprang to life, as if touched by a magic wand; ahead, and looming as he knew above Lower Farm and the Five Winds House, was Spread Eagle—the “mountain” of the region. There is always one peak so designated in any hill country; one dome more beloved than all others. Spread Eagle was not the highest peak, but from time immemorial it was The Peak. Its broad wings were spread like sheltering arms over the little town; it brooded protectingly, comfortingly. The trail leading up to it, as Austen well remembered, was no easy or direct one. It seemed to have “happened” along

as roaming feet wandered. It turned off occasionally to lead to ravishing views; it ambled by trickling streams, it all but lost itself in the group of gorgeous maples known as The Pilgrims. Halfway up the slope it came suddenly, triumphantly, to The Peak as if to say: "Here you are—after all my tricks."

Pressing on in the growing darkness, Austen became absorbed by his surroundings and the memories that arose brought comfort in their wake. He was no longer tired or apprehensive; he sang snatches of song and shifted his bag; felt strong and happy—he was literally, bodily and spiritually, upon a vacation, and the realization of this gave him joy. So it had always been.

He walked briskly on; came to the little brook—how well he remembered just where the stepping stones were!—jumped across it, struck into the sugar bush beyond, emerged, on the hill-top, entered the old covered bridge, groped his way out, and saw before him the gleaming lights of Lower Farm.

The shades at the glistening windows were raised at uniform height. There would be a rag rug on the doorstep. When the weather was "soft" this was replaced by a rubber mat. The brass knocker gleamed cheerily—no doubt about that knocker. Austen raised it, let it fall, and stood waiting.

Then the door fell back with no grudging hospitality and Nancy stood in the warm glow. Her eyes were lighted as from a sudden flare behind them.

"Barney Austen!" she cried. "Barney Austen!" To her he would always be what he was when he first came to her, sick and needy, years ago. She knew the honours that were now his; in secret she had followed his career, had faithfully defended his silences and long absence by her ability to hold him as she felt she knew him in her heart.

"My stars! You've come back along with all the other happenings. I declare to goodness!"—she was leading Austen into the narrow, upright hall; into the shining dining room beyond, upon whose table the evening meal was set—

“the way things have taken to springing on me! It does beat all! Now you hang up your hat and coat and I’ll have your plate and cup on in a jiffy. My! My! but you do go to the heart, same as you always did!”

Nancy was bustling about. She was one with whom tears and laughter lay close, and she chose the latter whenever she could.

In her quick passages from kitchen to dining room she interrupted her ramblings, now and then, to call cheerily: “Pa, come along and see who has happened in. My goodness, Barney, how natural it does seem to see you setting there by the fire!—Pa, Pa, do hurry. Barney Austen has follered up what has already happened!”

This seemed to reach Jonas Goodall. Austen heard the slow, determined advance of the old man whose obstinate nature was always holding back from Nancy’s sunny spontaneity. Old Jonas believed that it was strength of character, this stubbornness of his. He came into the room as if being dragged against his will. He was lean, gray, and stern-jawed, but he looked no older than when last Austen had seen him.

“Well,” he muttered, coming to the fireside and holding out a claw-like hand, “so here you are at last. What you got to say for yourself?”

“A good deal, if I may stay and say it.” Austen smiled at Nancy.

“Stay?” she called back over her shoulder. “Well, I guess yes! Just tote your bag up to your old room, Barney. I aired it only yesterday; everything set. Touch a match to the kindlings and wash up and then we’ll eat. God be praised, there’s waffles and maple syrup, Barney. I do hope you’ve fetched your appetite along.”

Alone in the upper chamber, Austen for a moment stood at bay. His mood of joy was challenged by the grim reality of his life, but he shook off the hold, spiritually emerged again from the Shadow. He would have none of it here among the hills. He was on a vacation!

He had abandoned everything that once he had craved.

But *had* he? He was simply doing what he, what any one, had a right to do, he insisted. But *was* he?

“Why have you come?” The question arose as if an amused but curious friend asked it. “After all these years, why have you come?”

“I don’t know!” Austen honestly acknowledged. Here he was and he meant to get the most out of it that he could. He was on a vacation! Reiteration restored self-respect.

He lighted the fire, plunged his head into a basin of ice-cold water, and laughed at Nancy’s call from below:

“Don’t be counting on your judgship, Barney Austen,” she rippled. “If you don’t come while things is hot they’ll be cold, same as if you were just plain folks.”

As he descended the little, crooked stairway, Austen heard Jonas mutter:

“You seem to forget you’re talking to a judge, Nancy. You never was one to hold to respect.”

“I guess that’s so, Jonas,” Nancy retorted. “Folks is just folks to me, and most of ’em are God-sent.”

The meal was exactly what the evening meals of long ago had been: ham and golden eggs; flaky biscuits, maple syrup and marvellous waffles and pear sauce to cap the feast.

“You don’t seem a mite different, Barney.” Nancy peered at him fondly. “At first glimpse you did have a new look, but it’s passing, leaving you—yourself.”

“I am myself, Aunt Nancy. I’ve just come back, that’s all.”

“That’s enough.”

And still no word of Five Winds Farm was spoken.

After supper Austen “helped with the dishes” in the old joyous way. He was cautioned against carelessness with china and glass; he was rebuked for keeping to a wet towel when dry ones were hanging close by.

“Dear suz!” Nancy chuckled. “Home ain’t home without someone to scold and keep after.”

It was when they were gathered in the living room that Austen sought the information for which he had come. At last he was honest enough to own the truth.

The Goodall living room was the final expression of the family feud which had existed since Jonas and Nancy were married. Across the orderly room there seemed to be an invisible line ending at the broad fireplace. On one side of that line were the Goodall possessions. Grim photographic or crayoned monstrosities flanked the west wall. Furniture, sacred to Goodall tradition, held stern place, while across the room, on the east side, the Smith heirlooms held their hard-won points of vantage.

The Smiths' taste had run not so much to perpetuating their own likenesses as to amazing flower pieces, dead birds, and cheerful mottos. The chairs were less rigid, less valuable, but more comfortable. The what-not held proof of the Smith tendency to wanderlust. Coral, Chinese figures, and foreign shells interspersed with seaweed and strange coins, added atmosphere to the east side.

It was all as it had been, and before the hearth Jonas sat, on his side, in the deep chair of his ancestors, while Nancy rocked in her place. Austen took the middle position with that "damnable line" running, as he humorously thought, under his chair.

"Some things can't be mixed," Jonas had once said when Austen, in a fit of mischief, had changed the furniture. "Marrying don't settle what never was to be settled. Goodall and Smith don't blend. Goodalls allas was settlers; Smiths allas was floaters. It's when you keep some things apart that you can live easy."

In the firelight Austen gazed at his hosts. Jonas stared fixedly into the red glow, his pipe clutched between his teeth; Nancy swayed back and forth in her frivolous little creaky chair, as once her forbears might have rocked as their crafts rose and fell on the ocean. There was nothing fixed about Nancy. Her smile came and went; her hands were never idle; her friendly glance travelled from object to object, face to face, as if seeking new pleasure.

And then quite irrelevantly Austen asked:

"What has become of Constance Maynard?" The barricade was down.

Jonas clucked disapprovingly; Nancy folded her knitting, patted it comfortably, and then advanced, by a side track.

"You know the old Senator died?" she said.

"Yes; the year that I was last here. I saw the account in the papers."

"Constance seemed to feel your not sending her a word." Nancy spoke gently.

"I—I couldn't!" Austen bent his head. "I——"

"Well! There, never mind," Nancy soothed. "I allas held and I allas will that reasons *are* reasons and I call 'em good till they're proven bad."

"Gosh!" ejaculated Jonas, whose objection to Nancy's plastic state was deep-rooted. "Why in thunder don't you come to the point and answer a civil question?" he asked.

"I'm coming, Pa. Some come cantering, others running. I was never one to plunge. Now the old Senator"—she turned to Austen—"went awful sudden. He was up in that tower room of his, painting one of them pictures he used to indulge in, and his paint brush was up in the air when it—fell—and that was the end! Constance had the picture put in an elegant frame and called it 'Waiting.' Waiting—like most of us is—to be finished, I take it." Nancy wiped her eyes.

"That must have been a shock to her." Austen spoke feelingly.

"Shocked all the common sense out of her if she ever had any," Jonas broke in.

"God Almighty had her in His keeping," crooned Nancy.

"He's a powerful careless keeper, that's all I've got to say," mumbled Jonas.

"Pa allas took it hard about what Constance did next," Nancy continued, "but I hold that being a woman and young and handsome shouldn't keep her from what she wanted to do—and it didn't. She went overseas. She was left a lot of money. No one suspected the old Senator was anything like as rich as he was. He was rather near, you know, and kept Constance like she was his little private idol set up aloft; but when his will was read, it was found that he

left her everything without a string to it—and then she went suddenly, as if running, to do all the things she'd never been let to do. She travelled far and furious—heathen lands what I didn't know really was on the map. She wrote to me now and then. She changed and changed—she didn't seem to have any leanings toward home. It certainly was curious." Nancy shook her head.

"Scandalous!" grunted Jonas. "It would have served her proper if she'd been caught by some old harem-keeper and taught what is what. There's something to say for the way the heathen handle women."

Nancy sighed, then laughed; presently she said: "I hold my opinions to myself until I know facts. . . . And then she came home, six months ago. Came home more beautiful than she was when she went away, but there was a sweet, trailing look in her eyes that upset me at first until I got used to it. It's a queer look—I've seen it in the eyes of children just waking up. A look as if they was remembering nightmarish dreams and couldn't quite fit in with the safe day. Barney, that's God's plain truth."

"I—I used to feel that way about her." Austen spoke quietly. "I felt that it was due to her training—she was such a lonely yet happy girl, so ready and keen for life; but so defrauded of it by her father."

"I reckon the old Senator knew what he was about," Jonas broke in. "The mistake he made was in thinking he had her trained and then leaving all that money to her. She ought to be spanked for her capers—or shut up. Ready for life! Ugh! Once she had a chance, she plunged in up to her elbows, and I miss my guess if she ain't considerable surprised at her grab."

There was a pause. Then Nancy said quietly: "She's married, you know, Barney."

Austen sat very still. Whatever he had expected, and why, he could not have told, but he had not expected this.

"No, I had not heard," he said quietly. "Someone from here?"

"No, abroad. He's blind."

“Blind!” Austen, in spite of himself, showed his feeling. “Is she happy?” he asked, lamely.

“I’m wondering, Barney.”

The two gazed into each other’s eyes; Jonas, having exhausted his ill-nature, was nodding across the separating line.

“She ain’t ever going to let on if she ain’t, Barney. That would be her way. But one just naturally wonders.”

CHAPTER VIII

AUSTEN went to his room, grateful for the solitude it offered.

He sat down by the hearth and tried not to think. He focussed his gaze upon a tiny flame creeping among the ashes seeking something upon which to feed and live! Presently it caught a side-tracked shaving, revived, reached ambitiously toward a half-burned log, and danced joyously upon it.

Austen's face grew grimmer and grimmer as he watched the fire play—it became symbolic. He leaned over and fed the lapping tongue of flame with splinters; then kindling; lastly, a fresh log. And all the while he was realizing why he had come to Coverly. He had begun to live again—he had been reaching out and back to the time when he had ceased to live. He had come to see what time had done to Constance Maynard! He had dared come at last, though Heaven alone knew why. He wanted her now as he had wanted her through all the years while Fate had kept him from her; while he had seemed dead.

“Blind!” He kept repeating the word. It seemed to signify something baffling. “Married to a blind man.”

Old habit again asserted itself. His own spiritual hunger must be discounted; as he turned to the woman and her problem, by this effort he righted himself, presently, and honestly acknowledged that it was not so much that Constance Maynard was married to a blind man as that she was married at all, that concerned him.

His wonderment and surprise humiliated him. Why, indeed, should she not marry? What hold had he upon her that he should now resent, almost fiercely, the fact that instead of living out her drab, colourless life as so many New

England women did, brought up as she had been, she had set forth upon a world journey and snatched her own happiness where she found it!

“But—blind!” Again Austen clung to the word, and presently it created a kind of dumb comfort that added to his humiliation and called forth action.

He got up, unpacked his bag, and laid out his tramping outfit—he meant to take to the trails early in the morning and before night go to Five Winds! He meant to hold his mind open until he saw Constance Maynard;—open to what? for what?

Then he paused. He had not even asked whom she had married. The man was blind. That was all. Blind! Blind!

Something revolutionary had apparently happened to Constance Maynard, but he meant to judge it only after seeing her himself.

She had been the Romance in his scarred and empty life; as such she shone now, as the blazing log was doing—the log that had seemed dead. That she was married did not seem to change her. He had come back to his old self and that self claimed Constance Maynard, demanded justice for her.

Austen seemed now, after all the years, to understand why he had lived his austere, monkish life. No religion or code had held him—it had been possible because of his sentimental attitude toward love, romance. He simply could not do otherwise. It had swayed him in dealing with his wife; it had overpowered him in his relations to Constance Maynard. He was, so he reflected, that kind of man. A man who could not compromise where his ideals were concerned.

When, from bitterness and loneliness, he had contemplated any solace life offered, he had had to acknowledge that, to him, it would bring no solace but merely add to his burdens. It had been easier for him to strengthen himself to bear what he must than to seek escape as many could.

And it had led him to this! Well, even so, because he *was* that sort of man, he was glad that he had not betrayed his ideal and could at least be spared contrition.

He could recall Constance Maynard's girl face without shame. Had her promise of loveliness been fulfilled? In a dim way Austen found himself pitying her blind husband! Why? Why, indeed!

It was strange, now that he recalled it, how he had been able during the years of his absence to picture Constance. He had seemed to keep her image clear for this day of reckoning.

Had she suspected his unspoken love? Somehow he always believed she had. Had he hoped she would wait, as women of her race and line did, for his return and explanation? What right had he to hope? He who had given no explanation?

Then common sense decried this selfish, egotistical thought. He laughed bitterly now, facing the truth. She had not waited—why, indeed, should she? She had gone forth and beaten her way out as he had, and their paths had never crossed; must not, now! He was a sentimental ass. Men often were. Women were more practical. So the gamut ran.

What a fool he had been with his dreams and altars and faith in things the world did not know. Life wasn't like that. If men took the course he had, how could women be expected——

And all the while he was beating his way out he had become—what? A successful business man; a judge of his fellow men; one in whose hands lay power to sentence! But under and through all, this living spark had for ever been eating its way through the ashes. "When he was free!" That had been his secret comfort. Again Austen laughed bitterly and made ready for bed.

He slept soundly, once he succumbed to the weariness that gradually asserted itself, and, refreshed, he went down to breakfast next day in his rough tramping clothes.

Nancy eyed him furtively. She had done much thinking herself during the night. Old memories had stirred in her heart.

"Well, son"—there was relief in the voice—"you certainly

do look like you'd brought the past back in your satchel. I can't get the idea out of my head that I've been making up a dream and telling it to you. That really things are as they were."

"I've been thinking that myself." Austen took his place at the table. "I'm going to prove it, Aunt Nancy, and if you have been fibbing, beware!"

"Yes, I'll beware, all right." Nancy turned away with her soft laugh that ended in a softer sigh.

"By the way," Austen asked, "what is Constance Maynard's married name? I may drop in upon her before the end of the day." Outwardly he certainly was reassuring.

"Warren. She's Mrs. Vance Warren."

"That sounds New Englandish. I gathered from her marrying abroad that she had married a foreigner."

Nancy, bearing a plate of amber rolls to the table, said quietly: "Roots were New England on the father's side; the mother was Italian, I've heard. This here young man always lived overseas until he married Constance. He's the beautifulest creature I ever saw, barring his blindness. I ain't keen about handsome men. I like 'em clean-limbed and upstanding. Too much good looks is terrible excusing for—what shouldn't have no excuse."

"You mean, Aunt Nancy——" Austen held her with his eyes.

"Oh! Barney"—Nancy Goodall sat down and turned her gentle face to him—"I am just that muddled about things I cannot *mean* anything. I ain't going to say a thing more until after you've looked about. I always hold that we haven't a right to dress things up in our ideas until others have had as good a chance as we have. Maybe it was his blindness—I don't know. It somehow don't seem right. Yet—I don't know! Do you remember how Constance used to act when she did some staggering thing? She always 'peared to be more interested in what she'd brought about than scared at it. Well, that's the way she looks now—mighty interested, and not as concerned as them who look on. She takes after her kin on her mother's side, Barney. I've

been remembering. The old Senator's family was firm and even-balanced, but Constance's mother's line flew off at a tangent when least you expected it; but fly as they might they lighted on their feet and gave no sign of being top-heavy. There was an old Captain Wallace, a grandfather of Constance, as sailed, the Lord knows where, and writ it all in a book. I think Constance was marked by him and it had to work out in flesh and blood—the book wasn't enough. Old Captain Wallace was for ever bringing things home with him that upset the community, and he'd act as if nothing was the matter, even when he'd about start a riot like he did when he let loose a couple of monkeys one time and another time brought a coal-black, half-naked man from Africa and learned him to cook and serve. Always he 'peared to think that such doings were, what you might say, commonplace. He never could get that man to wear proper clothes."

"And you think?" Austen asked, vaguely forgetting his intention of learning things first-hand.

"Lands, Barney! I'm just wondering."

At this juncture Jonas came in from his chores. These daily exactions reduced him to sullen gloom. While he dared not voice his sentiments, he rebelled against work; resented that a Smith, albeit she supported him in the home of his forbears, should demand service of him. A Smith indeed!

Jonas sat down and glowered.

"Going gallivantin'?" he asked Austen.

"Something like that, Uncle Jonas. If Aunt Nancy will put up a bit of lunch I think I'll try for Spread Eagle."

"Ugh! I reckoned you'd head t'other direction."

"I may take that in, too."

At nine, Austen departed. All day he wandered through the woods. He ate his luncheon at noon sitting on a sun-warmed rock; he saved enough for an evening bite, and he watched the sunset from a knoll four miles from Five Winds Farm.

All day he had seemed to be escaping from something. The sensation was uncanny. The years with their accumulation had been gradually dropping until, when he

forced himself to think sanely of his place back among the duties and perplexities, he grew confused as he might at the aspect of a stranger's life. They did not seem legitimately his; even Verity was obliterated for the time being. He had never felt more detached from what he believed himself to be than he did at that moment when most he needed a calm and level head.

Amid the once familiar scenes he realized that the actors were playing a new part and that he, all unprepared, had been assigned a minor rôle that might, by an unexpected trick of fate, become an important one. Much depended upon going slow; watching, waiting, and holding to facts, and not to that absurd trick of his of transforming facts into ideals.

Austen drew himself up sharply. What was he contemplating? Was it true, after all, that one never conquers temptation? that it is only when what lures does *not* tempt that we repudiate it? Had his years but fitted him for folly? For expecting again to possess what time had obliterated?

What really was happening to Austen was what has happened to men and women since time began. Once hope rose, he was battling for what was his own; for what he had desired even while he had trained himself to believe he had relinquished it.

With Mary Carlin—dead! . . . he suddenly thought and shuddered as if an icy blast had struck him. All the recent horror swept over him, but even as it overwhelmed him, he struggled. He had come back to seek help where he had hoped that help had waited for his coming. Instead——

“Married to a blind man!” The words became a dull mocking refrain.

Well, at last he must now use his knowledge as a slayer of dreams and romantic folly.

No more harbouring the impossible and enshrining it. Life henceforth should be lived sanely. Really sanely—not superficially so.

Who among the men with whom he associated could con-

ceive the depths of his sentimentality? Suppose they suspected? Well, what did he know of other men? That last question had a tendency to reinstate his self-respect. He recalled caprices of men he had known. Once he had laughed at them. He never would again! Caprices might be safety valves.

Definitely Austen knew that he had abruptly come to the parting of the ways. Verity with her yearning and demands had stung him to action. He was no longer going to slink and hide. He would have what was his own, even if his own included a sensible recognition of this sentimental relation to Constance Maynard. He would not permit himself to go on "mooning," as he termed it, any longer.

At last he had himself in control—or thought that he had!

Five Winds House stood on the crest of a hill that commanded a broad view on all sides. Wind-swept and sun-kissed, it had sheltered the Maynard family for three generations. Through its wide door, opening to the west, had entered women of other names, only to become absorbed by the strong and upright codes of the Maynards. These women offered upon the family altar beautiful daughters and gifted sons. For this service they received homage and protection. Only now and then did a woman of the house ask for more. When she did she was curbed at once—not resentfully or harshly, but firmly, reverently.

Always some Maynard served his country as representative at Washington, or as governor of his state. Doctors, judges, and writers were born and reared in the old house; went out from its shelter, lived honourably; returned to rest luxuriously, at life's close; and then, with homely honours, were carried forth at the end, and placed beside others of their line in the quaint, sunny, cheerful old graveyard behind the vine-covered village church.

No woman, except the last daughter of the house, had ever travelled afar without a male protector and guide.

Over the main doorway of Five Winds House some ambitious son of letters had had carved these words:

North Wind, South Wind
East Wind and West,
Shifting, drifting Fifth Wind
Of all Winds loved the best.

That Maynard had imagination when he classified the "changing wind."

Making his way down the trail, Austen recalled, as though a picture were passing before his eyes, the fanciful words, and smiled.

"You always seem to come with the Fifth Wind," Constance used to say. "It picks you up from somewhere and drops you here. I call it the wind that brings a friend."

All day the west wind had swayed the trees and bent the dry grasses, but at sunset the wind shifted here, there, seeking a quarter.

"I'll get bewitched if I don't look out." Austen bent his head and pressed on. "Once you cut loose from your moorings you are lost—or found."

Again snatches of old song rose to his lips; he whistled at times. The grave judge was dragging his anchors.

He walked under the stars to the Five Winds Hill; he was dusty, and the burrs of the wayside clung to his clothing. It was as it should be. In the garb of the city he would have been a stranger. Above all else he must not seem a stranger!

There were lights in the big friendly house. Austen stood and looked at them. Off there in the north side of the tower was the old studio of Constance's father. His playroom, they called it, the nook he fled to from his busy public life and where he painted those unbelievably bad pictures that no one dared to smile at! There hung his last picture—"Waiting."

The downstairs rooms were all aglow and the door leading into the broad entrance hall was ajar. There would be a generous fire on the hearth, Austen knew, although the night was not cold.

He stepped noiselessly upon the piazza. He tapped

lightly upon the swaying door; it fell back and he saw Constance Maynard by the hearth. She was bending forward across her clasped and outreaching hands. She was looking into the deep red bed of embers. But at the slight sound of the opening door she turned and stood up. The shock was great, but in a moment she rallied.

"Oh!" was all she said, but on the instant Austen realized the seal of beauty and loveliness that the years had put upon her. All that she had promised had been fulfilled. The touch of time and experience had but intensified it, fixed it. She looked but little older. By and by, when age fell upon Constance Maynard, it would merely shade and soften her loveliness; it would never mar her.

"I am sorry if I have alarmed you, Constance."

"Oh!" Then she reached out her hands. Her name on his lips had steadied her.

Austen smiled and, in detail, took her in. She wore a short skirt—she, too, had been on the trails, trails that had not crossed his. Her feet were shod in her tramping boots, to which the clay clung at the heels. Her heavy white sweater was open at the throat and her wonderful hair still held the wilful, uplifted look which the wind had given it.

Austen could think of nothing relevant to say. The sight of her so familiar—yet unfamiliar—held him. Then, as one often does at a tense moment, he remarked:

"I see the motto's still there, over the door," and he took her outstretched hands.

His words seemed of tremendous importance. It was like the password that gave them the right-of-way back.

"Yes, it is still there, Barney." She spoke his name almost defiantly. "I've had it retouched. And"—she listened, as she led, rather than pointed to a chair by the hearth—"and the Fifth Wind—hear it, Barney? It has brought you again."

They sat down opposite each other, their eyes clinging as though fearful that a dropped glance might destroy the illusion. They spoke in lowered tones.

"Why have you come, after all these years?" The question broke suddenly and was followed by a painful flush.

"To see you. To hear what has occurred." The bald truth restored the woman to calm.

With a little shrug she seemed to gather a shield of dignity about her. It chilled Austen like a draft of cold air.

"There isn't much to hear. I'm married, you know?"

"Yes—I stayed with the Goodalls last night."

"Doesn't it seem queer?" The question fell from the faintly smiling lips as if it referred to another's life, not the speaker's.

"It does, somehow, seem queer," Austen replied, "though why it should I do not know." He seized upon the cue that Constance's regained composure and assurance gave him.

"Neither do I, but I often wonder about it. And now, as I look at you sitting there, *almost* the same, and feel myself real at last and not in a dream, it seems stranger than ever."

How easily, dangerously so, they fell into talk. That had always been their way. It was as if a meeting unloosed the flood that had but bided its time.

"You've been dreaming, too, then, Constance?"

Austen kept his eyes on the glowing face. Its changing expressions charmed him. Dignity melted—the girl he knew flashed forth! Dignity arose—and the woman took command and warded off encroachment! It was baffling: aroused defiance.

"I suppose we all dream dreams within dreams, until it is no wonder we are puzzled at times." Constance raised her head—a trick that Austen recalled. "I lived in Italy for years, Barney, and Italy is a hotbed for dreams."

"I suppose so," Austen smiled.

"I—I must try to pick up the dropped threads." Constance seemed nervously anxious to avoid pauses. "How much do you know about what has happened since you went away?"

"The Goodalls have told me something. I saw the notice of your father's death, of course, in the papers."

Austen courted pauses. They revealed so much.

"Father's death, you know, was so shocking. He was

talking to me, telling me about his picture, laughing in his old, dear way. He apologized for wasting time and paint; said that I must have a hobby when I got old—and then with his brush lifted—that funny, quizzical smile on his face—he wasn't there!"

"Poor girl!" Austen bent forward. He wanted to touch her, but dared not. Once he would not have hesitated, but now he withdrew his hand, fearing he might rouse the woman of her.

"I've learned, Barney, to be so glad about it. We're so horribly selfish. The shock and misery were mine. For him? Why, often since, I have fancied him just going on with his work and suddenly wondering what had happened when he saw that his work was no longer bungling! I think that is what it will be like at first, with us all—we'll at least know the truth; know that there will be no more bungling."

"I hope it will be like that." Austen looked away from the vivid, brave face.

"But you, Barney, tell me of yourself . . . since I last saw you." The moment's pause was alarming. "While I was away I heard of you, now and then; I was glad for you. I used to smile, all by myself, and call you a wise young judge—for you never would pass judgment on anything in the old days, you know; you used to say you dared not—and I fancied you sitting aloft, judging and sentencing your kind. Life changes one so."

Austen winced.

"I think, really," he spoke slowly, "that I have never done either. In a sense I have always managed to get off the bench and stand beside the man or woman at the bar. I have tried to get their point of view; understand why they did what they did; and then when I climbed back to the bench, I fell upon the poor thing we've mauled into shape and called justice, and prayed to heaven that the poor wretch might be able to get *my* point of view."

Constance laughed delightedly.

"Again I say, 'wise young judge'! You are still young, Barney." Then, and her eyes rested on his face critically:

"I hoped you would be like that. As I look again I see—well, Barney, I see that you have not escaped being judged and sentenced yourself, too, like the rest of us."

"I hope so."

A silence fell between them—a silence that welded the past and present together as words never could have done. As in the old days, their understanding of each other reached across all barriers and touched confidently. The ideal still held in the midst of changed conditions.

They smiled, unconsciously, and then started almost guiltily as they heard approaching steps. Slow, seeking steps, guided by a groping hand upon the side walls. Austen feared, he knew not what. It was like standing in a haunted house awaiting the approach of a spectre he had heard described.

Closer came the steps. Constance and Austen still looked at each other, with the smile dying on their lips. For a moment they had seemed so safe, so distant—but now? The steps were on the broad stairs; they were crossing the hall; they were by the hearth!

"Con, are you here? I heard voices."

The spectre made its demand and both Austen and Constance faced it.

"Yes, Vance, I am here. An old friend has come—Bar-nard Austen. Barney, my husband!"

Never had Austen been so taken off his guard. Without speaking, he took the long, white, delicate hand extended, gropingly, toward him; his eyes were fixed upon the beautiful poetic face—a boy's face with eyes hid behind dark glasses.

"He cannot be more than twenty-two or -three,"—a hard something was registering in Austen's brain—"and blind!"

"You have come from where?" The voice was musical.

Austen rallied.

"New York," he replied, and it sounded inane, meaningless.

"You smell of the woods," Warren said.

"I have been tramping in them all day. I am staying at Lower Farm."

"Oh, yes. Let us sit down. A friend is a great excitement, isn't it, Con? We're lonely at times, naturally."

The voice had rare cadences. In its cultivated tones there was a suggestion of amusement that might signify shyness, or a brave attempt to ward off sympathy. Then, as they all sat down, Warren said:

"My blindness has, as usual, sharpened my other senses. The odour of pines and hemlock clings. Constance, where has our friend been? Where are the pines thickest?"

"I make a guess"—Constance was all aglow and eager: "You've been on Spread Eagle, Barney."

"Yes."

"You rested for a bit—under The Pilgrims—going or coming."

"I rested going up." Austen watched Warren; saw the smile flit over his face.

"Thanks, Con. Now another test. Your voice, Austen, somehow suggests you, and yet a voice misleads. Now, one would think Constance could sing, but she cannot, and you—your voice suggests——"

"Come, Vance!" Constance broke in, "no more dissecting. Let us take *as is* and make the most of it."

And so for an hour more the three sat around the fire and talked commonplaces.

Italy, New York, the amazing sameness of Coverly; then the Goodalls and their oddness. Warren laughed boyishly when old Jonas was discussed.

And when it was time to go, Austen rose and said:

"It's been quite wonderful—the going back and the catching up. May I come again?"

"Yes, and soon." Constance stretched forth her hand. "I'll leave the door ajar, Barney."

"Thanks. Good-night, Warren."

A moment later the door swung to after Austen, and Warren leaned back in his chair, as if weary. Constance knelt beside him and her head rested on his arm.

"Tell me, Con, is he young or old? Must I play the jealous husband or the compassionate one?"

“Neither young nor old—verging more to young. You’re to play nothing, Vance, dear, just—be!”

“Good! And, Con, would you mind closing that door?—there is a draft. Lock it—the wind shakes it. I suppose your ghost wind is on a lark. By the way, it has brought a friend, hasn’t it? I recall your pretty fancy.”

Constance rose, closed the outer door and locked it.

“Thanks, dear. It’s wonderful, having you. When I am on edge—and the wind always edges me—you are like a strong wall that shuts me away, safe. I must go to bed now. I’ve always noticed that if I can get to sleep before the wakefulness gains the upper hand, I’m all right.”

“Vance, let me help you”—for Warren was rising, groping.

“I can find my way, thanks. It’s great, this learning to know the way about. Are you too tired to read?”

“I’m not tired at all, Vance. I’ll come at once. What shall we read?”

“Something of Stevenson’s; anything of his that is handy. It’s the man that counts with him—the man who got the best of things.”

CHAPTER IX

AFTER Warren left, Constance unlocked the outer door quietly and set it wide to the starry, windy night. She stood in the doorway and, in thought, followed Austen.

Since her marriage she had lived such an existence as only one of her temperament could live. By hedging around each day with stern determination not to feel, she had achieved much.

Austen's appearance, for a moment, had shattered her defences, but she mended them quickly. All her life she had doggedly clung to a childish code: "If you *must* cry, hide it! Don't let any one see you do it."

Her ability to hold to her code had given her security.

What went on behind her barricade was her own business and God's. Constance Maynard still kept her God. The God of her fathers, softened by time, but none the less the New England God.

Standing with the night before her, the searching, reaching wind touching her hair and wistful face, she thought:

"Oh! if I could only tell you, Barney, all about everything." Then: "But I never will! I must go on living on the surface, day by day. But I am so glad—you've come back."

Deeply she realized that Austen had come back! Why he had left her life so suddenly, what had kept him away so long in the silence, unexplained, she no longer questioned. He had come back. Standing there, her duties and cares in the rooms behind her, she felt that she had never really doubted Austen; had always held him apart for the day of his return.

"And now," she thought sadly, "I cannot tell him anything. I can only know that he is here. I have forfeited my right to tell him things!"

She returned to the warm room, sweetly scented with the piney fragrance of the burning logs; she did not lock the door but left it ajar on its heavy chain.

“For air!” She smiled softly at the folly of her real reason. Then with dragging feet she mounted the stairs to read until midnight to Vance Warren. When he slept—like a tired child—she undressed quietly, lay down upon her bed beside his, and refused to question or repine. This was her life. On the surface everything seemed as it had been, but the depths were heaving, and Constance had denied that there were depths!

At daybreak she arose, bathed, and dressed. She wore her heavy skirt and muddy shoes, sweater and cap. She listened to Warren’s even breathing; all was quiet in the house. Then she tiptoed downstairs and into the kitchen. Her servants—a village couple—were there.

“I’m going for another tramp,” she explained. “Will you see that Mr. Warren has his breakfast at nine? I will take a sandwich with me, and I will be back as soon as I can. Tell Mr. Warren I’m going to the sugar bush.”

The sun was just rising over the Saw-tooth range when Constance ran down Five Winds Hill and struck the trail leading up to Spread Eagle.

So subtle is the power of imagination that, in the mystical light of the early day, she was able to wrench herself free from the effect of her night’s vigil and her evening’s shock. Presently she began to feel that she was running away from a danger that existed only in her ungoverned and weak imagination. She was, thank Heaven, quite herself.

“I am thirty-two!” This seemed of deepest importance. By repeating it, it reduced everything to normal. Women of thirty-two were wise.

Austen had swept her off her feet—but why? Why, indeed! For a moment he had carried her back where no one had a right to carry her—not even Austen.

She had been such a little craven fool, back there in the past. A piece of putty in her father’s hands—no wonder Austen had played with her and, when he tired of her, or

feared her foolishness, had gone to make his career and future safe. In like fashion Constance believed she had dealt with her girlish romance. She had not permitted it to overpower her. Once her shackles had been struck off she went, too, and sought the equivalent of a career. She had been able to live above her folly. What had the past to do with Austen and her? Nothing except what friends might claim. Friends!

“He went to become famous; I went to find out—and I have done so! Nothing shall force me back! We are quits. We can begin from here.”

Constance looked her full thirty-two years as she plunged ahead, intent upon putting miles between herself and Austen as they once had been.

“Of course he’ll go, again, to Five Winds. Men are so sure of themselves.”

This was a damaging admission.

But in spite of her sensible and courageous attitude of mind, the past did rise rampant, again and again, as Constance plodded on. Not for years had it been so insistent. It brought tender memories; humiliating ones, right ones, wrong ones. The more she struggled against the past, the more it claimed her.

She had been so sure of Austen’s love—she, the poor, ignorant, subdued girl. Always thinking in terms of duty; prating of the glory of self-sacrifice when Austen sought to convince her of her rights, her self-expression. What talks they had had!

Why had he tried to make her see? At first she believed it was because he loved her; wanted to wean her from her position. There had been wildly sweet hours when he had awakened—what? Something that she had not dared face; something that frightened her. And then, without a word, he had gone away! Not even her father’s death had called forth a word of sympathy. She must have betrayed herself vulgarly; he had not meant what she had believed! She had alarmed him. Later knowledge of life had shamed her into realization; had set a seal upon her emotions. This brought

Constance Maynard sharply up to the present. She raised her head proudly.

“And yet,” she murmured, “I am glad to see him back. Why? I do not care *why*. I am glad to see him back. He shall now understand.”

Now that she had her thirty-two-year self in hand, Constance could afford to walk slower and think her thoughts.

Was she now, with all her experience, going to permit Austen's old power over her to gain control? For a moment he had frightened her, but only for a moment! She had been mistaken, once, about Austen; she was wiser now. He need have no fear of her. She had, undoubtedly, once, charmed him. Young girls, such a girl as she had been, were always attractive to men like Austen. He had arrived when he first met her; she was but arriving. He had recognized that, had taken pleasure in pointing the way to her, “blazing her trails,” he used to say.

She had mistaken, in her crude egoism, his good-fellowship for passion.

Over and over the past rolled and unrolled until Constance Maynard stood still, the morning sunlight on her face, and vowed to be a fool no more. Why should she explain, justify?

Somewhere in the near distance a red-poll was giving his long-drawn cry of: “Listen! Listen!” And every fibre of Constance's soul and mind listened!

A terrifying honesty finally overpowered her. Only by facing squarely the facts dare she go on. She could not go round and round in a blind maze. Well, she had the facts fixed at last!

Back in the beginning of Constance Maynard's line there had been martyrs: men and women, driven by that force which can never be explained or understood. It drove them, willy-nilly, to stake or scaffold. Through each generation it drove them to what replaced the stake and the gibbet. They could face anything, bear anything when driven. Nothing could turn them once the propelling sense of duty gripped them. They might tear life apart, as Constance had;

they might snatch what they believed was theirs; but once they accepted it there was no turning back.

All this rang in Constance's thought while she listened. For a time she forgot Austen: this reassured her. And then Vance Warren's boyish, beautiful face rose supreme. She could confront it without shame.

The tormenting morning passed. Constance reached the clump of maples known as The Pilgrims, and found the little hut where her woodsman lived until winter drove him to the village. The man was smoking by the door and viewed his young mistress through cold, calculating eyes. He had revered and feared the old Senator, but he resented the daughter—as most of Coverly did, since her return with her blind young husband.

“I want to develop the sugar trees,” Constance told him; “and I mean to leave it all in your hands.”

This was as it should be, and along the line of business they could travel together. It was after two o'clock when Constance turned her face homeward. She thought, now, of Vance and his lonely day. She pictured him sitting by the fire alone. Feeling his way to the dining room, eating alone! Austen did not enter her thought at all. She was triumphant.

As the wind blew through the trees in soft, creeping tones it sounded like Vance's groping touch along the walls, not Austen's demanding presence. When Constance could think of Warren in that fashion her heart warmed with pity and sympathy. It was when he resented that attitude that she feared him; feared life. Only she never showed fear—she had got over that!

The business of the day, the life-giving air and beauty, had restored her poise and calm. The effect of Austen's appearance was passing. She smiled faintly. One could, if one so willed, live deeply and well on very little, she reflected. As she walked on, she rehearsed the rôle she had decided upon for herself long ago. Love was not everything in a woman's life any more than it was in a man's. There were splendid opportunities, if one were not a fool!

Little things caught and held her attention as she walked more slowly along. Two belated golden butterflies were fighting in the warm sunshine, fighting when their time was so short to *do* things. As sensibly might two autumn leaves fight, or two sunbeams.

"No one in all the world shall ever again get me in his power," Constance declared, and the white teeth clenched as though an antagonist were challenging her. "And there is to be no time wasted in fighting shadows, either!" All this to-do, simply because an old friend had taken her unawares. It was absurd; humiliating. A laugh was possible now.

Constance stood, as she came to this conclusion, by a stone wall. One hand lay upon the vine-covered top. She loved to feel the crisp leaves under her touch, the resistance to her fingers when she lifted the sturdy branches.

It had been a wonderful day! After all, there are joys outside the realm of men and women; there are spirit contacts with "things." One can thrill to a bird note or the cry of an animal.

"I suppose it is that in us which is for ever lonely," Constance thought, "set apart, knowing only a kinship with the invisible."

At that moment a hand, laid upon hers, drove her far afield, where the day's wild conclusions deserted her.

She turned. Austen stood near. His hand was upon hers. There were apology and determination in his eyes.

"Do not draw your hand away," he said.

"I am not going to, Barney." She would have scorned herself had she done so, though every thrill warned her.

"I went to Five Winds. Of course you knew that I would go. They told me that you had gone to The Pilgrims, and again, of course, I followed on."

Austen had done some practical thinking during the night.

"Are you in a hurry, Constance?"

"I suppose that I should be, with Vance waiting for me; but he is so generous and one owes something to a returned friend, so I will be a bit lazy if you wish it, Barney."

They were outdoing each other now.

"I wish it very much. Let us take the brook trail. It always seemed the most beautiful one to me."

"Yes. It is such a rover, just happening along and doing such unexpected things."

They struck across the hilly meadow to the brook trail.

"I wish, Constance"—Austen switched the stately brakes by the way—"I wish you would fill in the gap between our last walk here and this one."

"My dear Barney, what a mad proposition! As if I could!"

"Well, then, as much as you can."

"That would be easier. The gap is rather packed with other happenings than mine, Barney. I told you the principal things last night."

"Tell me the less important. I'll play fair."

"Agreed! Well, then, you went away without bidding me good-bye, Judge Austen! Most deplorable bad manners." Constance permitted her eyes to rest on his.

"That was your father's command!"

"My father's?" The smiling calm of the uplifted face was broken. As a lightning flash discloses an unsuspected danger in the dark, so Austen's words did.

"Oh, I never knew!" was what Constance said, and she and Austen were driven along the way ahead with keener understanding.

"I feared that you never did. Forgive my interruption. Go on, please." Austen bent his head.

"I—I told you of my father's death. It was beautiful, but tragic. He had never shown me anything but his lovely nature—he and I had been walled away together. I had never been to school, even, had no girl friends, no one but him. Of course it was all wrong, but it was done in love, and even after he went and I stood utterly desolate I could not blame him. Above all things, Barney, he had failed in preparing me to do without him. And then came the money; more than any one dreamed of; more than I had even thought of. All mine, mine. It bewildered me, frightened me, and then it loosed something in me. It was a power that made it possible for me to do anything I wanted to do. Finding out

what I wanted to do saved me from madness after Father went. I could not classify what I wanted in detail. I only knew that I wanted to go away, to be free, to know things!"

"Things?" Austen glanced at her keenly. "Things?" Constance laughed lightly.

"Oh, you cannot understand! Men never do—they cannot, or will not. Life unrolls so naturally to them; they take it as they travel on. Women have it thrust between their teeth just so much, no more. I wanted all of life and I wanted it in my own way. So I let go and went."

"You let go of what?" Austen was deeply interested. The woman beside him was revealing herself to him almost cruelly. Her indifferent frankness seemed to set him far from her and he resented that, even while he yearned to show his sympathy.

"Oh, everything. All that my people hold sacred, though it isn't sacred at all: it is wicked, crushing, deadly. But I let go and went. As I turned my back I knew that in letting go I was being cast off. My people are like that. It was stupid and funny, but when I thought of travel the only places that I could think of were the ones in hymns and tracts and such—such literature as had been considered safe and proper for me. India's coral strand and Greenland's icy mountains. I even considered investigating the stronghold of the scarlet women of Babylon. So I booked up for a world's trip. That seemed the simplest method of getting a semblance of what I wanted. Fancy me! Twenty-three, but about as ignorant as a girl of ten; a pocketful of money and bagfuls to draw on; hungry and thirsty for life—a modern fairy story. Of course a great many awful things might have happened, but they did not, and my native common sense came to the fore and clipped the wings of my suddenly developed imagination; only clipped them, Barney. It did not—break them. People were so kind. On sea and shore their kindness gave me time and opportunity to gain control of myself. I saw India and kissed her coral strand; I even ventured close to Greenland, and hobnobbed with some Babylonian ladies who wore their scarlet with beautiful

grace. I joined some side-parties, and dropped from others; I lingered and dreamed and felt as if I were floating through space. And then after two or three years—think of it, Barney, *years* of drifting!—I began to want a place. My wings were tired. And then I realized that I had no place; nothing of my own. If I came back, what would I find? My empty house, nobody needing me, nobody wanting me. I would be a stranger to my home-town folks, and they to me. Their faces were already indistinct to me. You see, I had let go and so had they.”

“My dear!” whispered Austen, but Constance did not heed.

“A lonely rich woman, Barney, is the loneliest of all. If one is poor, there are noble souls who revel in giving—giving earthly, touchable things. But no one had anything to give me along those lines, and I had not the gift of winning love. I was eager to share, but no one seemed to want me, need me. I was hungry to be wanted. I used to think at the day’s end, that if I could find someone waiting for *me*, glad to see me, I would give all, all that I had. I suppose I grew *queer*. I know that I grew sullen and sad. I was so different from other women—I had found that out. I dared not show them how different I was. Sometimes I could see them smile at me and I became afraid of men. That’s another curse that the rich, lonely woman has—she dares not trust men. She grows suspicious. That, added to my fear, made me hard. If I couldn’t have love, I would not buy its counterfeit. I wanted the things that all women want, Barney, and I did not know how to get them. My money and freedom were the greatest obstacles. My freedom made me cheap; my money set me apart. And then, Barney, it happened!”

The two on the brook trail looked in each other’s eyes.

“What?” Austen asked sharply, almost savagely.

“Vance Warren.”

“Oh!” Austen looked away.

“I was at a lovely inn in Italy, and the keeper and his wife were wonderful—so humanly dear. I could not speak their tongue, nor they mine, but we understood. I began to feel warm again; happy; like someone else. Perhaps we all

have many personalities. I seemed to be a new self. Vance Warren was there—dying, everyone believed. An old aunt supported him—if one could call her niggardly care a support, and she was rich, too—rich and wicked. She was tired of her burden; tired of the pitiful responsibility it involved. She was obliged, occasionally, to come from England to see what progress he was making in dying. His illness—they thought it was tubercular—had affected his eyes—he was blind, but not hopelessly so, I learned. If his health could be restored, his sight might be. But they thought it was too late. Day by day I could see that he was failing. He had been an artist, a real one; some of his beautiful things were in his room. He wrote, too—exquisite verse. He never complained; he made a joke of the most tragic things. He would not be pitied. His courage shamed me, made me long to share it. ‘I’m speeding up,’ I once heard him say to the old aunt on one of her visits. ‘The doctor gives me a year or two at the most. Being young has its drawbacks when it comes to a race with death, but I’m gaining.’ Barney, that brave dying boy gave me something to do. I read to him, walked with him. When he could not sleep we sat on his balcony overlooking the little lake, and I learned to love the spirit of him, so like an unquenchable flame. I loved his mind—he had lived and learned so much. It was a rich, beautiful mind, and I was but an ignorant girl in comparison. We talked and I grew to understand, in a way, the values of things. He taught me. He had lived while I had vegetated. I asked his doctor—a famous man staying in the village—to tell me the truth about Vance, and he did. There were two years at the longest, and only good care and comfort could secure those. As things were then, the doctor said, Vance might last a year, but he doubted it;—and he might be puffed out at once. Two years, Barney, and he so young, so gifted! He had starved and slaved for his genius; had defied his aunt’s wishes and was obliged, in his misery, to accept her grudging aid! And then something wild in me broke loose. Something I do not expect any one on earth ever to understand. I wanted those two years of Vance’s life. I wanted

to play God and live! It was the most exciting thing, the most tenderly beautiful. We loved each other, Barney. With that new self of me, we depended upon each other like two outcast souls. That was the one thing we agreed upon—our dependence upon each other. Of course, I told him that I was older than he, but the doctor, who was elderly, told him things that set my words aside. They laughed at me, the doctor and Vance. Italy is such a dangerous place for madness, Barney; it makes people madder when they are already mad. Then I had to overcome my money. Vance hated that. He used to say that it was the greatest enemy to love. But in the end we got over the money, and then the old aunt saw her chance. She hated me, put the worst interpretation upon me, but she saw her opportunity. We were married at last, Barney—Vance and I. He was mine! It was the only way. I think I did my work so well in the two years that God trusted me. Do not laugh, Barney.”

“I am not laughing.” And Austen looked as if he would never laugh again. He fixed his eyes on Constance’s face. He saw, as it were, a mask rise over it: a noble, beautiful mask, but none the less it obliterated all that he dared to call familiar, and it drove him back upon himself.

“Vance recovered. His lungs are quite all right. Love and happiness mended them, and now he is getting stronger and perhaps he may regain his sight some day. The doctors are giving us hope. Think, Barney, what God and I have done!” Then the frank gaze seemed to demand, “And, having saved him, do you think I will cast him off—ever?” The challenge shone clear.

“Thank you, Constance.” Austen rose to the silent call of the soul.

“It is an idyl,” he continued, “the most beautiful one I ever knew. I did not believe such a one could survive in the world to-day. No one but you and your husband could have wrought such a miracle. I wanted to see what life had done to you, Constance, and I see! I cannot tell you my part in the gap of years to-day,” Austen added, “but I will—before I go back to New York.”

Slowly they emerged from the woods. The early gloaming lay in the valley, but the hilltops were flaming. Under the ice of restraint surged the warm flood of perfect understanding in both Austen's heart and the heart of the woman beside him. At last she said:

"It's good to have you back, Barney. I seem, at last, to be my old self."

He smiled into her demanding, commanding eyes.

"It's great to be back, Constance. Great! But you are *not* your old self."

"What then?"

"Something—more wonderful."

CHAPTER X

IT AIN'T natural!" Nancy Goodall confided to Austen several days after his arrival and after he had had time, so she thought, to get the point of view of Coverly regarding Constance. "It's agin nature, Barney, and that allas sets folks at bay. All the making-believe in the world—and Constance allas was a master hand at that—can't make lobsters into humming birds. She's older by ten years than Warren; she's rich and he's poor as a herd of church mice and blind as a bat into the bargain. I've battled no end, since she came trailing home with her quarry, to hush tongues and hold to Constance's fairy tale. But she's made herself a stranger in the home of her people. I have done somewhat in shutting mouths, but the men have their joke in the tavern, and the women can't be free and easy when all nature is agin it. Five Winds is putty much shut off."

Austen had listened and grown thoughtful; had sought to add his mite to the effort to make unreality appear real.

"Aunt Nancy, love is a magician, you know," he said.

"Very good, Barney, but it ain't as blind as most folks try to make it."

"Constance Maynard is beautiful and young. People cannot possibly think she had a low motive in marrying."

"He can't *see* her beauty, son, and the need of money overtops a good deal. Folks resent what they cannot understand."

"He has the artistic temperament, Aunt Nancy. He adores his wife, that's plain enough."

"Maybe!" Aunt Nancy, her arms elbow deep in flour, nodded her head.

"And she has little thought for anything but him," Austen added.

"That would be her way of handling the matter," Nancy

sighed. Then, after a pause: "It's just like us all was skidding on thin ice, Barney. Any one of us may go in a hole; if we bump against each other too rough, the whole lot of us may break through. Constance Maynard, poor lamb, has started something, sure enough, and there are times when I think she's more interested in watching it than the rest of us are."

And Austen had to let it rest there.

Letters came to him from Verity and Lewis. He read them as he might letters belonging to another. He knew that he ought to return to his home, but he lingered on while the autumn turned the countryside to Oriental splendour, and the nipping air, morning and evening, warned that winter was not far off.

After the first week it became easy to sit by the fire at Five Winds and feel safe, or approximately so. Warren expanded, showed his best phase to Austen, the brilliant, half-cynical phase that was so perplexing in one as young as he.

"It's the only possible attitude he can take with any degree of assurance," Austen thought. "Only by disdaining certain stern facts can he hold to others."

Warren would recite poetry by the hour in his rich, musical voice; he sang, too, while Constance accompanied him on piano or violin. And Constance, by endowing everything and everyone with the novelty and charm of Austen's companionship, was merry and apparently happy.

There were moments now, and Austen watched for them, when something of the past escaped and rose supreme and defiant. An old song, a recalled conversation, brought the timid, sweet girl back to him; the girl that had held place in his lonely years as the dear dead might have.

The dead! No, not that. He would not accept that.

On the trails it was not so easy to hold each other at bay. Except on near-by paths Warren declined to join them, and alone, in the open where once they had learned to understand each other, it was perilous travelling. All topics seemed to lead them to that sense of happy detachment.

It was the day before Austen had finally decided to return

to New York that he had the talk with Constance that marked so clear an epoch in several lives. Quite frankly, the night before, as he was leaving Five Winds House, he said that he was going and asked Constance to walk with him to The Pilgrims.

She had hesitated but Warren urged her.

"I'm going to pick out a tune on the violin," he said, "and I have decency enough to demand isolation. I'll go to the studio and feel free."

So, directly after the noon-day meal, Austen and Constance set forth.

It was a cloud-tattered day; gray, but shining like silver. The autumn foliage seemed to have been varnished by a magic brush. It gleamed and the wind swayed it into kaleidoscopic figures. Across the sky, in Indian file, the crows flew, giving vent to their impudent, mocking cries as they swept on over the swinging tree-tops.

"How trees do talk!" Constance said as they left the west pasture and struck into the wood trail. "I think American trees have a language of their own—and dialects."

"I shouldn't wonder." Austen looked away from the glowing face. "I have never been abroad, you know. Is there a difference?"

"There is, Barney. I cannot explain it. Perhaps it is in me, but I used to feel, in the forests abroad, as I did in cities: lonely for the home tongue."

"You were lonely?" Austen asked.

"Before Vance came into my life—yes."

"And after that?"

"I had something of my own at last."

"That changes everything for us, I know." Austen gave her a frank glance.

This seemed a blind trail of talk, and it ended abruptly in a silence that neither seemed in haste to break.

"Ah!" Suddenly Constance stopped and looked up. "There go some snowflake birds—hear them chatter. They bring notice of winter. Winter comes early to the hills. I wonder——"

“What, Constance?”

“How Vance is going to endure the cold.”

There seemed to be a definite purpose in keeping Warren in their thought. Austen resented it; it seemed to assume—what?

“Why did he come from his sunny Italy?” he asked. “His thoughts cling to it.”

“He wanted to know my home,” Constance replied; “know the place in which I had my roots. You see I, too, can cling, and Vance is generous and unselfish.”

“I see. And you will return to Italy, Constance?”

“Not for some time, unless Vance’s health fails. So far it has improved.”

It was a little after two when they reached The Pilgrims and stood leaning upon a stone wall to catch breath and gaze upon the bewildering beauty that lay below.

“Talk of autumn being the saddest season of the year!” Constance cried. “Why, it is the one season that shouts victory.”

“And may not victory be sad?” Austen asked.

“Never, Barney, never! It may be bleak and lonely, but if it *is* victory it is glorious.”

“It may not be a right victory. What then?”

“It still has its thrill.” This less confidently.

“Is it too chilly for you to sit here for a short time?” Austen asked.

“I’d love it. See!” Constance jumped up and swung her feet across the stone wall. “Now, then, Barney, sit here and look at the valley below. Do you remember?” This was incautious.

“Yes. So we sat on the last day of my stay here years ago. That evening your father and I had a talk. I left on the midnight train.”

Constance did not speak or move. She felt as if she had dislodged something and must await its descent. To move might imperil safety—but was there any safety?

Austen was speaking.

“I even remember your words as we sat here on the wall,

looking at the valley and the roads over which we had come. We had lost our way several times; we could see from the top, where we had made our wrong turns, but we had always been facing the upward way. You said that God must feel as we did as He watched, and it must amuse Him as He looked from the top at our struggles."

"Did I say that, Barney? I cannot imagine myself, in those days, thinking of God as amused. I can now, but then He seemed always a stern God, out for vengeance if we lost the trail."

"You were very bewitching that day, Constance. I think you were half afraid of your daring. I recall that you pointed out the spot where you took one trail and I the other to investigate. I lorded it over you because I was right."

"Oh, but, Barney, don't you remember, from the top we agreed that the trails came together a little farther on?"

"Did they? I had forgot that."

Again they came to the stone wall of silence. The hidden meaning under the words had broken through as Austen smiled at Constance.

Then, as if aware of the insecurity of this idle talk, Austen said abruptly:

"After I saw your father that night, Constance, I went away without seeing you because he felt that I should. I had confided in him. There was a woman in my life. He would not let me tell you. I wanted to."

This was a wild plunge, but Constance reacted calmly.

"I think I always knew." There was no shock in the even voice. This surprised Austen and at the same time gave him comfort.

"It was only when you did not come back, Barney, that I knew it was serious. I had hoped that you would count upon my . . . sympathy."

Austen appeared not to hear.

"It was an incubus. It clung weakly, tenaciously," he went on grimly, "but with a throttling hold. I could have shaken off a strong thing; this was so weak. But I tried to strike even this off at that time. I left here firmly re-

solved to do so, but it eluded me. This is difficult to explain, but the woman was my wife, Constance."

"Your wife!"

Constance's face turned a dead white. Her eyes widened and she drew her breath sharply. She could have borne the lesser relation, but—his wife! There was something in that tie that defied her.

"Let us walk toward home, Barney," she said, quietly, ashamed of her sensation but unable to overcome it.

"Must we, Constance?"

"Yes. We can walk slowly. There is a chill in the air."

She longed to know all, but could not ask for more. She had become an outsider. Against a wife she could not prevail.

Side by side they began the descent. The chill rose from their hearts to their lips, but in Austen's soul was a desperate demand for justice. He could not let that look of despair remain on Constance's face. She would never ask for more than he would give in confidence, her code would hold her from him. Husband and wife were sacred things to her.

And just then, just when Austen meant to tell her everything, fling himself, too late perhaps, but unreservedly upon her mercy, she gave a startled cry and sprang away from his side. He looked down, and there by the path lay a dead rabbit. Torn and mangled by a trap, it had been tossed away by a hunter. There is something awesome in the presence of a dead wild animal, and this crushed creature's eyes were wide and staring. The look in them seemed to demand an answer—what right had life to impose such misery? What right?

It was the look that humans have at times when death or agony wrings them—what does it mean?

Austen, as he gazed at the little body, limp, lifeless, but with that look frozen in its eyes, thought of Mary Carlin, and his heart grew heavy within him. He had been banking upon her living death! With her trapped he had dared to feel free.

"You are dead—I am alive!" he thought. "I cannot

“speak evil of the dead.” The black shadow of his life once more crushed him. He was *not* free; not even in thought.

“Come, Barney, come,” Constance shuddered.

They passed into the shade of the woods, and still Austen did not speak.

“Until death do you part.” The hard metallic words fell into the silence as if both he and the woman beside him were chanting them.

Austen understood the reaction to his words and bitterly smiled. Had he, in the past, come to her, scarred, she could have forgiven, but having come bound by vows, set him beyond her pale! How undying some superstitions are with some souls!

“Poor Barney!”

Austen looked up quickly. Constance was trying to batter down the dividing wall; the effort touched him; he made a desperate stride toward her.

“There was a child.” He thrust the words into the silence.

“Yours, Barney?” She would not retreat now!

“Yes, but I did not believe that until a short time ago—a few years ago.”

“She—your wife—made you believe that the child was not yours?” A trembling horror shook the words.

“Yes. Her love for the child made her lie—to keep it. Lie as—as such women rarely lie.”

Such women! Curiously enough Constance was able to draw a freer breath. *Such* women! Marriage could not always sanctify. She had learned that. She looked up with a smile.

“And now, Barney?” She was trusting him once more.

“The child is with me. When I knew, I accepted her. She is at school.”

“Oh, Barney, how God must have loved you. But it would be like you.”

“Stop, Constance, stop. I cannot stand such words. You must help me; not weaken me. If I am to see this through, you must help me. I came for this help.”

At that moment he believed that he had.

"I will help, Barney. I will, as I can. How can I?"

"She is lovely, Constance. She looks like, well, one of these delicate hemlocks"—Austen paused near one and smiled—"bending and sweet, but strong. I'm sure she's strong, Constance. It is that that troubles me—her strength, which she lays on the altar of her loyalty to me."

"She knows that you are her father?"

"No, Constance. She calls me Barney. You see, I urged that. She thinks me her mother's friend and legal adviser. She believes I am managing her property. She has only a beautiful memory of her mother—she has not seen her for years. I—I cannot take that from her."

"Barney, Barney!" Constance's words had a steely ring. "And now *you* are trying to play God. My dear, it is a hazardous undertaking. In your—your ignorance, Barney, you are cheating this young girl out of what belongs divinely to her. Her father! The *truth*, the truth even if it cuts to her heart—she has the right to truth."

The words flashed out defiantly. They escaped the control of the woman who had tried to play the rôle of God herself.

"It is the greatest wrong one can do another, this cheating of a soul of what is its own."

"But how can we tell what is one's own, Constance?"

"And because we cannot, how dare we——" Constance paused, her face flushed and paled. Then she said more quietly:

"In permitting this girl to keep her dreams of her mother, you deprive her of her father; of you! Oh, Barney, how young, young you must have been when this all happened."

"I was." Then, with an effort: "What I could not ask for myself, Constance, I ask for this child. She needs a woman. Will you be her friend?"

Then Constance turned and laid her hands on Austen's shoulders. She was trembling but her eyes were steady.

"Her friend and yours. Oh, Barney, do not let me cry! I want to be helpful—not pitiful. How you have suffered! And never a word of complaint—just going on; going on."

“That was the only possible thing to do—to do now. Just go on!”

“And this young girl—send her to me, Barney. I want to know her, love her, make her love me, if I can. What is her name?”

“Verity. Verity Leighton. That was my mother’s name.”

“Verity. Verity. What a beautiful name! Let her come to visit me; after I know her I will try to help you with her, Barney. But this I say now: you and I dare not keep her behind closed doors. When she knocks, at least we must open them to her. It is terrible to shroud her in dead, cold lies.”

Constance lifted her tear-wet face to Austen and gave her a brave smile. She had drifted far from her own life and his: she was with him in the life of another.

He looked at her, hesitated, and then took her hands from his shoulders and held them.

“Just for a moment,” he whispered. “We are both so tired.”

Her hands lay quite still; her face never flinched as her eyes met his.

“I am rested now, Barney,” she said at last.

“And I. We can go on, go on, Constance, from here.”

They had made their compromise. His past and hers lay, and must continue to lie, for the present, quiescent; leaving it, they could go on—and together! A backward look might shatter whatever of peace and happiness they might achieve. They must not look back!

They had this in common: something held them to their course. They could not do otherwise but go on, but they could reach out and touch each other bravely if they kept to the faith within them; but that faith must remain unshaken.

That had their inheritance done for them. They had seen the Promised Land from their hilltop, but they were among those who could not enter in!

CHAPTER XI

AUSTEN did not return to Five Winds. He left Constance at the foot of the hill.

"I suppose there are times," he said, "when the best of us are driven like chaff before Fate. I could not have told you why I came to Coverly after all these years. I was utterly at sea, but I leave feeling that I was well guided. Nowhere else could I have found what I have found here."

"Perhaps you found what you left, Barney."

"Hardly that; but something that is worth everything to me: a friend."

"And you will send Verity to me?"—hastily.

"At her next vacation, and I shall abide by your decision, after you know her."

"Even to the taking away of her mother?"

"Yes."

"And the giving to her of her father?"

"Yes, even that. But I fear I must find her father first. The tie between us, Constance, seems not the legitimate one."

And by that Constance estimated the hurt of Austen's early life.

That night the storm came down under Spread Eagle's wings and beat upon Coverly. It tore the crimson mantles from the trees; it strewed the earth with shining red and gold.

Sitting by the fire, at the Goodalls', Austen watched the two old people—Jonas sound asleep on his side of the invisible line; Nancy, knitting, rocking, and twittering, on hers.

"I'm sad at heart, son, to have you leave," she said, and then counted her stitches.

"I shall be coming back soon." They spoke in whispers. Nancy raised her eyes.

"I am sending a client's little daughter to Five Winds," he added.

The explanation was awkward, for all its apparent simplicity.

"A what?" Nancy dropped three stitches.

"A young girl who has been left to my care. Constance has invited her."

"And a perfect Godsend, if you ask me, Barney Austen. What that woman up at Five Winds needs more than anything, except God's mercy, is something to play with and serve. She never had a girl friend and it don't look as if she was ever going to have a chick of her own. I'm terrible glad, Barney, but it staggers me how you came to think of Five Winds. Now *I'd* be the more natural thought, though I am old and unfit. I reckon you got your leadings right, son. I'm terrible glad, though I am struck all in a heap. Is it part of your job, Barney, looking after other folks' children?"

"Yes. It is decidedly part of my job."

"It must be considerable nervous work at times."

"It is. That's why I ran up here."

"Oh, so that was it!" Was it relief or doubt that rang in the quiet voice?

A silence fell in the warm, dim room, a silence that boded no good; so Austen rushed to the fore with a seemingly senseless question:

"Aunt Nancy, are you happy?"

The query was not as footless as it seemed, for Austen had been gravely considering phases of life among the hills that rarely entered his consciousness in his crowded, busy city life and he was seeking solace for himself.

"Well, now, son, that is, *as is*. We New Englanders learn to scrape along with less summer and more biting cold than some folks, and maybe we get a keener joy out of what we *do* get. I don't know. Happiness is a gift of God, I reckon, and we don't have any tie-up to what you might think."

"I begin to see"—Austen smiled—"why your mouth has an upward turn and your eyes a twinkle."

Nancy chirped—a sound she made when speech was difficult.

“Has it paid, Aunt Nancy?” These two could compass mighty areas without words.

Austen glanced searchingly at Jonas.

“I don’t know as I ever expected to be paid, son. You are thinking of Jonas, now?”

Austen was. Of Jonas and what Jonas represented: lack of appreciation; indifference; constant care; the sordidness of life.

“Well, perhaps a little,” he said, and turned his eyes away.

“Barney, when we take what we must, to get what we want, and then the thing we *get* is taken from us, it don’t seem to me to relieve us of the duty we owe to that which we took to gain our ends.”

“I am afraid I do not understand, Aunt Nancy, and I want to, very much.”

Nancy rocked peacefully and sought for words to reach the need she saw. When people came to her, as Austen always had, she searched her experience and faith, as one might a treasure chest, in order to supply the demand.

“Well, Barney, Jonas was what I took to gain my ends. I was just a woman, but a plain one; one without the taking ways of most. I had small choice. I sometimes wonder why the Almighty doesn’t put it in the hearts of men to pity the women that want and want the right and precious things of life but have to wait until some man offers to help them out. Men don’t pity such women, they laugh at ’em. I wanted a home—a home to share, not just to bide in. I wanted to serve, early and late—just lovingly serve. I was terrible keen about that. I wanted children. I was far-reaching, Barney, but I never could grasp and hold. I was a poor, longing critter waiting for some man to help me out, and not one turned to look at me, because I lacked the charm that don’t always count in the long run. Then I set my eyes on Jonas. He belonged to a family whose roots were about the best of it—all buried and rotting, but giving a kind of life to the shoots. Jonas was drinking himself to death and taking

after women scandalous; all his property was gone but this place, and this was going under the hammer. I just shut my eyes and lips and made a solemn bargain with the Lord. I'd take Jonas, buy him as he was, and as I knew, Barney, none better. It was a bargain. I set in to make a home here, among Jonas's dead folks and all that they had held sacred—a sharing home. Jonas has shared always, maybe not in my way, but shared. He'd miss me. He's got used to me, and under his complaining I feel the need he has of me. I keep him clean and well fed. For the most part I keep him from the tavern, and the women side with me against Jonas, when it comes to taking sides. I had my children, two of them, Barney. I had the feel of them, the understanding of them; then God pried my arms apart and took 'em and I nigh let everything drop, but somehow the Lord folded my arms again and I found that they wasn't empty. There was still Jonas to look after; he was what I bargained for, and I couldn't throw him over to suit my whim. When all's said and done, a bargain with the Lord is a bargain. I got to know a certain joy in keeping Jonas out of mischief and making something of him. He's my child, and if I must often be stern and often provoked, still there are times when I shake with laughter at him. In spite of everything, he holds to me. Barney, in the end, I guess there ain't any form of happiness equal to hearing the 'well done good and faithful' said to you by the thing in you that must be satisfied."

"I suppose not." Austen's face was grave. "Excuses and explanations can never obtain what you have, Aunt Nancy, when it comes, as you say, to facing whatever stands for rightness in us." They had long since forgot Jonas!

"No. That's God-truth, son. Maybe it's satisfaction, I don't know—only nothing else equals it."

Austen rose and went close to Nancy. He bent over and touched her shining silvered head with his lips.

"You see, I never had a mother I could remember," he whispered. "But I know what a mother means."

"Yes. And having my babies made me know the needs of such as you, Barney. I never look a happening in the mouth

any more than one does a gift horse. I take it and gallop about on it and see a smart piece of life and get a good deal of excitement, one way or another. I ain't borrowing trouble about Five Winds Farm, but I'm keeping my eye and heart on it. I ain't worrying none about you, but I'm here, Barney, when you call. I sense that you and Constance, too, just couldn't cheat yerselves—and for the rest, that's God's business."

"Cheat ourselves?" Austen started.

"Yes. Some folks can, when the game is up." The keen old eyes did not flinch. Nancy Goodall, when it came to helping another, demanded, and gave, simple truth. "I sense how it is with you two, son. I had my suspicions long ago. What druv you two asunder don't matter. You are asunder and you can't, being what you both are, mend matters by loose thinking and methods. You had to come and make the test. I've allas held," the firm voice talked on, "that unless you know you can look each other in the eyes, faithful-like to the end, there's no use patching up a bad job for a spell. It don't last. Take courage for your friend, son. There ain't nothing to equal it. In the face of seeming defeat, it often leads straight to victory—a clean one."

Austen's voice shook as he said: "You'll have an eye on this young girl I am sending, Aunt Nancy?"

Nancy drew a sigh and gave a smile. "That's what I'm here for, son, with my eyes. Just to look about. The stretching of my eyesight has made it mighty strong."

Jonas snored, stirred and grunted, then emitted one of his sharp remarks that made one wonder.

"I allas have held that ministers and lawyer fellows was like the rest of mankind, mighty keen about returns when they're doling out the milk of human kindness. What's this about Nancy keeping her eyes on something?"

"Jonas, ain't anything sacred from your joking?" Nancy peered over her glasses; at times Jonas came only within her far vision.

"Not much, Nancy, not much," and Jonas chuckled wickedly.

All during the night Austen woke and slept fitfully. He seemed to rest most when sleep deserted him, for when he slept he dreamed; while he lay awake he was conscious of arriving, without thought, at conclusions.

It was like being carried through tunnels and coming, now and then, upon vistas of clear vision. So sharp and short were these periods of illumination that they were startling.

He knew, for instance, that Constance Maynard was holding sternly to duty with all her inheritance of pride and honour. He knew that that same force had held him through the years. He had never understood before. In common, he and Constance knew this power, and it would probably be the death of all that they passionately desired; but in the face of that possible disaster there was a grim sense of peace and satisfaction. They were not compromising a birthright. This force was what sent martyrs to the stake smiling. It could not be ignored.

Because many *could* compromise, the race had lost much. So Austen tried to find comfort for himself. There was a good deal to say for the upholding of principles, even though they demanded self-sacrifice. Cold comfort, but it brought peace.

To be obliged to defend one's *rights* at the bar of justice is, as each soul knows, wasted time, if happiness is at stake. Then like a flash it came to Austen that the *only* thing that counted, the only thing that brought rest and real happiness, was the commendation of that which held part in every soul, though often it was spurned and set aside. Nancy was right. It was the individual inheritance of conscience.

And then, as day was breaking, Austen thought of Constance, Verity, and himself—a little, groping, reacting group; and overcasting them like a cloud were Vance Warren and Mary Carlin!

Rights or no rights, demands or renunciations, do what they might, they must, Constance, Verity, and he, emerge from the clouds, if that might be, without compromise. This he realized in the depths of his soul. Better to live for ever in the shadow than to—— And suddenly, as such things will

materialize, before Austen's sleepless gaze came the memory of that dead rabbit on the trail with the frozen question in its eyes, and Mary Carlin at the bar of man's justice! Her eyes had held that eternal question: and he, a judge of men, by the grace of God, must not spare himself!

"Why are things as they are? Why?"

At daybreak Austen gladly got up and faced the next turn in his road. "We can never explain why we do and think as we do. We simply *must*," he muttered.

He was accepting the fact that Constance must go on with Warren. That he must go on as long as Mary Carlin lived. They were as they were, he and Constance, and that is why they had inevitably come together again. They had to prove themselves. They were going in the same direction; their roads might touch, they might cross, but they must be guarded.

As Austen neared New York, he gathered, like a dropped robe, his old self about the detached personality he had found among the hills. In an impatient moment he shrugged his shoulders at what he termed his sentimentality. Business, however, restored an equilibrium and Lewis's abounding cheerfulness and cordial welcome were reassuring. *This* case and *that* awaited his immediate attention. They had been pushed aside as long as possible.

"And you certainly look up to snuff," Lewis remarked. "Do any shooting?"

"No."

"Didn't you? What in thunder did you take to the woods for at this time of year?"

"It's the best time in the hills," Austen replied.

"Well, it's set you up, old man. That's the main thing."

Austen feared, as the evening wore on, that Lewis might refer to Verity and his new relation to her, but he did not. "It would be embarrassing," he thought, "to have a lien on her before everything was set clear."

Austen had not counted upon this. It was as if Lewis were bidding without knowing what he was bidding for. "There is no estimating the confusion one causes," Austin re-

flected, smoking, and eyeing Lewis through the screen, "when he works under cover."

After a long, awkward pause, Austen struck the blow he dreaded that Lewis might strike.

"Ted."

"Yep, Barney."

"About that matter of which you spoke—Verity, you know." Since Lewis would not speak, he must. He, now, resented Lewis's silence.

"Yes."

"I do not want you to misunderstand me, old fellow, but I hope you will let it lie fallow for a time. There's your family——"

"Damn!" muttered Lewis genially.

"That's all right, Ted, but they have their rights. Besides, I want Verity to find herself. When the time comes for her to give herself, I want her to know what she's giving. She doesn't, now. She's got a rather tangled past, as I've told you. I'm going to untangle some of it, and then——"

"Thanks, old man." Lewis blinked in the smoke. "All I wanted you to know was the plain fact. Nothing can ever alter *that*, but I wanted you in at the start. I may not get her—I'm not the kind of ass that overlooks that—but I'm going to try some day."

"And Verity?" Austen looked keenly at Lewis.

"Oh, she doesn't suspect. She's right on her own trail now, working for her goal. When she arrives I'll be there. That's all."

Another pause. Then:

"Ted, I want to tell you a little about where I've been and why." Then, haltingly, feeling his way, Austen spoke.

For a long time Lewis did not interrupt the quiet flow of Austen's words. Once he asked: "Why in thunder didn't you tell her that you cared long ago? Why, in God's name, did you let the old man steer your course? That was your big mistake."

"I could not. I was not free, you see."

With lightning rapidity Lewis made a mad calculation,

then discarded it. He was linking Verity with Austen! "No! At that time I was wedging into Barney's life. I would have known," he concluded. "But a woman's in Barney's life, all right!"

"You see," Austen was speaking calmly, "I'm made that way. I simply couldn't. If I could have got away with it, been happy, felt respectable, I would have done it in a minute. Many men could have justified themselves. I couldn't. That was all."

"A woman, I suppose," ventured Lewis, "who couldn't be got rid of?"

"Yes, a woman who clung."

Then Lewis, regarding Austen, seemed to see him take on new proportions, new significance. He could not follow him through his valleys of humiliation and dogged perseverance, but he could see him on the summits he had gained—and relinquished. His heart ached, but with characteristic fervour he said:

"You won't mind, Barney, I know, but I think you were a damned fool. No woman has a right to drag a man at her heels."

"Perhaps. As I said, if I could have done otherwise, I would have. I simply couldn't. I'm not claiming any virtue."

"And after all these years, finding yourself free, you went"—Lewis was appropriating heights he had no rights to—"and found the woman you cared for——"

"Married." Austen finished the question with a sharp answer.

He had no intention of sharing any further confidence. That was his way.

He could open the dam that held his secrets; he could permit a certain intimacy to flow forth, and then, as now happened, almost with brutal abruptness, the gates of silence fell.

"Lord!" thought Lewis, beating against the barrier. "I don't feel as if I ever knew Barney."

And that was a correct conclusion.

CHAPTER XII

LIFE again settled into what Lewis termed prehistoric ruts. Business became absorbing and Austen plunged into several civic interests with the ardour of his early years. He desired above all else to fill his time and work off his energy to some purpose. He and Lewis often dined together, and it was curious to note how intimate they became with so little to justify the relation except faith and a growing affection.

Austen wrote often and at length to Verity. He was sur-
facely extremely frank about his Coverly visit. He referred to Constance as an old and valued friend "recently returned from abroad" and dwelt upon the pleasure it would give him to have Verity know her and become attached to her.

"I have promised her that you will visit her when next you come home," he added.

She wrote in reply, with the lack of filial tone that amused and daunted Austen:

That's plain cheek, Barney. I may want to go elsewhere. I'm making contacts of my own. You need not feel, in order to rid yourself of my obnoxious presence [here Austen winced], that you must parcel me out to old friends. My special pal at present is Jane Terrell, a most fascinating creature with a brother Jack, at Yale. The Terrells have a camp in the Adirondacks and Jane has intimated to her mother that a standing invitation to me would be appreciated. So, Barney dear, don't have me on your mind! As time passes I realize, with shudders, what havoc I must have created in your orderly life. Well, that's that!

Love to Ted. Why doesn't he write?

"Why don't you?" asked Austen, turning, as he read the letter, to Lewis.

“Because,” Lewis leered pleasantly, “I wanted to make her notice that I did not.”

An unlooked-for calamity brought Verity home again soon after her return to school.

Scarlet fever broke out among the students, and Verity wrote:

We're suspicious of each other and of every one else. We are flying apart like chips from a split log.

I'm all right so far—got a clean bill of health, but I've been thinking, Barney, I'd like to reconsider and go up to those hills you mentioned in your last letter. That is, if your nice Mrs. Warren isn't panicky about germs.

Hills! I've never had hills in my story. Sea, cities, and flats. I think hills might revive me.

Two girls have died, Barney; two! Pretty, laughing things they were. It doesn't seem possible that they will never laugh again. One was going to be a great singer. She had a voice that thrilled you. I hope, wherever she is, she'll be allowed to go on with her singing. It would be such a waste.

“My God!” groaned Lewis after reading the letter Austen passed over to him. “What do you make of this?”

“Only that the girl has been rather roughly brought face to face with a grim reality, Ted. She'll escape disease, I believe, but I think we had better pack her off to the hills at once. Mrs. Warren is mentally germ-proof and will be the best influence in Verity's life that she could possibly have now. I'll wire her and Verity at once. When Verity arrives we'll meet her at the Grand Central and put her on the Vermont special at midnight.”

“Lord, Barney, it sounds indecent! Like the way they smuggle dangerous objects through.”

“It's best, Ted. We're not the right ones for her now. Besides, while she longs for the hills, she had better have them.”

Verity arrived in New York late one December day, and was met by Austen and Lewis. She was pale and sad-eyed. She did not seem to resent her brief stay in the city. She was mentally at low ebb and regarded everything indifferently.

She brightened a little at dinner and at the play later—for Austen had planned to fill every moment of her stay with entertainment.

“You’ve aged,” Lewis said, looking keenly at her. This was unfortunate. Her eyes filled.

“I suppose so,” she replied. “I’ve been through things that do age one. Somehow, Ted, I didn’t know it *could* happen to happy, well girls. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“I didn’t mean that, Verity.” Lewis looked penitent. “Only you seem so grown up.”

“Well, I am, Ted. I suppose I’ll never be growner!” She smiled faintly.

The night on the train was a restful one and had the effect of restoring Verity to something like her old self. She ate a good breakfast and faced the future with greater interest than she would have believed possible the day before. So much had occurred during the last ten days that she had been stunned; but she was emerging, and the fact surprised her.

“There’s not much to me, I’m afraid,” she thought. “I get over things too easily.”

She tried to escape from the sense of cheerful anticipation that rose in spite of her, but could not. She tried to feel some resentment for the way she had been rushed through New York, but presently she laughed aloud.

“They looked so up against a problem,” she thought, “poor Barney and Ted, bucking each other up and hustling me away as if they were afraid I might find them out.”

It was after four o’clock when the train drew into the Coverly Station. Verity, with her trunk beside her and her suitcase clutched in her left hand, stood dismayed.

There was no one to meet her! But just when dismay was giving place to indignation and fear, an automobile dashed up and a man jumped out, swept Verity and her belongings into the car, and headed it for the hills with a gruff remark about “busted tire at the wrong time.” Presently, with the broad road before him, he grew more communicative.

“Mrs. Warren was detained. You’re to feel like one of the family.”

Verity, her eyes widening, smiled. It was funny, but rather nice, too, this idea of being one of the family and treated casually.

And then she saw the hills. To sea-level eyes they seemed majestic, those tender, brooding hills of Vermont. Verity gasped. There is always one of two impressions that grips one at the first sight of mountains. Either they seem to smother, to awe and humble, or they seem to lift one up, by a tender and mighty force, to peace and vision. It was in the latter way that the hills affected Verity. As she gazed at Spread Eagle and the other peaks, she was conscious of an emotion that never before had swayed her; a new chord had been touched and it sang in her like a call.

"Oh!" she whispered over and over. "Oh!" Then, unable longer to keep silent, she leaned over to the man at the wheel and touched him.

"Are we going *into* the hills?" she asked.

The man turned understanding eyes upon her. A mountaineer knows his kin.

"Want to?" he asked.

"Oh! I want to get near them. They are beautiful, they reach so—and touch."

"We're going 'mong them," was the calm reply.

"I'm glad." Verity leaned back, feeling as one might who was nearing home.

"It's queer!" she pondered, and suddenly she thought of old Ezra. Thought of him as she had not for many a day. The tears came smartingly to her eyes; her heart yearned and she whispered as if repeating a prayer: "The havens where they would be." Where they would be! Her glance clung to the hills.

At Five Winds another surprise awaited Verity, but it gave her less shock. She was met at the door by a trim, elderly woman and led toward the stairs. How still and beautiful and warm the house was, and how empty! It was like being in a new world and wondering if there were other inhabitants to be found later. Verity paused midway and looked about.

Off in the soft, warm brightness someone was playing a

violin, and now and then a voice sang a few words and then it trailed off into the violin's notes.

"Mrs. Warren wants you to rest and then come downstairs when you are ready," the woman was saying. "It is five o'clock now. Dinner will be served at seven, but Mrs. Warren will be here"—the woman pointed to the fireside in the living hall—"at six."

It was all very strange and unusual, but Verity nodded bravely and followed on. "People, people!" she sighed, "and their ways!"

Her bedroom was like a mute welcome. Someone had been thoughtful and kind there. Such a merry, clean little fire crackled on the hearth; such a comfortable chair was drawn close to it, and there were pretty quilted slippers and a soft gown of blue near by. No need to wait for one's trunk, here. Candles were flickering cheerfully in quaint brass on dresser and table, and there was a jar of ground pine and scarlet berries on the stand by the bed.

Feeling suddenly very old and wise and well poised, Verity drew her breath sharply and was grateful for the opportunity to get ready. She took off her travelling clothes, donned the dressing gown and slippers, and sank into the friendly chair.

Presently her trunk and bag were brought, and then she was alone once more. She went to the window and looked into the blue twilight; she saw the blessed peaks rise protectingly on every side. The witchery of the place caught and held her as it had long ago caught Austen. All disturbing things were shut away; she was freed from what really was of no consequence, things that had seemed so compelling off somewhere beyond those friendly hills. She was glad without knowing why; simply glad and at peace.

"I'm not sleepy, not tired, but just glad."

After a while she turned, with a little sigh, to her trunk. She must make herself ready for that first meeting with Barney's old friend! At once she became concentrated and eager as she always was when seeking to meet a demand Austen made upon her.

Womanlike, she selected, religiously, her gown—it might

make such difference, that first glimpse. She began to picture her hostess, her silent, absent, but strangely present hostess.

The gown was decided upon—a pretty, soft blue thing edged with dark fur.

It was nearly six when Verity left the shelter of her room. Outside the protecting door she experienced not shyness so much as fear. People were often so disappointing, so disturbing; and *this* person meant so much. Verity shrank from any jar that might menace the marvellous thing the hills had given her.

Noiselessly she passed down the broad hall to the stairway. Groping along, as Vance Warren did, but without sound, she descended to the first landing and looked over the balustrade. Austen had given as little as possible in the way of description. Verity knew that Mrs. Warren was young, that her husband was delicate—that was all. She looked gravely at her hosts now. They had not heard her approach.

Vance Warren, his wonderful face all aglow in the red light, leaned back in a deep chair. Constance sat on a stool near him, her hand upon his arm. It was like a beautiful scene set and waiting; waiting for the play to go on!

If Verity had chosen her gown by inspiration, so had Constance. A silvery gray, loose garment enveloped the tall slender figure like a mist. At shoulder and waist buckles of glimmering stones sparkled. Woman and girl had, unconsciously, vied with each other for effect, and for the same reason.

Suddenly the sweet, dreamy face at the fireside lifted, turned toward Verity, and smiled. Long the two looked at each other, and as surely as such things can be known, they both knew that hereafter their parts would be played close together.

“And this is Verity Leighton!” Constance did not seem to move, but when Verity reached the foot of the stairs she was there to meet her. “My dear, Barney didn’t tell me that you were just like this!”

A quick, soft kiss fell on Verity’s cheek. Then, hastily:

"Vance, dear, she has come, Verity Leighton. Verity—my husband."

"He is a boy!" The thought leaped to consciousness. "And *blind!* Why did Barney keep this from me?"

For a moment something hurt in the region of Verity's heart. She took Warren's groping, outstretched hand. She murmured something, and then:

"I wonder," said Constance as she led Verity to a chair, "if Barney Austen's odd notion about names will hold here? You know how he dislikes more than one name apiece for the people he cares for? I wish you would call me Constance and my husband Vance—it would get us over such a long distance without bother. Do you think you could, my dear?" How tremulously eager the voice was.

"I'd like to try." Verity smiled.

"Thank God," Constance was thinking, "she doesn't look like Barney."

"What a groping voice," thought Vance Warren. "A blind voice—feeling along."

The contact was made!

Brought together as these three were, emotions were developed with hot-house rapidity. It would be that or nothing. They all seemed to realize that.

Almost within the hour Constance found herself in league with Austen as to withholding any hurting thing from Verity.

"Not yet!" she thought. "Something is happening to the girl, something that any unfavourable blow might blight."

Vance Warren listened to Verity's voice; he pictured her, as was his lonely custom, starting always with the voice.

"She is fair; she is going to be beautiful some day if she is not now." He amused himself by his fancy, asking a question now and then.

The tie between Constance and Warren at first daunted Verity by its unnaturalness. With the blunt cruelty of youth she resented what seemed incongruous. Warren's sharp wit and ironical cheerfulness disarmed her at times, and his very

evident affection for Constance was touching. After a few days she came to a conclusion.

"They are making-believe to each other," she thought. "Why? Why did they ever marry?"

After that, life took on zest and colour; Romance rode a wild race and outstripped reason.

Little by little, as time passed, Verity became part of the home life of Five Winds. Nothing disturbed the quiet flow of the days, the blessed rest of the nights. Gradually she was taken for granted.

Constance spoke often and affectionately of Austen; she disarmed growing suspicion by her simple frankness.

It would have been so thrilling to associate Constance with Barney! Austen's detachment from women had recently caused Verity's sex stirrings some grave moments; here was hope, but hope soon fell.

"Nothing doing!" The girl smiled quizzically and turned her thoughts on the everlasting why that stood hovering over Warren and Constance.

In due time the Goodalls became a charming addition to the circle. For some reason Nancy constantly brought Ezra to Verity's thought.

"They are the same breed," she mused. "I bet their God is the same God."

Old Jonas repelled Verity.

"He's a menace," she concluded, "an old vulture."

On his part Jonas eyed Verity askance. He had heard more than people knew that he had, and it had fed his evil tendencies, not his compassion.

"What does this all mean?" he asked Nancy.

"I don't know as that need fash you," Nancy replied. "I reckon we know all there is any reason for us to know. I declare, Jonas, there are times when I think you *want* to upset what never was meant to upset."

"All the same"—Jonas stuck his bristly chin out stubbornly—"I ain't going to swaller everything that's jammed agin my mouth."

"Who's jamming anything?" Nancy stood at bay.

“He’s got something on his mind,” she thought. “He’s bent on mischief. Now what’s got him—just curiosity about what don’t concern him, or the tavern, or women?”

And, as though drawn by a magnet, or compelled by that fell instinct that drives us all to come into contact with an obstacle before us, Verity and Warren became constant companions. This surprised and interested Constance. She had feared that Vance would resent the change in the home life, that it might irritate or weary him; but the contrary resulted.

“I—I feel old, left out!” she thought one day, and then sharply denounced herself as a jealous fool.

“Jealous of whom?” This became absorbing. She often overheard snatches of conversation between Warren and Verity. They were illuminating; startling.

“You are going to see some day”—it was Verity who spoke; she and Warren were in the studio room and Constance chanced to pass by—“at first I thought you were not. I’m glad, very glad.”

“Oh! that’s a hope.” Warren was scribbling, feeling ahead with his pencil to the limit of the sheet of paper. “And,” cheerfully, “as Aunt Nancy says, hopes ain’t lobsters. Lobsters seem to be her final test.”

“How *can* you be so light-hearted?” This came wonderingly; Constance paused outside the door.

“One has to take everything *some* way. I choose the light-hearted way. It saves time.”

“Why don’t you get ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“Ready for the time when you can see.”

“I do not understand.”

“You are afraid of things in the dark—your dark. Some of the things are not there, Vance.” This very definitely; firmly.

“For instance?” There was a new tone in Warren’s voice. It startled Constance; made her conscious of eavesdropping. She walked quickly into the room. The conversation ran on. Verity merely smiled a welcome.

"You could do more things, sort of practise, and then when light comes you will not have so much to learn." She nodded to Constance. "I'm bullying him," she said.

"When light comes!" The words were like music, full of hidden yearning.

"Yes. You could find your way around this house more; do little things for yourself instead of always waiting. You could come out with me now, for instance, and walk as if you knew everything was safe. I'd tell you if it wasn't. Walk alone, I mean, as if you were not afraid."

Warren laughed bitterly.

"You think I indulge myself?"

The tone caused Verity to flush.

"Yes, I do!" she said, courageously. "If you act all right people will think you are all right—won't have you on their minds."

"Con, do you hear the ragging I'm getting?" Warren turned his unseeing eyes toward Constance. He had heard her enter.

"Yes, dear."

"Am I on your mind, Con?"

"Delightfully, Vance."

"I dare you to come out walking with me now." Verity tossed her head.

"I'll take the dare!" Then: "Con, come along and see me walk alone, after all this time." There was challenge in the tone.

That was the beginning. Day after day, more and more as if sight guided him, with the whispered caution of Verity or Constance, Warren trod the trails. Oftener and oftener his laugh rang without the bitter or mocking indifference. He gained weight and colour.

Constance watched every phase of what was going on. She made no demur even when she feared the risks Warren was taking. To her, who had brooded over him, believed that she was making life secure and happy for him, the present atmosphere of cheerful disregard of consequences was astounding.

“What have I been doing all this time?” she thought. “It almost seems as if I had been getting him ready to die, while in reality I should have——” She paused. Almost she resented Verity’s presence for the moment then she grew grave.

In an inexplicable way, she again felt set aside; felt the necessity of asserting herself. And yet life, except for this new element of youthful spirits, was going on naturally enough. It was as if she, as well as Vance, had become conscious that some things they had feared were not, after all, in the dark.

Verity’s personality was such that she could not mingle with others without attracting or repelling. She was vital, positive, with the acquired independence that her life had evolved. She had won her way step by step. She might so easily, so Constance thought, have been impossible, but something had saved her. At Verity’s most daring moment she would look at Constance, as she often looked at Austen, with an appealing, groping sadness; a sweet loyalty, a reaching out for sympathy. This was disarming and fascinating.

From the sense of age, Constance drifted eventually to an exhilarating sense of youth and high spirits. She did not try to analyse this mood: she accepted it.

When Verity suggested that they all learn to skate, Constance, who had been restrained from even that pastime in her girlhood, agreed.

“We’ll all tumble together,” she pleaded. And tumble they did, but conquered in the end, bruised but triumphant.

The strange course of events was watched by old Jonas with sinister amusement; by Nancy with keen relish, for the dear soul was as young in spirit as the three who were unconsciously on the wheel of fate, and she was as unsuspecting as they.

The sense of relief and pleasure that Verity’s presence gave still caused Constance at times to pause, in the midst of her merriest mood, and consider. Why were things as they were? Why was she brighter, happier than she had ever been in her life? The questions would recur.

She tried to believe that it was because Vance Warren was growing stronger and more hopeful. They presently talked of the possible operation, of plans to have it performed soon; and looked beyond the hours of anxiety to a future of usefulness and purpose.

It was pleasant to bask in Verity's youth and high spirits. She had seemed to come in with the turning of the tide. But there were hours when Constance was sternly honest with herself, and then she acknowledged that, in Verity, she shared Austen. The girl was a blessed tie that held her in all honour—in all honour, yes!—to Austen.

And the preparations went on!

For what? She could hardly have told, except that they planned for the operation. But Constance knew that her life had taken a new turn, that never again would it be the same. She wrote to Austen what she felt about Verity. The time had not come to tell her that her dreams were but dreams.

Let her learn, Barney, the difference between sawdust and flesh and blood. When she has learned, she will insist upon the latter. It's odd, but since she has come into my life, I feel as if a pendulum swung between us. I touch her; she touches me—by the unseen medium. We understand each other!

Austen pondered over this letter and found deep satisfaction in it.

When March came, Verity made her plans to return to school. The months had brought her health and happiness, given her a wider vision, a surer foothold.

“I have a belonging feeling,” she confided to Constance, but laughingly refused to explain.

CHAPTER XIII

JUST before Verity arrived, Lewis passed through an experience that had the effect of driving him, like a living wedge, into the lives that heretofore he had but touched superficially; how superficially, he had never imagined until then.

He had, ever since Mary Carlin's sentence, sought, as opportunity offered, to get for her a pardon. Of late his efforts had met with indifference or actual rebuff, and because he could carry no good news to the wretched woman, he had not been to see her for months, nor spoken of her to Austen. His visits, at the best, had been doleful affairs and were made in Austen's interest.

Suddenly, out of the silence, came papers, properly executed, that gave Mary Carlin release!

Lewis was taken aback, and at first decided to lay the matter at once before Austen, but upon second thought concluded not to. Why should he? Austen was, at the moment, engaged upon some critical cases; had several important transactions under way, and after all there was no immediate hurry. The arrangements for Mary Carlin, if there were any to be made, could wait until after Verity's visit and the rush of Austen's business were over.

With release the woman would be her own mistress, but Lewis, after a few hours' thought, decided to offer her what assistance she might feel like accepting from him until such time as Austen could be consulted.

Undoubtedly money questions would arise; in the meantime, he could bring the woman to the city, place her in a quiet hotel, have a nurse for her, if that were necessary, and when Austen was more at leisure he could act as he saw fit. There was still a goodly sum of money in the bank.

This seemed the feasible thing to do, and Lewis secured a suite of rooms in a family hotel; engaged a cheerful young undergraduate nurse to attend "an invalid" when she arrived in New York, and then set forth, with the official papers in his pocket, to break the good news to Mary Carlin.

It was months since he had been to the prison. During that time the wretched woman had sent him two or three short notes. He recalled their import now with a sense of neglected duty. In one she had written:

I cannot seem to die. I am better again. Able to help in the infirmary. Thanks to your interest, I am given this work to do.

Again—and this was the nearest the woman had ever come to the personal:

You seem to be the only link between my living death and life.

"I wish," Lewis reflected as he neared his destination, "that I had been more considerate."

He found Mary Carlin on her narrow bed in the infirmary. Another spell of illness had left her weak and hopeless. In her eyes was the dumb, pathetic look of the beaten. The eternal question of *Why, why?* to which the soul expected no answer.

She had won for herself, during her confinement, the sympathy and liking of those in authority. She gave no trouble; took what came with indifferent cheerfulness; rarely talked to others, but was always ready to respond to any demand.

When Lewis entered the ward, he at once saw Mary Carlin propped up on pillows. With relief in sight he seemed to understand, as he never had before, how terrible the ordeal must have been to her. She was tragically changed—not by illness alone, but by experiences of loneliness, a sense of disgrace and utter despair.

They had told Mary Carlin that Lewis was coming, and she had been watching for him. She knew the train schedule. If he did not come at ten, he might come at one. Failing that,

he could not reach the prison until four. By that time the sun would be streaming in through the window at the foot of her bed. The sun meant so much in that drear place.

At three-thirty Mary Carlin had fallen asleep, her scarred face turned to the wall, her thin hands spread so that the sunlight would warm them when it reached them.

And then suddenly the head turned. There was a radiant warmth in the eyes that had been looking at dreams.

“Oh!” Lewis, sitting by the bed, seemed part of the vanishing dream. “Oh! I had forgot!”

Lewis bent closer. “That I was coming?” he asked.

“No. I knew that you would come. I had forgot that I could not go! It’s queer, that forgetting dream. It wipes everything out, and sometimes I get up still forgetting, and do not wake up until I fall against the—the bars.” The words broke feverishly, eagerly—she had been so nervous.

Lewis shuddered. “You are feeling better?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so. I’ve got to longing for the forgetting that cannot be stopped by bars.” A certain delicacy which Lewis had never observed before marked the woman. A rough sob shook the thin form and a hovering nurse drew near.

“If you get excited,” she warned, “you’ll have to be let alone.”

“I’m not excited.” The words mumbled along between the chattering teeth.

“See you ain’t!” The nurse passed on.

“You want to be free?” Lewis asked gently.

“Who doesn’t? Just keeping us from being free is hell enough. I lie here and think of the time when they can’t stop me—when I’ll have escaped them.”

“Mary Carlin, what would you do with freedom?”

“I do not know. Who does? Freedom looks one way when you are part of it, quite another when you are barred from it.” A weak laugh followed the words.

“Mrs. Carlin”—Lewis was afraid of shock—“I have in my pocket the order that will release you.”

Shock may rouse one to action, or it may act like an anæs-

thetic. Mary Carlin closed her eyes and her thin face took on the hue of death.

“Do you hear me? Do you understand?” Lewis whispered. He, too, was afraid of the nurse.

“Yes.” The breath was short and quick as if the woman were running; escaping.

“I have made arrangements to have you come to the city at once. I have rooms in a quiet hotel—but would you prefer a hospital?”

“No, no, not that. Once I am free, I can manage. My friend——”

Excitement was flushing the thin face now and the eyes that would for ever hold their beauty looked full upon Lewis.

“Good God!” Mary Carlin breathed. “Freedom! A chance——” Then almost fiercely drawing Lewis close, she went on: “It’s like rising from the grave. You asked me what I would do with freedom. I will have to decide.”

“Yes; and I may be able to help you.” Lewis was deeply moved, but Mary Carlin’s next words drove him to a condition of mind in which thought seemed impossible and only primitive instincts held sway.

“It depends, Mr. Lewis, it depends. Tell me—tell me about that young girl who is with Judge Austen. What are they going to do with her? What have they done?”

“What is that to you?” Lewis asked almost fiercely. Where had she heard of Austen’s affairs? Why should she be interested in Verity Leighton?

Every sense recoiled at the seemingly impertinent curiosity, and yet when Lewis spoke it was more gently, more as if he were propitiating the woman. He suddenly felt that whatever hold she might have upon Austen’s generous nature it might become an impossible burden once she was free. With Austen’s peace and comfort in his mind he spoke with little consideration but great audacity. He ignored her question.

“You say you must arrange your own plans, Mrs. Carlin, upon your release, but only within certain limits. You must promise to go away.”

The woman raised herself from the pillow. “Go away?”

she moaned, and fright, positive horror, shook the voice. It was as if she had received a death sentence. "How can I go away? Where can I go? Why must I go away? You say they are to set me free. How can you, any one, prevent my going where I please?"

Lewis bent closer and spoke as he might to an excited child.

"There will be money. You could go to England. I have power to withhold your release." Lewis was driven on by a fear that he could not classify. "There is just one way, Mrs. Carlin, for you to obtain your freedom. Consider it."

Lewis was not thinking, he was simply seeking to push aside a dangerous obstacle; clear the way of a menace that he did not pause to understand. Mary Carlin's question had created a panic in him. Was she contemplating a hold upon Austen? Did she intend, because of any old tie, to demand service that would hamper and humiliate him? If there was anything Lewis could do to avert that, he meant to do it while there was time. He took big chances, relying upon Mary Carlin's ignorance and desire for freedom. Better terms could be made now than later. Austen must not be throttled. This "case" must at last be brought to a definite close.

"Is this another sentence of Judge Austen's?"

The words roused Lewis anew. Again he took a chance.

"Yes," he said, tersely, and watched the gray shadow steal over the thin, drawn face.

There was not much time now and the hovering nurse might swoop down at any moment. At the present instant she was quieting a rebellious patient in the next room by threats of a strait-jacket.

A flame was succeeding the shadow on Mary Carlin's face, leaving the scar white and shrivelled. What she had to say she must say as one hurls a missile bearing a message, unmindful where it strikes or how it may stun. She dared not think of Austen nor what the man beside her might think. She *must* speak.

"If I must go, I must see her—just once; just once. In God's name, do not deny me! You are young enough to have mercy." Poor Mary Carlin, if she had ever considered the

matter at all, believed that Lewis, at least, had Austen's confidence.

"See whom?" Lewis bent toward the bed. For an instant he had forgot the earlier question.

"The—the child that Judge Austen has. Verity Leighton. She is mine! Mine!"

"Are you mad?" Lewis shivered as one does who has been drenched with icy water. But the shock saved him from much.

"No. When I thought I was dying, it seemed easy to give her up. But if I must live and go—go away for ever, I must see her before I go."

Mechanically, Lewis took out his watch. Only twenty minutes more. He could think later—there would be years for that—he must act now and take no more chances. He must act!

"If what you say is true," he whispered, snapping his watch case, "can't you see that to interfere now would be brutal?" If the woman *were* sane, this might touch her; if she were mad, it might divert her. "When you saw Judge Austen and trusted him with—with your child, you must have realized what you did."

"Yes, but I thought I faced death."

"What difference does that make?" Lewis blurted out the words and Mary Carlin recoiled from them.

"Can you not see?" she murmured, and gave a hysterical laugh which was smothered in the bedclothes.

"No. I cannot see. Whatever was your reason for giving this girl into Judge Austen's care, he has accepted her, placed her beyond harm—unless you choose to injure her."

"Does she know about me?"

"No. She thinks her mother is dead."

The bedclothes were clutched convulsively.

"Is she happy?"

"Yes." Then desperately: "Mary Carlin, you have a divine opportunity to preserve the memory of you which this young girl has; an opportunity to keep her happy and safe."

The paroxysm was passing, leaving the woman on the bed

limp and weak. She had abdicated, but she reached forth for one grain of comfort upon which to live in all the long—or short—years ahead. Lewis had overpowered her.

“If she did not see me—if I could just look at her, just look? If you will permit that, I will promise—as God hears me, I promise. Only a look. Just a look.”

Never in his life had Lewis been so deeply moved. For a moment he could not speak. Then he said brokenly: “I will try to arrange it. You must be got to New York. I will come to you and tell you my plans there.”

“Thank you. Suppose I cannot get to New York? I am so weak.”

“You will be able to come, I feel sure. I must go now. You must trust me and be calm. I will send for you and do my best.” Lewis stood up. He seemed to tower over the wreck upon the bed. Then he asked huskily—the words seemed to escape his will to restrain them: “What is Judge Austen to you?”

The weak face stiffened; a kind of majesty overspread it.

“Nothing, except that he—he once knew my people. He is a good man. He has saved innocent——”

“Thank you, Mrs. Carlin!” Lewis drew a deep breath. “You must not exert yourself. Live for to-morrow. Good-bye.”

“To-morrow!” The misery of the word rang in Lewis’s ears all the way to New York.

On the train he relaxed and tried to think. He went to the dining car, ate a hearty meal, and went back to his chair; tried, again, to think. Presently he fell asleep and awoke with a start.

“Doped!” he called it and with good cause. He slept a little more; started and grappled the spectre that was waiting for him. At last he could think!

“If this is true——” he thought. And knew, somehow, that it was. “Damn it! I’m an ass. The whole thing may be a lie.”

There was no use to struggle. Lewis knew that it was not a lie. By and by, when the shock had passed and he could

sift and weigh things, he began to experience personal reactions. Never before had he been so keenly alive to his dual nature. All that his inheritance and training had done for him recoiled from what he had heard; what it signified. By a trick of imagination he saw Verity beside—Mary Carlin! “Great God!” he muttered under his breath.

Then, as vividly, he felt himself—or part of himself—beside the two. He could not shake himself free. Beside those two he took his stand, pushing Austen aside. Curiously enough Austen seemed to play no part in the drama evolving in his tortured mind. What did Austen matter? For old connections’ sake he had, if this woman’s tale were true, rescued Verity. He had done his part—the future had to do with Verity and him. He had told Austen that he “would be there” when Verity needed him.

Well, here was the need. Here was he!

Then, as the train flashed and trailed through the night, the wheels seemed to sing, madly, frantically:

“Delmar! Delmar!” Wheels were diabolically controlled; they were like keys of a telegraph board struck by a force outside the human.

“Delmar! Delmar!”

And at that moment Lewis believed he understood.

That was why Mary Carlin had shot Delmar.

That was why Austen had undertaken to shield Verity!

“Curse everything!” The words escaped Lewis’s lips, and a woman across the aisle frowned indignantly.

The next few days were destined to be so hurried and work-filled, so demanding and exacting, that Lewis got through them as if impelled by a force over which he had no control beyond the mere clutching of details and the fitting of them into niches, and then plunging ahead. At night he was so exhausted that he became unconscious—it was more than sleep.

He got money matters in shape. There was a considerable sum in the bank; he would add to that if necessary. He meant to pay high and get Mary Carlin off the scene before he talked to Austen.

This was *his* affair now. He had arrived at that point and had mastered his damnable inheritance that reared at his determination. When danger was past, he would have a frank talk with Austen, and accept any blame Austen might put upon him. Austen had no right to demand much when he gave so little. There had been small choice, and Lewis felt no twinges of conscience. He was held to his course by his passion for Verity that had flamed and risen above all else in the hour of danger.

Verity would be three days in New York. He must arrange for Mary Carlin to see her; then he would take the next step.

The possibility that he was all wrong in his conclusions and decisions did not now occur to Lewis. He was too concentrated upon the menaced future that belonged to him and Verity. If safety were to be secured—and with his intense egoism he had determined that it was to be—he alone could secure it.

Verity must *never* know: he and Austen could work that out when Mary Carlin was disposed of. Perhaps Austen would talk then; together they might patch up a decent background for Verity. Such things were done. It all depended upon prompt action now and a determined hold hereafter.

The *future* was his and Verity's; what part Austen would have in it depended upon himself.

The arrangement for getting Mary Carlin to New York went through smoothly. Upon her arrival at the hotel the young nurse telephoned to him, and within an hour he was on his way to see the sick woman. He found her lying upon a couch with the cheerful young attendant bustling about.

"I'll go into the bedroom, Mrs. Carlin," she said when Lewis entered. "You can call me if you want me."

Lewis drew a chair to the couch and gazed critically upon the woman he feared and pitied.

"You look better," he said, and then surprisedly observed the new and becoming clothing. Vaguely he wondered how that had been obtained.

"The nurse bought these"—Mary Carlin touched her

gown—"after I came. There is a shop near by." This seemed of vital importance and it made talk. "Clothes help so—they are a woman's salvation. I had nothing."

The head turned restlessly on the pillow.

"I have your ticket," Lewis went on, "for Southampton." He sounded brutally cold, but he was more afraid than he had ever been.

"England's as good as any other place, Mr. Lewis. I know London, a little, and I speak its language." A change had come over Mary Carlin with her clothes. The strength of her weakness was asserting itself.

"I hope——" Lewis paused.

"Don't hope for anything for me but my death. What is there for me in life? And yet I hang on as if—as if there were something still for me to do."

"There is!" Lewis's young eyes looked haunted and pitiful. "I've been thinking all day of what you are going to do, Mrs. Carlin, and I think it is about as big and fine a thing as a woman has ever done." Suggestion proved successful. A broken sob shook the form on the couch. It was stifled at once as if in fear of one who might punish. The prison control still held.

"What else could I do?"

"You might do much less, Mrs. Carlin. You might make it difficult for us all."

"I see; but it would not be of any use, Mr. Lewis. I have counted the cost alone there in the prison; at least I shall be free."

Wearily the words fell without resentment or undue emphasis.

"And"—here Lewis went cautiously—"perhaps you had better give me your address, Mrs. Carlin. There may come a time when I'll need it."

But Mary Carlin shook her head, and a certain flickering pride touched her face.

"I—I reserve the right, once I leave America, to have complete isolation. I will have you informed of my death—I will do nothing more. If you regret the money, I relinquish

my claim to that." This took courage, then stiffly: "I am not being bought."

A pitiful dignity rang weakly in the words: "I have a friend to whom I can go—in America. I heard from her to-day. "No"—for Mary Carlin saw fear in Lewis's eyes—"you need not worry. But if I went to her I would be as safely hid as if the ocean rolled between us."

"You misunderstand," Lewis hastened to say. "I will abide by your decision as to how the money shall be paid. You have my address when more money is needed. You will have only to write to me."

Lewis passed her a sealed packet.

"Thank you. It does seem like being bought, but there is only one other way, and you prefer my absence."

"Yes. Frankly, that is what we desire."

"You are most generous." The voice broke miserably. "I wish that I might go without the money. To accept it is harder than you know; but I am helpless."

Lewis turned his head away. He could not face the misery in the eyes holding his.

"And you still insist," he said, walking to the window, "on seeing Verity? You think that you can bear it?" He spoke the name determinedly as if learning it in a new sense.

"I can bear it." Then suddenly: "You—you have seen Judge Austen. Does he object?"

"He does not know."

"Thank you." The relief in the tone was touching. Lewis came back and took his seat by the couch.

"I am placing great faith in you," he said.

"Again, thank you, Mr. Lewis. I shall not forget." Suddenly and with curious intensity Mary Carlin asked: "Where is she?"

With that feeling of repugnance, which Mary Carlin caused when she drew near the intimate circle of his life, Lewis replied: "She has been with a friend of Judge Austen's."

"A woman?"

"Yes." This came rebelliously, and for some reason it aroused a weak show of resentment in Mary Carlin.

"I lost sight of her for a time. That is all."

"You what?" Again Lewis was conscious of fear.

"Oh! I have kept in touch—it was the only holy thing I had to think about while I was——"

"Who has kept you in touch?" There was anger in Lewis's voice, anger born of doubt.

"I—I told you that I had one friend to whom I might go. She has told me enough to keep me from going crazy. Judge Austen"—this came falteringly—"is a good man."

For some reason this brought Lewis relief.

"But this woman?" he asked.

"She will not bother. I am glad"—weakly—"to do Judge Austen a good turn. My friend will give no trouble. And now, Mr. Lewis, when may I see—my child?"

At that moment the nurse entered, gave Mary Carlin some medicine with the cheerful assurance that it would strengthen her, and again departed.

"I wonder if you would know your child, Mrs. Carlin?" Lewis asked. "It has been so long since——"

"I will know her!"

"Well, then, Mrs. Carlin, here is my plan. It is the best that I can do. To-morrow Verity Leighton arrives in New York—her train is due at the Grand Central at three. It may be late, but probably not. Judge Austen will be there to meet her. I will call for you at two-thirty, we will stand with the waiting crowd. It is a poor, shabby arrangement, but I could think of no other that would be safe."

"Oh! if she, not knowing, would but look at me in passing!" The words came on a broken sob.

"I will stand out of sight, Mrs. Carlin," Lewis said slowly, "but you must not betray yourself."

"I will not. Oh, I will not."

Then, with a hysterical gasp: "Such queer things happen. There's a Bible in my bedroom, Mr. Lewis, a hotel Bible. I picked it up while I was resting to-day; I opened it and read that scene where Jesus looked at His mother from the cross. The look! the look—how she must have lived on it all her life after!"

Sob upon sob choked Mary Carlin, but she buried her face in the cushions.

"I cannot trust you if you give way so, Mrs. Carlin." Lewis was genuinely anxious.

"I shall not give way again. I promise."

"I must go now. You will try to rest?"

"I will rest. And I am very, very tired."

"And after?"

"I sail the day after. That is the end. I will trouble you no more; no more."

A crowd gathered at the gates behind which the three o'clock train puffed in. It was a popular, limited train. Amid the crowd, securely hid, Lewis, his hat slouched over his face, and Mary Carlin, shielded by her veil, waited. Presently Lewis stepped back, leaving his companion alone.

"There she is!" It was Mary Carlin who spoke. Lewis had not seen Verity. He hardly dared look now.

She came so close to the line that held the crowd back, that Lewis shrank.

As if pressing forward to a goal, Verity passed. Her head was lifted and thrown back, her lips were parted; her fine eyes scanned the waiting crowd, seeking Austen, but they did not fall upon the scarred and haggard face so close to the line.

Then a silvery cry was heard: "Barney, Barney—here I am, here I am!"

The scarred woman swayed and Lewis reached forth to grasp her.

"I'm not fainting, Mr. Lewis. Do not be afraid." Then with a choked sob: "Not even a look to remember. Not even a look!"

CHAPTER XIV

I WISH, Mother, that you would invite Austen and Verity to dinner—informally, you know.”

Lewis looked haggard and spent. He had seen Mary Carlin sail away, and instead of feeling well rid of a burden, he felt as if he were being dragged after her. He began to doubt the wisdom of his course. The power of the woman, who had so imprinted her strange personality upon others, was closing about Lewis. “We would all have been safer,” he thought, “if I hadn’t sent her into space.”

Mrs. Lewis, sitting in a circle of light from a standing lamp, looked nervously at Aunt Jane, sitting in another circle of light across the room. Lewis spoke from the gloom beyond.

“Is the young woman in the city, son?”

“Yes. She’s been on a visit to some old friends of Austen. She’s on her way to school.”

“My son, I must speak.”

“Let ’er go, Mother!” There were times when Lewis could avert an avalanche by turning the flood in another channel. “I’ll bet you are going to tell me that you are giving dinners to the rector and the archbishop and the stranger within our gates.”

“I must warn you!” The flood was not to be turned aside. It was headed straight for its goal. “I have seen the danger from the first. I have hesitated to speak—you know my aversion to intruding—but the time has come when I *must* speak.”

Lewis, grateful for the darkness in which he sat, yawned.

“It is this—this young girl, Verity Leighton, of whom I must warn you!”

“What about her?” Lewis was alert: the yawn had been checked halfway.

“That is what I would like very much to know. Who does know?” Mrs. Lewis spoke as if Verity had but just dawned upon her horizon.

“We all know all that there is to know. We have known it all along.”

Lewis bridled and felt the perspiration come out on his forehead. “I will run over the items to refresh your memory. She’s a daughter of a client of Judge Austen’s. He’s always been frank enough about this.”

“Not frank enough for a loving mother, my son.”

“Rot!” muttered the fond son. “Why flare out now?”

“Theodore, of late you have been different. I have never approved of your friendship with Judge Austen. Such friendship is never normal and wholesome.”

Lewis, recalling Austen’s help in time past, grunted a disrespectful opinion and added: “I’d have been a darned worse fellow than I am, Mother, except for Judge Austen.”

Mrs. Lewis disregarded this and went on: “Who, when all is said and done, *is* Judge Austen? We do not know that he ever had a grandfather.”

“Grandfathers are an infernal bore—once dead,” Lewis returned recklessly. “They had their day. Why mortgage eternity?”

“You amaze me, Theodore—shock me.”

“I’m not particularly proud of my grandfathers or my father, Mother, when it comes to that!” Lewis was getting angry.

“My son! My son!” Mrs. Lewis covered her face with her black-edged handkerchief. “You can so speak of the sainted dead!” For ten years Mrs. Lewis had worn mourning for a husband who had insulted and ignored her.

At this Lewis laughed. The sound had the effect of drying the wet eyes of Mrs. Lewis.

“You act guilty,” she said firmly; and certainly, could she have seen her son’s face, she would have been confirmed in her belief. “I thank my God for the intuition that lights my way. Come what may, Theodore, I will speak and then leave the matter in your hands.—Jane, for heaven’s sake stop

knitting. I believe you purposely clatter your needles." Mrs. Lewis was, as she expressed it, "all on edge."

Jane Lewis rolled her knitting and put it in her bag, and Mrs. Lewis proceeded:

"Barnard Austen has always seemed to me like a wily spider. Silent, calm, he weaves and draws within his web young men of family. For what?"

"The Lord knows, Mother. But you need not give the dinner party if you feel this way. Let's drop it!"

But the flood descended.

"First, to worm his own way into respectable homes." Figures of speech were mere words on Mrs. Lewis's tongue. A spider worming his way was a perfectly justifiable figure to her. "Then, to use them; make them take *his* chestnuts out of the fire; and now to marry this unknown girl into a family whose daughters have always been, by birth and law, immaculate!"

At this, for some never-to-be-known reason, Aunt Jane laughed.

"*You laugh, Jane?*"

"Forgive me, sister-in-law, it escaped me." Jane twisted in her chair.

"Escaped you!" There was a silence. Then: "I believe this Verity Leighton is Barnard Austen's illegitimate child whom he is trying to establish!" The final shot was fired.

"Cut it out, Mother!" Lewis was white with rage. "Why is it that such good women as you kick up mud when there is no need to?"

Lewis had the sensation produced by being tickled. He wanted to roar in agony, but instead he laughed again. If we cannot estimate the power of a word, we surely cannot estimate that of a laugh. Never had Lewis laughed in his mother's presence as he did then. It was like a sudden recognition of an inevitable barrier between them. It frightened her, she actually strove mentally to scramble over it and reach him.

"I suppose we do owe Judge Austen some hospitality";

she blundered, ignoring her recent remarks and clutching at her son as he seemed to recede on the echo of that laugh.

"We owe him an apology," was what Lewis said.

"We could have a dinner to-morrow or the next day, if that would please you."

Oh! the tragedy of such a moment! For a mother to force the truth about herself into the consciousness of a son who had been able, heretofore, to respect and love the image he had created of her from his necessity and loyalty!

"We'll cut the dinner out, Mother, and since I cannot feel free in your home to entertain my friends, you will not object to my taking rooms elsewhere."

Mrs. Lewis was aghast. From her circle of light she leaned forward and touched the electric button, flooding the room with light. She had hoped to find her son sitting in his father's chair, but she saw a stranger!

"Rooms?" she murmured. "My son, my son, what do you mean—rooms?"

"Why, I mean rooms! A place of my own where I can invite people without——"

"My son, have you acquaintances that are unfit for your mother's home?"

"Well, not exactly unfit, but sort of, well, specially mine."

"You terrify me, Theodore. I have put entire confidence in you. I have felt that your inheritance, your training, had secured you against the temptations——"

"Good God, Mother! You must spend your life binding up your ideas and soul so that they cannot stretch. Never mind! We'll talk of the rooms later."

"No, let us talk of them now!" Mrs. Lewis was white-lipped.

"It's a wretched business," Lewis broke in, "the hold of the dead past upon the present. It sucks the very life blood. All the sap of the Lewises is in the roots—the buried roots. It does not run up. Let me alone, Mother, I've got to live."

"But—the rooms," Mrs. Lewis breathed, "you mean—perhaps you mean that you would like to have the top floor here. I had intended that for you, if you ever married. We

could put in a small kitchen; Davis could serve you, if you desired to dine there with—with friends.”

“Thanks, Mother, I do not want the top floor. I’m going to have rooms to begin in, not go on in. Of course, I’ll be home a great deal, if you want me; it will make very little difference, really, but I think it will be best.”

How definite it was, this idea but an hour old!

The iron entered Mrs. Lewis’s soul, but it did not rend and shatter it: it reinforced it.

“The day may come, Theodore, when you will regret the step you are taking.”

“That may be, Mother.”

Lewis rose wearily. Never had he needed his mother so sorely, but the woman upon whom his eyes rested was a stranger—just a woman—and as such, objectionable. She repelled him.

He noticed her heavy mourning, how insincere it was; he noted the thin, fine features, how devoid they were of plain human beauty. Whatever the thing was that she worshipped, it had done the charm and the mother of her to death.

“I may not be back to-night, Mother.” Lewis moved to the door but Mrs. Lewis did not raise her eyes.

Then a remarkable thing happened. Jane Lewis got up, walked across the room as if propelled by machinery that was running down. She put her thin, wrinkled hands upon Lewis’s shoulders and reached up and—kissed him! She, who had never borne a child, felt her maternity overpowering her.

“God bless and keep you, Theodore,” she said firmly. “Good-night.”

Lewis drew the little, crooked figure close to his heart. He dared not speak, but his lips clung to the cold ones on his.

He slept that night at the Kismet Club and the next day turned up late at the office. Austen regarded him keenly.

“Sick?” he asked.

“Sick nothing! Barney, what’s Verity doing to-day?”

"She's not moping because of your neglect and bad manners, Ted."

"That's good. Will you lend her to me, Barney?"

"What for?"

"I'm setting up housekeeping. Just signed contracts for a—for an apartment."

Austen looked grave.

"Oh, that's all right, Barney. Nothing doing, only that the Mater and I came to a clinch over our ideas of living. We'll all be the better off for two roofs."

"I see." Austen, to whom silences were ordinary fare, respected them in others; demanded them at times. "I see. Well, I think, myself, families put too big a strain on their members. You've got a place, eh?"

"Yes, a block from yours. High, dry, and absolutely antique-proof."

"That sounds good. Sit down and take it easy. Verity will be here in a half-hour. She will be glad for something to do. She's a master hand at spending money—better not let her get the bit in her teeth or her hands on your purse!"

"She's welcome." Lewis turned to his desk and fell to work. Austen, watching him, was struck by the sudden gravity of the tense face.

"There's been a row," he thought. "Why, in God's name, cannot people let others alone? Why smash the sacred things with things that do not count a rap?"

But when later Verity fluttered into the office Austen's wonderment and Lewis's gravity disappeared.

There was that about the girl—and it was constantly impressing itself on Austen and Lewis—that suggested detachment. It was more than independence, more than the assurance of youth: it was a spiritual thing. She seemed to have escaped from any hold that had been put upon her, and from her safe vantage point reached out fearlessly, lovingly. She had her own outlooks and conclusions, but she was intensely interested in others.

She had got used to the sensation of "not belonging"; she

had accepted things as she found them and was tremendously intent upon modelling her life from what was at her command.

She had lost the sad look in her eyes that the death of her schoolmates had left. The hills had restored her; their peace rested in her glance.

"I hope, Ted," she said, lightly seating herself on the arm of a chair, "that you've got a good excuse for not turning up to dinner last night. Sheila O'Neil will not mention your name. We had fried chicken."

Lewis laughed. All his gloom had disappeared.

"I want you to come and help me buy furniture," he said. "I'm setting up housekeeping."

For a moment the glint in Verity's eyes dimmed, flitted, and then she remarked:

"Revolt or subjugation?"

"Neither."

"How well they understood each other," Austen thought, watching the play.

"I'm trying my hand at going it alone." Lewis lighted a cigarette and started for his hat and coat.

"I haven't accepted yet, Ted."

"Don't waste time!" Lewis retorted.

A moment later they started forth, going at once to the apartment.

"Oh! it's a duck of a place," Verity announced at her first glimpse of the four sunny, airy rooms. "Everything new. No one has left a suggestion, or a ghost. All you have to do now, Ted, is to wedge yourself in and then press out until you fill every crevice. I bet the landlord thought I was your bride-to-be. Did you see him grin?"

Lewis looked at the tall, lithe creature.

"It must be the Delmar strain," he thought distractedly, and marvelled as many had before him at the cynical power of nature that often takes the least moral channel to preserve its finest strain.

"Resenting the landlord's curiosity, Ted?"

"No. I'm simply indulging my own."

"Ha! ha!" The silvery laugh rang in the empty rooms.

The western light flooded the place; its bareness seemed suggestive of cheer and welcome; an open-armedness, a response to the youth that had entered in to conquer.

"Ted!" Verity was peeping into a clever closet—a space arranged by inspiration. "Here's a cedar chest—you can sit on that to pull on your shoes; here are hat shelves, boot trees, and here is a nice cosy corner for—— Ted, have you got a skeleton? If you have, jam it in this slit behind the clothes rod."

Lewis looked grim. For a wretched moment he felt ill at ease with this vivid young person alone with him in his rooms.

"What's a home without a skeleton?" Verity laughed her tradition-shocking laugh.

"I think I prefer dogs," Lewis said. "I'm going to have a wire-hair. A friend has selected him. He's named Scruff. Isn't that bully?"

"Bully! And that ends the skeleton. A wire-hair would shred anything, with bones, to pieces. The name, however, suggests untidiness. Going to have a day bed?" They were in the small sun-filled bedroom.

"I think I prefer a night one," Lewis replied.

"So do I. I hate makeshifts. I've learned that much at school. Let's sit on this window seat, Ted, while I run over some of the high lights of my recent experience. I only have one other suggestion. Never *place* sofa cushions: chuck them!"

And there they sat in the empty, waiting rooms and talked.

"Do you remember that play we saw together long ago, Ted?—the one about the girl who wasn't afraid of life? That marked a turning point for me. I scared dear Barney into the knowledge that I had red blood in my veins, and it thrilled me through and through. As I go on living I realize what a corking play that was and what a blessing red blood is. There is nothing in life to be afraid of; nothing, if the colour of your blood is right. Ted, did it ever occur to you that the job for our generation is to smash bugaboos? Walk with eyes open and beat the past generation to it?"

"Does it ever occur to you, Verity, that our job is usually cut out for us by those who hand it to us?"

“Men or—God, Ted?”

“God has only men to work through.”

“Anything God hands to me, He hands, Himself.” Verity tossed her head. “No middle-man for me.”

And then the talk drifted to Coverly, to the likelihood of the operation on Warren’s eyes, and the result.

“When he sees—oh! my Lord!” Verity raised her hands.

“Sees what?” Lewis caught vaguely at the flying missiles Verity let loose.

“Themselves, goose. They never have seen themselves.”

“In the words of Scripture, Verity, you are a wild ass!” Lewis laughed gaily.

“Constance is corking,” she went on, ruminatingly. “She is beautiful, too, if the fact could be brought to her attention. She’d be a wonder, but Vance thinks she’s a white-winged dove descended straight from heaven and has alighted on his head, or soul, or something. She isn’t, you know. I bet Barney doesn’t think she’s a dove on any one’s head. The fact is, she hasn’t alighted yet, Ted, and I tell you when she does, it’s going to be with a thump.”

“Cut it out, Verity!” Lewis felt as if cold water were dripping down his spine. He glanced up to see if there were a leak from above. “I had hoped you would escape the sex messiness.”

“I couldn’t, but that’s all right in its place. What have you against sex?”

“Nothing.” Lewis looked abashed, but Verity ran on.

“And Constance thinks that Vance is a spiritual essence of man. He isn’t. He’s a man. Just because one is blind or deaf doesn’t mean that he is idiotic or foreign. When I got up there, Ted, truly I was horrified. The stage was set for Vance’s death. Vance Warren is *some* man, Ted; he is going to live and prove it.”

Ted wiped his brow and looked about dazedly.

“Isn’t Barney ripping?” Verity asked blithely. “He improves year by year. So handsome, so alarmingly fine. While I was a child he seemed old, but now every time I come

home he seems more dangerously youthful. How he escaped, God only knows!"

"Escaped what?" Lewis gasped.

"Women. Maybe he hasn't. Perhaps he has a dark past that he has managed to burnish up and—and restore."

"For heaven's sake, Verity, let's talk tables and chairs."

So they talked furniture for a time, but Verity felt that she must make the most of her opportunity to attack certain topics taboo from general conversation.

"Do you know, I have an awful suspicion that your mother fears for you." This brought Lewis to a sharp turn and a dark flush.

Verity, leaning back against the buff-coloured wall, seemed to fit in with the scheme, she was so golden and pale and fine; but so alarming in her awful keenness.

"She fears for me, yes! She fears these rooms! Poor Mother!" breathed Ted.

"Yes, poor Mother, Ted. Why will mothers insist upon being mothers when they have been given such a divine opportunity to be friends?"

"Gee! Verity. One gets to considering you a wild ass, and you suddenly reveal yourself as a—what shall I say?"

"Just a thinking animal, Ted. But your mother fears for you because of me."

This was staggering. It drove Lewis to the wall.

"Ted, you understand, don't you?"

"I hope so."

"Do I scare you, dear old Ted?"

"No, you paralyse me."

"Nice old Ted! I'd hate to have *you* misunderstand. You see I have too much to do to be hampered."

"Dear little wild ass! What have you to do?"

"Oh, remodel the world! Well, that's that! Now let us go and pick up Barney and have dinner. It's a wonderful world, Ted, wonderful. It's divine to be at the beginning of things. I used to feel sodden because I did not *belong* in any true sense to any one. I have got over that. I often

think I'm just created and turned loose in a brand-new world. I'm going to grow up with the world. I'm not hampered and, as a blessed old woman up in Vermont says, I'm going to take courage for my friend and—" She paused, threw her head back, and added—"strike the up trail."

CHAPTER XV

IT WAS definitely settled at last. There was to be an operation on Warren's eyes. The physician, who, in Italy, had given hope, was in America; had been to Five Winds and passed judgment.

"This is a miracle," he cried after his examination of Warren. "The man is sound and there is no reason why the operation should not prove successful."

Warren gave his light laugh and asked: "And what if it fail?"

"You will be no worse off, and you must not let doubt enter in."

So the time was set for August.

"I'm going to ask a strange thing, Barney," Constance wrote to Austen when details were settled. "I want Verity here when the time comes. Just Verity. Try and arrange it."

And during the time preceding the operation Coverly droned on and the lack of excitement got on Jonas's nerves.

While he had been interested, gathering material for his evil brew, he forgot the simple dissipations that lured him on occasion, but with Five Winds empty of suggestion and with Nancy eternally on guard, suspicious, but denouncing herself secretly for her suspicions, the days were miserable and the nights wakeful for both the old people.

"There ain't no escaping her," Jonas said. "She won't even trust me with grocery money when I'm sent erranding. But when my government money comes"—Jonas had a pension for what was supposed to be his service in the Civil War—"I'm going to brace up for my rights. I fought and bled for that money, and by the Almighty, I'm going to put up a stand for my rights."

As a matter of fact, Jonas had neither fought nor bled for

his country. He had been taken prisoner, early in the struggle, and lived to reap the reward for service he had never given. But when the pension money did arrive, Jonas strutted.

Nancy, with fear in her heart, refrained from any attempt to restrain Jonas from doing as he wished with what she acknowledged was his own. So Jonas departed for the Tavern and for several days and nights indulged in what he termed "the sacred rights of an American—personal rights."

At the end of the week he could not enunciate "personal rights," though he made many attempts. The next stage in Goodall's personal expression was the mellowed, tearful stage. He looked upon Nancy as Woman, not as his despised wife. He was maudlin, terrifying, and Nancy grew silent and grim. Then Jonas wept and presently resented her, and at last, like a mischievous boy, determined to make trouble somewhere by any means in his power. He gathered his forces and lay in wait.

"I'll make her sorry!" he blubbered. "Acting up like she was better and purer than folks—she, a Smith!"

At first Jonas conceived the idea of running away—not far, but far enough to frighten Nancy. Then he grew moody, ugly, senselessly vindictive. Somebody had to suffer!

"I'll raise hell!" Jonas drunkenly decided and, not having any more money to share with other hell makers, he brooded and wandered away from home alone.

One day, a week after Verity's departure, Jonas had come upon Warren feeling his way, by tapping his cane, on a safe trail near Five Winds Hill. With the cane, and by counting the trees, when he came to the path, Warren was able to exercise and exult in the sense of independence so lately born.

"Fourteen trees, then turn. Fourteen trees; then the meadow with its sharply defined path; then the road—turn to the right—and so on up to the house."

It was between the twelfth and fourteenth trees that Jonas's voice startled Warren and made him lose his count!

Jonas, sitting on a fallen log, viewed the blind man through bleared eyes. He wanted to cry, but suddenly he remembered certain things concerning Warren that rose accusingly.

“Not *against* him,” Jonas floundered in his thoughts, “but *about* him.” Then a great wave of humanity swept Jonas from his insecure mooring; he felt like a suffering brother of Warren.

“Well, sir!” he grunted, “if this ain’t wicked and cruel!” Warren started. “Who is that?” he called.

“Just a friend, just Jonas Goodall.”

“Oh! Good afternoon, Goodall. I never expect to meet a friend on this walk. How are you?”

Jonas pronounced himself “feeble” and begged Warren to share the log.

“Two derelicts!” he muttered when Warren, with an amused laugh, accepted the hospitality of the log. He saw a half-hour’s amusement with the old man. He let him babble on for a time as one does a child, but suddenly he drew himself up: the drivel was taking on substance, Jonas was saying things! Rather, he was uncovering, in a dark corner of Warren’s mind, hateful, hurting thoughts.

From rambling recollections of the old Senator and Constance, Jonas had touched upon Austen’s first visit to Coverly. “Vacationing,” he expressed it. Two or three sinister chuckles at this point roused Warren.

“I uster see ’em wandering in woods and giving the old Senator the slip.”

Warren never could recall later just how much followed this, it was all so confused, vile, and astounding. Apparently Jonas had separated his listener from a personal part in the slander he was voicing, he was considering him as a listener, a crony of the Tavern.

“And when it came to marrying—God! Men like this Barney Austen don’t want to marry. They——” Warren struggled to his feet, his face was white and set. “And coming back, now, to ferret out—and this here girl—who is she, this here Verity? What does it all mean? This ain’t any kind of stuff to pass out to a God-fearing community what has——”

“Stand up!” Warren’s voice, stern, hard, had the physical effect of bringing Jonas to his feet.

“You’re an old man, but I’m a blind one: we’re quits. Now, then, take what you deserve—you!”

While white anger and abhorrence held, Warren struck out once, twice, thrice. Two blows fell on Jonas; one cut his cheek, in spite of his effort to shield himself. Then sanity, shame, overpowered Warren.

“Get home,” he commanded. “I had no business to forget myself. Are you hurt?”

Jonas groaned. “You’ve pretty nigh ruined me.” He wiped the blood from his face.

“Get home!”

Warren turned away sick at heart. How he ever found his way back he never knew. He did not attempt to count the trees, but he mechanically tapped the ground and went on. He reached Five Winds, found the living hall empty, and sat down, exhausted, by the ashy hearth.

Presently he began to think and feel. Something in him had received sight; been shocked into consciousness. He was able for a time to detach his sensations from people and fix them upon incidents, upon situations.

Looking back upon his prison house of dreams—and already he was looking *back* at it—he realized that it was when Verity, with her youth and daring, had set him toward life instead of death, that his walls had trembled. While he was dying, bravely, dramatically, the lesser things of life had not mattered: Money, woman’s love, not even sacrifice for the short hour of what was left of life. In defying these lesser things he had welcomed death; had been able to laugh and joke during his pitiful hour. Often he had dreamed that when he was gone Constance would remember his indifference toward death and find comfort in it. He had acted a part in the shadow of death.

And then he had discovered, through a girl’s bravado, that his dark was not peopled with danger so much as with ignorance. For a short time or long a man must play his part in life. Once he confronted life he was bound to call things by their rough, common names. Names such as that vile old man had uttered.

Warren shuddered as he recalled the blows he had aimed at the creature.

"A blind beggar!" Warren gripped the arms of his chair. "I am that—a blind beggar. Sunning myself in the bounty and unselfishness of a woman, while tongues wagged and I stopped my ears."

Then Warren seemed to drift back to the fair golden days in Italy when the spell of the country was over him and Constance.

"But even if they knew that," he thought, "who could understand?"

Not for a moment did Warren regard Constance, Austen, or Verity in the light of evil that old Goodall had turned upon them, but again he reflected upon the situation and its significance.

Suppose there had been something unhappy in the past between Austen and Constance, and that now they confronted each other—over him.

Well, what then?

If Constance, carrying her hurt and sad past through the world, had come across a man placed as he had been in Italy, and had bargained, superbly, courageously bargained for two years—not ten . . . Two years of divine peace, safety, splendid companionship, and in return—a name; a tawdry ceremony that the world places such significance upon in order to restore what otherwise——

"A wife!" Warren shuddered. "Some women hit men back in that way." Perhaps Constance had.

But *after* the two years. When the divine tragedy became a divine comedy, what then? It had been a fair enough bargain.

Warren eliminated Austen and Verity. He and Constance were alone at last, dealing with their problem—if there were a problem.

In that hour Warren longed for death; determined to refuse to undergo the operation. Perhaps there would be another brief space of dreams and peace before the final scene.

Restless, torn by doubt and despair, he pulled himself to-

gether. No! He was not going to turn tail and scurry into the coward's corner. He meant to play the game out. He had practised to some purpose. Things were not even. What had he given for those two years?

By the time Constance returned from the village, he had himself well in hand.

"I stopped at Lower Farm," Constance said, flitting about the room drawing a shade here, patting a cushion there, "and old Uncle Jonas came in. He is getting over the worst spree he has had in years. He had fallen, cut his head quite badly. I helped, as I could, and left Aunt Nancy freshening him up, as she pitifully expresses it. He tried to tell her how it happened. He said he fell in the woods, but I think some cowardly fellow struck him. He hadn't a cent in his pocket; he was probably robbed. Poor Aunt Nancy!"

And that night as Warren lay in his bed while Constance read, a fierce summer storm came up and beat savagely upon the west side of the house, upon which opened Constance's windows.

"I cannot hear you, Con, this devil of a storm kicks up such a racket."

"Perhaps you can sleep, dear."

"Perhaps. I'll try."

Then while Constance moved about the room Warren listened to her every movement. How swift, noiseless she was in action! Sometimes she hummed in a light, breathless kind of way. She never dropped anything; never knocked against anything.

Far on toward morning Warren lay listening to the even breath of the woman in the bed next his own. If he stirred, that even breath became irregular.

It was a day or two later when Warren made a request.

"Con, I wish you'd have a room fixed up for me on the south side of the house, will you?"

"A room, dear? A room for what?"

"To sleep in, if I can. The south side is more sheltered, isn't it, from storms?"

"Why, yes, but——"

“You see, Con, I want to give myself every chance for the big test. I want to sleep better, eat more; exercise more—do my part.”

“Why, of course, dear, I’ll have the room arranged—the one right across the hall from ours.”

“Thanks, Con. And isn’t this operation going to cost you a small fortune?”

“Cost *us*, you mean. Well, what are fortunes for?”

“But I—I might go to a hospital.” They were planning to turn the tower room into an operating room, for Warren had a nervous distaste of hospitals.

“You are to remain here, dear, and the south room *is* warmer, more sheltered.”

“Winds are my horror, Con. If ever I commit murder or set an orphan asylum afire, it will be on a windy night.”

Constance laughed and patted his cheek. An awful sense of relief overcame her for which she felt a shame she dared not face. “With Vance across the hall”—she shrank from her thought, but again and again it returned.

If Warren were hewing his way along a dark path, she was doing likewise, with her wide and seeking eyes open. She was living as she never had lived before. Every sense seemed quickened. The beauty of the season had never before so stirred her. The days were golden, the air soft. And then the moonlight! It was like daylight under a thick white veil. Often, after Warren had changed his room and she left him for her own chamber, Constance would steal up to the tower room, where hung her father’s unfinished picture called “Waiting,” and breathe deep, free breaths. From what was she freed? She dared not ask that question. It frightened her.

She stood by the window and looked out into the night, and something within her sang, and she stilled it—as one might still the voice of a stranger who had come into a house of death.

To such as she, husband meant just one absorbing interpretation; but fate had relieved her for a time, and so something in her sang.

In spite of her silent insistence that she *must* be anxious about Warren's approaching ordeal, that she was wretchedly wicked in her sense of freedom, now that Warren slept in the south chamber, she was unbelievably happy. Happy with the joyousness that does not depend on visible signs or tokens. Her imagination was quickened to light and power, it worked magically. While she lived her new, unquestioned life with Warren, her freed and blithe spirit could live with Austen. As she might once have played as other children played, so now she made-believe in dangerous but soul-widening ways. Suppression was relaxed. "Suppose . . ." and from morning until night she "supposed."

Austen's letters, filled with the small happenings of his busy days, court business, Verity's future, all were fuel for the state of detachment in which Constance moved. She fancied herself Austen's wife—this was madness. She pictured the glory of wifedom at last; heretofore wifedom had lacked glory. She was Verity's mother—all her pent maternal emotion flared and flamed. That was why Verity charmed her. Verity was Austen's; might have been hers.

The woman who had smeared and scorched Austen's life by her folly and madness was eliminated, and Constance seemed to drift into that woman's place.

Poor Vance Warren, however, was not always so casually disposed of. Once the mad fancies gave place to reality, Vance rose demanding. Now that he lived to a certain extent apart, Constance could regard him as she had when she first met him—a tragic boyish figure who, but for her, would slip through the terrifying darkness into death—alone. He need not fear Austen; that was another matter, her secret, safely guarded.

Again she felt the thrill and mystery of acting the part of God—but God was a just God. She could have no secrets from God.

Warren was, as Verity had discovered, a man, not an abstraction. He was more simple, more direct. Constance's devotion gradually overcame the poison of Goodall's evil suggestion.

Of course, he argued, if there were truth hidden behind the

slander, there would be an opportunity for him to prove himself with honour. Warren's mental operations were directed by sophistication, and no New England puritanism tinged his thought. There were possibilities of a mess, but certainly of no devastating calamity.

If he were *certain*, he could face his ordeal, but it was knavish to continue to act as if he had accepted old Goodall's interpretation.

Constance's present mood of tender devotion might mean——

“Good Lord! Perhaps I'm wronging her. She's proud; she couldn't speak. I'll put the thing to a test!”

CHAPTER XVI

WARREN made his test a few weeks before his operation.

He and Constance had been particularly merry all the evening. They had sung together, for a few minutes danced together, and Warren had repeated some verses he had composed.

“You are simply wonderful, Vance.” Constance touched him fondly from her place near him.

“How?”

“Oh, I do not know. Just wonderful.”

“Some day,” Warren had said, “when light comes and I will not have to dictate, I’m going to write us up—write our story, Con. I bet it will be a best seller. Such a tale!”

“I refuse to be copy!”

When Warren started for bed Constance asked if she should read him to sleep.

“No. I’m going to beat the storm to it—I hear thunder in the hills,” he said. “The south chamber will come in handy,” he added. Then: “Kiss me, Con!”

Something in his tone startled her, but she raised her face to his waiting one.

“Shall I help you, dear?” she asked.

“No. It’s queer, for lately I seem to have developed eyes. I go about as safe as any old hundred-eyed fellow. Extra sight seems superfluous.”

“Don’t, Vance dear! It’s all too wonderful and heavenly to joke about.”

“I’ve heard”—Warren moved toward the stairs—he did not grope—“I’ve heard that, at first, light and vision hurt after one has got used to the dark.”

“You’re absurd, Vance. Good-night—happy dreams, and get ahead of the storm.”

Then, when Warren’s door closed upon him, she stood listening before she turned to put the room in order. She disliked to begin the day with the suggestion of last night’s mood.

Slowly, quietly she worked and then, for no reason whatever, she opened the outer door, secured it with the long chain—and thought of Austen.

She turned the lights off and went slowly upstairs. She ran noiselessly through the upper hall, a bit breathless she reached her room, closed the door and—locked it!

Slowly she undressed by the flashes of lightning that already rent the darkness; the thunder rumbled in the hills; the wind was rising.

“I should not have left the lower door open,” she thought—but she did not go downstairs to close it. After all, the rain could do no damage, and the wind was from the opposite direction. The windows rattled. She drew them down and sat by her clean hearth and—let herself go. An empty hearth, a wide empty space to be vision-filled.

Presently she fell asleep and dreamed. She dreamed that Austen was in the room with her. He had come upstairs with her—she had left the outside door open for him. Of course! She had locked her own door against intrusion.

It did not seem strange or shocking; it was the most natural thing in the world, when one dreamed, to have the most unnatural things occur. So, perhaps, had her ancestors borne their colourless lives.

There Austen stood leaning against the mantel-shelf! How lifelike was the position he took in the dream. Head resting against his arm, body bent a little toward her.

He was smiling that rare, kind smile of his, and she was telling him how hard it had been until—until that relief came via the south chamber. Austen looked puzzled, but it was clear enough to the dreamer.

Then, still in the grip of the dream, she lifted her arms and

Austen came slowly toward her. It seemed an interminable distance across the hearth.

And at that moment there came a tap upon her door, and a sound as if one were seeking the knob. Instantly Constance was on her feet defending, God alone knew what! She clutched the folds of her gown across her breast. Her breath came sharp and quick. Then she went steadily to the door—so had her kin always met the inevitable; she opened it and faced Warren.

“You cannot sleep, Vance? I will come and read to you.”

“I want to come in.” Warren’s face looked grim and old—he seemed older, far older than Austen, who in that terrifying way seemed to be in the room still—but no, Constance glanced at the hearth: he was gone. Reality and dream were severed!

“This storm, Vance, is terrific. You feel it here. I could not sleep. Let me come to you. You may take cold.”

But Warren had closed the door behind him and was walking to the hearth where Austen had stood!

“I prefer to remain here,” he said, and felt for a chair.

An emotion that shamed and yet emboldened Constance caused her to laugh lightly as she sat down watching every move and expression of Warren’s. He no longer appealed to the maternal in her; he was arousing all that was dangerous and fear-filled. He seemed an intruder, a stranger, and for a moment she shrank from him. But he could not see the motion!

“It does sound like hell outside, doesn’t it?” Warren bent forward and stretched out his beautiful, thin white hands as if seeking the warmth of a long-dead fire.

“Yes. I warned you.”

“You need not have warned me, Con. I am quite expert. One is who lives—in hell, you know.”

“Vance! What is the matter? You must not talk so—please do not laugh!” Constance was as pale as if death, not life, were touching her.

“I mean what I say, but I’ve fought my way out, Con,

fought my way in my own fashion, and now things are bound to be better. I dare say you've been a bit scorched yourself, my dear, living so near hell."

"Vance, you shall not talk like this. I cannot follow you."

"I thank God for that! Con, if you had followed me through the last few months, there would be the smell of brimstone on your pretty clothes, even if they escaped scorching."

"You mean that you have dreaded the operation, dear?"
A wave of pity swept Constance toward him.

"Operation? Good God, no! That's bound to bring me light or everlasting darkness. Why should I fear that?"

"What, then?"

"I have feared that our love—our beautiful poem—was blank verse, Con. I wronged you, dear. You could not be blank verse, nor that damnable thing, free verse. You are pure melody. You are my wife!"

The groping hands suddenly caught the sleeve of Constance's gown and drew her close like a grip of steel.

She came, dragged, to his side; she drooped to his feet. His arms, strong and sinewy, held her. His lips were close to her face.

"I read a story once of a man going to his death, and he asked but one thing of the woman he loved—one thing. He wanted to take proof with him. No human-made tie held them. If she gave, she must give to prove her love, her faith, her divinity. It would mean—if she gave—heaven instead of hell to the doomed man. Con, I face death. I ask——"

"Vance! I—I—oh! God forgive me, I—cannot!" The words were wrung from Constance's control.

Warren relaxed his hold and she fell like a dead weight against him.

The storm howled. A clock below struck two. Then: "Why in heaven's name *did* you marry me?" Warren's voice rang hard like steel, and a shuddering clap of thunder followed. "Answer me truly, Con. Answer a doomed man."

"I—I don't know! Oh, yes, I do know, Vance, I do. I wanted to know life. I wanted to help you, have something of my own. I thought that you were dying——"

"You wanted to know life? Good God! And through me—well, what have I taught you—I?"

"You"—Constance was sobbing miserably—"you have taught me to—to know life: to honour life!"

"In that case we owe each other nothing. We are quits."

"Don't, don't, Vance."

"Good-night, Con. You have played the game true to type. You're great stuff, great!"

And then, groping, stumbling, Warren reached the door, passed out, closing it behind him.

How they lived through the next few days neither Warren nor Constance ever knew. They got through them, that was all. It was morning and evening of the first day, morning and evening of the second day, and then common sense came to the rescue.

"There is just one thing, dear," Constance said, "and we must accomplish that."

"The getting of light?" Warren replied. "Well, I have some light; I can bear more."

"Don't, dear."

"I won't, Con."

The tower studio was turned into an operating room.

"And when the ugly business is over," Warren pleaded, "just move me over by the south window. When I look out I'd like to see the hills from that point."

"Verity is coming, Vance."

"Verity? Why Verity?"

"Oh, she's so healthily young and irrepressible. I felt that she would tone us up."

"Queer old Con! Always starting something to see what will happen."

The nurses arrived first—quiet, well-trained machines. They knew exactly what to do, and did it.

Then came Verity, breezily, as if eager to be on the scene just

when the miracle of light came. Never for an instant did she suggest that disaster was possible. She took for granted that success had been achieved, and rather magnificently, if a bit arrogantly, planned for the future.

She sang and laughed; she filled the house with flowers; she flouted anxiety. She donned breeches and flannel shirt and scoured the hills; she relieved Nancy Goodall, by sitting with Jonas, and humoured the old man, who by the day was growing childish. He had never recovered from his hurt in the woods. Every time he alluded to his accident he had a new version, and presently he became fantastic.

"I allas did say that that old Spread Eagle would git us into trouble," he mumbled, "and it has. I was acoming down the trail and the blamed old bird swooped and clapped me with its right wing. There's powerful strength in the wing of an eagle—and—and—a gander."

Verity laughed as she listened. "Never mind, Uncle Jonas, we'll clip the eagle's wing."

"Better not. Taking a bull by the horns ain't in it with tackling a bald eagle."

Verity's spirits never flagged, and day by day she drew nearer to Constance until age, experience, all differences were obliterated. They were two women—Verity, perhaps, the elder of the two.

"Lean hard, Connie dear," the girl would say. "Let me do the upstanding stunt." And Constance leaned hard.

Then the doctors came, two of them, and a young assistant. They bustled in and out with that awful trained cheerfulness that grated on sensitive nerves.

"Good God!" groaned Warren. "Do they think they are bucking me up?"

"As if you needed it!" cried Verity.

The night before the operation Warren dropped his light, mocking manner and for one never-to-be-forgot moment his sightless eyes seemed to look into Constance's.

"My dear," he whispered, with exquisite tenderness, "I haven't damned life for you, have I?"

"No, no, Vance. Never that!"

"I'm glad, for you have given me the most beautiful thing I ever knew. It is something to be glad for, this feeling that in awakening you I did not shock you. It will all come out right in some way. Let us hold to that."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" And now Constance dared touch him. She leaned over him and pressed her lips to his shining hair. "You see, some women hunger for knowledge—and cannot bear it when it comes," she whispered.

"I'm glad to have had the little talk, Con. I think I understand you better than another might. You pretty, cold, sexless thing!"

"No, no, Vance! I cannot stand such talk now. We must wait for all that until later."

And it was right here that Verity proved her mettle. She had never been stronger, firmer, or cheerier in her life. The old gift of healing seemed to have returned to her finger tips. When she saw Warren's brows contract, with a magic touch she smoothed the pain and perplexity.

"Don't press against the lines, Vance," she said, smoothing the broad forehead. "The lines are safeguards. Against them your effort cannot count. It just takes it out of you—the lines are taut. There, now—a long breath. Isn't it great to know the lines are there marking our limit? I've learned that at school. To-morrow will soon be over. There, now!"

"Thanks, Verity. You are hypnotizing me!"

"Nonsense! And you can laugh if you want to, Vance. But all the same there is something, quite outside our everlasting push and pull, that can put anything over."

And having driven, for the time, the dark devils away, peace followed.

Then came the day of the operation! Nurses and doctors moved about noiselessly; the sun shone unheeded in the quiet house.

Sitting apart, Verity fancied a dramatic aftermath. There would be days of suspense; days of bandages and forced cheerfulness. "But on the day when he sees"—so the girl planned—"Constance must be alone with him. He must

see her face first. What are years!" This was flung out defiantly. "She is the dearest ever, and lovely beyond words. She's young, too; frightfully young, compared to him. She somehow seems to have escaped living. Of course, there will have to be readjustments. There is fear between them, but that won't last. It will be quite thrilling—the thrillingest romance *I* ever encountered."

But great events do not always occur as fancy depicts.

Warren passed through the operation in splendid shape. Just as he was losing control of himself, under ether, he remarked with his perplexing laugh: "Only a coward lets go, eh? Then he flung out defiantly: "We'll see!"

He came out of ether, silent and grim. Then while the bandages held all possible light from him he chafed, grew restless, almost peevish. He had expected quicker results.

On the day that he was permitted to try his eyes, doctors and nurses, as well as Constance and Verity, were in the room. As it happened, Constance had her back to him, not knowing the critical moment. The doctors were absorbed in their case, not in the dramatic effects.

"I can see that it isn't dark!" Warren said thickly.

That was all that mattered to him or the surgeons. "Bully!" said one of them. "Now, then, Warren, back you go into your closet for a day or so."

As it turned out, a week elapsed.

The next time the bandages were removed, Warren held Constance's hand and moved to the window; he was saving his strength for an out-of-door glimpse.

"Everything is blurred," he said, disappointedly. "It looks a mess!"

"Can you see nothing, Vance? Look!" Constance asked.

"I see something moving. It's a long-legged boy—or is it something else? My God! Is this all that seeing means for me?"

It was Verity coming up the Five Winds Hill that Vance Warren saw! Verity in her knickerbockers and sweater.

"My dear, my dear!" Constance comforted, "you are

getting on beautifully. It must come gradually, this sight of yours, and you must learn to use it."

"On the old job, Con. Egging a fellow on. It's all right, dear. I'm not in the dark, anyway."

They did not seem man and woman, husband and wife—they were merely humans.

At Constance's request Verity sent a telegram to Austen after the operation. It was worded in Verity's style. Austen understood, smiled, and drew a long breath.

"Let there be light—and there was light!"

"Well, that's over!" Lewis exclaimed, as Austen handed the yellow slip to him.

"Yes, that's over!" Austen looked grave.

"Well, what about it, Barney?"

"I don't know, Ted. I suppose it is the relief, and other things, but all day I've smelled the woods; seen fish in clear water and felt the moss under my feet." This was irrelevant.

"Beat it!" advised Lewis, understandingly.

"Verity has an invitation to spend six weeks with her pal in the Adirondacks," Austen went on. "If she accepts, I think I'll take to the open."

"Why wait for that?" Lewis asked. "Send her scooting to the mountains or fix her up somewhere else. Why doesn't she stay with Mrs. Warren?"

"I think she will prefer the Adirondacks later, Ted, now that Warren is out of his trouble."

"All right, old man, use me if you want to."

"Can you stick to the office until September, Ted?"

"Sure thing. You couldn't wedge me off."

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a great deal of business to attend to before Austen made his final arrangements.

While he cared little for social affairs, he had, of late, perhaps with an eye to Verity's definite future, indulged rather more freely. He had joined a golf club; accepted dinner invitations, gone to conventions—and these activities all seemed to focus during the weeks when he was most strenuously seeking to arrange his affairs in orderly fashion.

More and more, Lewis had become his right-hand man. As far as he could drop his own responsibilities he felt that he could drop them upon Lewis, but he conscientiously sought to make the load as light as possible.

However, at the best, he was obliged to postpone his visit to Coverly and gain most of his information of what was going on there from Verity's rather frivolous letters and Constance's restrained ones. The latter puzzled Austen. A definite change of tone marked them.

"I must hurry up there," he thought, and hurried to the limit of his strength. But it seemed as if Fate, seeing so able a worker, laid on the task in sardonic humour.

And while every nerve was strained, a sudden thought of Mary Carlin got wedged in his mind and could not be dislodged.

Looking back over the past few years he became suddenly amazed at his attitude toward the sad creature. While mentally accepting the bond that held them—and more and more he realized his type, the type that doggedly goes on even while inclination and longing tug—having accepted, he had refrained from asking questions; had taken for granted that unchanged conditions prevailed. He had even given

up the grim hope of release by death. What did it matter, one way or another?

That line of argument roused something in Austen: something that combated; insisted.

Strangely enough, he did what he had never done before: consulted, hypothetically, two or three lawyers as to the legal and ethical aspects of a case like his and Mary Carlin's. While the men listened respectfully so long as he held the matter to legal snarls and possible quicksands, they lost interest when he touched upon the moral aspect.

"No sensible man should be held by that kind of damnable nonsense—not mentally, morally, or spiritually." That was the verdict.

And still Austen could not shake off the dead hold. The moral, or perhaps it was the sentimental, aspect held him.

"I'm damnably tired," he argued, "and cannot see straight. Since I'm not able, apparently, to *act*, why re-hash the ugly matter?"

But nothing ever happens suddenly in life, if signs and symbols are observed; and Austen was, like the most, being lashed to a spar even while he contemplated the wreck—the old, forsaken wreck.

There were hours when, in his weary, half-sick wakefulness, he recalled—or was recalled by—the memory of his girl wife. From this aspect of his suffering he revolted. *That* should not hamper him. No, by God!

But why *was* he unable to leave the case now, of all times, to Lewis? Was he, again, contemplating freedom?

"I want to clear the way for Verity," he argued, even while his mind dwelt upon Constance and Vance Warren. "What's going to happen when——" Verity's letters and Constance's were unnerving him.

The best he could accomplish at the moment was to think of Mary Carlin *as* Mary Carlin, and then he could humanly regard his suffering.

And so, after a big dinner one night, he strolled under the calm summer skies to Lewis's apartment. He looked up, saw lights burning, and took the elevator. He had no

particular object in view—he simply went. As Lewis had a key to his apartment, so Austen had one to Lewis's.

Austen made as much noise as a man decently could when he entered the rooms, but Lewis did not hear him.

With his feet on the sill of a window looking out on the starry night, Lewis, pipe in mouth, Scruff at his knee, was basking in the atmosphere of home. It was only when Austen laid his hand on his shoulder that he came with a crash, spiritual, as well as physical, to earth.

The dog growled. His tail had been included in the descent and he resented it.

“By the Lord Harry!” Lewis exclaimed. “Where did you come from?”

“A dinner at the Lawyers' Club.”

“Disagree with you?”

“Not exactly, but I'm rounding things up, and there is one item I must tackle. What is new about that Carlin case?”

Lewis could, on occasions, be diplomatic and evasive, but with Austen he was as simple and direct as a child. He was startled now into frank statements.

“Well, Barney, we're free of her.” There was a touch of defiance in the tone that escaped Austen.

“Has she died?” he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

“No. She couldn't seem to do that. They made it easy for her up there, and I got her release. I meant to tell you before you went away. I only waited until things eased up.”

This was mere sparring for time.

“Got her release! Where in God's name is she?”

“In England.” This casually, as if it disposed of the matter.

“England? When did she go? Come, let us have the story.”

And now Lewis was stricken, as he had been more than once during his term of service for Mary Carlin, with a sense of impotence that angered him.

“See here, Barney,” he blurted, and leaned forward over his clasped hands while he regarded Austen's blank, drawn face,

“that *was* my case; you felt that I might arrange certain details because, as the woman’s lawyer, I presumably would be able to do so. If you had any interest in the matter you trusted me. I have asked for no more information than you vouchsafed and I have done my best. When the papers came my one thought was to get the poor creature off the stage. I was tired of her; damnably worn out with her, if you want the truth.”

Austen regarded Lewis as he might a masquerader. He was not sure of the assumed disguise.

“Of course I trusted you,” he said dully. “Of course I realize that it was your case, but I had taken your confidence for granted. Have you the woman’s address? I suppose you provided funds?”

Lewis weakened at sight of Austen’s very evident anxiety.

“The funds were all right—the money at my disposal—I understood that it was hers—it has been given her. She was not over-reaching. She was glad of her freedom on any terms. I do not know her address. She refused to give it. After all, the woman, once she was set free, had the privileges of freedom. The Lord knows I did not want to hold her leash.”

There was a poignant silence. It affected the dog as lurking danger might have. He whined, licked Lewis’s hand, then turned to Austen. Neither of the men took any notice of him, and he sat on his haunches and gave an incipient howl.

“Shut up!” commanded Lewis.

Then from out the silence words came. They were simple enough, but each statement had its black shadow as a tangible thing might have.

“Ted, Mary Carlin was—*is*—my wife!”

That glaring statement stood out against the court scene—the night in the cell. Words merely explained what Lewis was seeing.

“Good God!” he muttered.

“She’s Verity’s mother. I should perhaps have told you all this before. Somehow, I couldn’t. I’m that kind of dumb animal.”

"I knew"—and now Lewis threw his bomb—"that she was Verity's mother. That was why I had to get rid of her, why I thought that it was peculiarly my job."

"Mary Carlin told you that?"

"Yes."

"Was that *all* she told you?"

"Yes, Barney. It nearly knocked me out, but——"

"And you were sheltering Verity?"

"Yes, as *you* have done."

"I see." Austen got up, paced the floor, as was his way when deeply stirred, then came back and faced Lewis grimly.

"I'd like to tell you something of the past, Ted, in order that we may tackle the future together. It's never easy for me to talk when another is involved—it was that more than anything else that shut my lips. It's so infernally impossible to be fair."

Then, while Lewis sat rigid, his hearing, apparently, the only sense in action, Austen laid bare the past. Fiercely holding to what justice he could, he spoke openly.

"She is—she always was—a dangerous woman, Ted; a small cloud to cast such a black shadow, but it is her shifting that makes the trouble. To her, a lie and the truth are indifferent factors. She uses them as they seem to indicate their power to gain her ends."

This bold statement took courage—Austen was dealing with the matter now from Lewis's standpoint and Verity's. He eliminated himself as far as thought went.

"She was once very beautiful. She had that quality of the man's woman. God! how women would spurn that title if they only knew what it means! *Why* are they men's women? Why? Men don't realize themselves until it is too late. She had the power to blind while she worked her spell. When sight came, her power was gone; but her menace, the fear of what she might do, remained. She had risked her reputation with the man afterward known as Delmar. He was Tilden when I knew him. She believed herself betrayed by Tilden and I saw my chance to get her; get what I wanted of her; what I lied about to myself until after I got her. I

had at least bought her gratitude, I hoped, when I saved her name and gave her a home! "God!" Again Austen got up and walked the length of the room and came back. Lewis did not move.

"And then, when Tilden called her, she fled like a cur to its master that had beaten it. She lied about the child—said that it was Tilden's. Everything went smash. When I could crawl from under the débris I came East. The East was my people's home: I made it mine. That's about all, except when, later, I met a woman I wanted for every other reason than the one that held me to my wife, Mary Carlin stretched out her menacing hand, threatened after she had pleaded, and caught me again. Naturally she had been deserted; had sunk lower and lower. I tried to find her at that time; meant to free myself for ever, but she had changed her name. That is one of her tricks. She changes her name with her abode, her mood. It's damnable. But there is always the spark of divinity, I suppose, in the lowest—Mary Carlin loved her child, shielded it, protected it. It was that that compelled me to undertake the course I have followed since that night in the cell."

"How do you *know* it is your child, Barney?"

The words were wrung from Lewis as if mortal agony gave them birth. He meant now to have everything that lay in his power to get.

"How do we ever know truth? When she confessed, in the cell, I doubted at first, but there seems to be, along with the spiritual spark in us, a something that cannot be fooled; something that knows truth—just truth."

Austen bent his head.

"I've got to find Mary Carlin, Ted," he went on, "for Verity's sake. There must be no deeper shadow on the girl's life than can be prevented. That's the hell for us men when we get old enough to see what we've done in our blind passion. We see what we've let others in for. They have to pay our debts."

Lewis leaned farther toward Austen. Slowly he unclasped his clenched hands and reached out.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything to say, Barney”; he faltered. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Only stand by, old chap. I see that you *are* standing by in a rather splendid way—about Verity. I haven’t done you justice. I will clean this thing up, if I can. It is up to me finally, for all my shirking. I am going to Coverly. After that I’ll talk it over with you—the future plan. Trace Mary Carlin if you can. It sounds maudlin, but I’ve got to have the hills. I’ll get my bearings there.”

Both men stood up and shook hands, and Austen strode toward the door. There he paused.

“I had a letter from Verity to-day, Ted. She’s going direct to the Adirondacks. She’s taken the bit in her teeth.”

“Barney, is it Mrs. Warren?” Lewis’s face twitched. “I mean in—your life?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is a hell of a world with its undercuts!” And somehow the words were fraught with comfort.

Soon after Austen departed, Lewis invited his dog to climb into his lap. The creature was absurdly large for such a position, but size does not limit the craving for affection nor the close human contact.

Man and dog looked into each other’s eyes and, unrebuked, the animal moistly lapped Lewis’s face.

“Do you know, old chap, I bet you a marrow bone to a wag of your stumpy tail that there is some way out of this. Good God! Think what he has been through. If there wasn’t some way out, there isn’t a God or what He stands for.”

The dog writhed sympathetically.

Lewis pursed his lips and nodded his head. “*Some* story, or I miss my guess.”

Then, holding Scruff’s head close: “Old pup, you’d better thank your everlasting good fortune that you *are* a pup, fleas and all.”

And while Lewis orated to his dog, Constance, walking beside Verity on the piazza of Five Winds, answered some direct questions, while her steady eyes looked straight before her.

“Constance, is everything all right now that Vance can see?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad. I feared that it was more than anxiety that has changed you so.”

“Am I changed?”

“Yes. You make me think——”

“What do you think?”

“I can hardly put it into words.”

“Try. I want you to try.”

Then so suddenly that Constance started:

“You made me think that you were frightened because Vance saw.”

“Verity!” A vibrating silence followed. Then:

“I suppose there are many kinds of love, Constance, besides the one that counts.”

“There is only one that should ever count.”

“And that one is——?” Verity looked afar into the summer night.

“The one that holds honour!” The words had the ring of clanking chains.

“Yes.” This came fiercely from Verity. “I suppose we all snarl up the matter by calling things love that are not love at all. That’s why it’s so rotten to hold folks when they make a mistake. There’s no other relation between men and women that cannot be ended when you see your mistake, but this one——”

Constance winced at the vague, hot words.

“We should pay for our mistakes,” she said faintly. “We cannot let them slip and run from them. Besides, they may only *seem* mistakes.”

“But living together, Constance, paying *that* way. Oh, good heavens! What good can come of that?” The terrifying frankness of the girl had an electric effect.

Constance had a beaten, tragic look. Every instinct bade her control the situation she was letting slip.

“Unless they both can agree to break the bargain,” she said, limpingly, “the bargain holds.”

“That sort of talk, Constance, is what is making girls like me shy at marriage. It’s too big a risk on such bad terms.”

A laugh, almost sneering, made Constance recoil. She could still struggle weakly.

“Don’t!” she pleaded. “Girls like you are so—so hard to us who have tried to set the standard, have held it aloft in spite of everything.”

“We each must have our own standard. No one has a right to assume that his own is above attack.” Verity sounded as old as the ages.

“But if we have tried, Verity—tried and suffered—doesn’t *that* count?”

“It shouldn’t with the big thing in view.”

“The big thing? What *is* the big thing?”

“Being the best that is in you: not being snuffed out by others and their ideals.”

“Verity, listen. Just listen.—I am not trying to control your thought. I only want to urge you to control it yourself.—But listen to me. In your quest for happiness, independence, and that big thing you feel you understand, don’t make Barney suffer any more than you can help. He has suffered enough—through me.”

So earnestly had Constance spoken that she had drifted from her own self-control.

“You mean—” Verity was aghast. She was terrified by what she had torn the veil from—“you mean, that Barney and you——”

“Yes.”

“Barney and you! I—— Oh! Why have you let it come to this?”

Wretchedness shook Verity. She was dissecting something with fumbling, unskilled hands.

“There was a woman in his life—a bad woman—but he held to his ideal. He couldn’t help it. He is that kind!” The words sounded piteous. “And then I married Vance; we mustn’t talk of that, Verity—only—well, I’m *that* kind, too. The kind that Barney is.”

“And see where all this has brought you!” Verity

drew back. The gesture had power to rally Constance's forces.

"I—I never should have permitted myself to talk so to you," she faltered. "My only excuse is that you frightened me by your recklessness. There has been enough suffering."

"Don't!" pleaded Verity before the pitiless glance of the woman's eyes. "Don't!" Then: "We're doing the best *we* can, Constance, our poor best. If we fail, we still must hold to that just as you have. Oh, you must believe that!"

Verity's face went white. Her eyes grew moist. Her lips trembled.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" she went on, as if *she*, not Constance, had fallen by the way. "How—how *little* you make me feel!"

Constance turned, took her in her arms. "You blessed!" she said. "That's the loveliest thing you've ever said. It isn't true, but the sound of it is heavenly. God bless you, Verity, and keep you always as you are now—trying to find the way. Perhaps you will."

"I don't know." Verity's words came muffled from the shoulder against which she pressed. "I suppose this is what—life means—just trying to—to find the way through it, without hurting our souls too much. But you, Constance—what are you going to do?"

"Go on trying to find the way and not hurting my soul, or the souls of others, too much."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE dignity and reticence of youth—and this applied to both Constance and Verity—held them, after that soul-talk, in a vise-like aloofness.

They seemed feverishly eager to fill every moment of the day with matters destined to separate them from that hour of revelation. Verity, when Constance relaxed, devoted herself to Vance Warren. He laughed uneasily at times and pleaded to be left alone. Sensitive to environment, he resented what he could not understand. When service to Warren was eliminated, Nancy and Jonas were fallen back on.

Long, lonely walks gave both Constance and Verity time for thought, and that presently brought them close again, but without confidences.

“Keep off!” Verity rigidly demanded of herself. “None of your beastly dissecting now.”

“Perhaps I have gone too far,” Constance sadly reflected. “It’s quite possible I may turn the girl from Barney in my efforts to save him from her. Youth is so sensitive and delicate. She has thought of him as exempt; set apart. Can she see him close and human? It’s always so different with our own—the sacred, human emotions.”

A letter from Austen drove Verity, at this time, to her course of going away alone. It read:

Perhaps you had better wait until I come, for after my visit I am going abroad. When I return, Verity, you and I will have a full talk about your mother, your father, your future.

Verity shrank as if a touch had fallen upon an exposed nerve. She did not want to see Barney—she wanted strangers. She’d been torn open enough—seen too much of others’ hidden sores. She wanted to forget certain things,

or at least get used to them, before she gripped reality again. In her sanest moments she planned.

When school was over—another year would round out her school life—she would refuse college.

“I’ll tackle my job myself then,” she vowed; “learn a trade. Anything but this.” By *this*, she meant her contact with Austen’s private affairs. “I’ve been blindfolded long enough. Do folks know *what* they have done to me while keeping things from me? I want my own; to be myself, no matter what that means, and then——”

Verity thought in terms of blasphemy just at that point. Her nerves were ragged from emotion, and Vance, Constance, and Austen played upon them cruelly.

She wanted to run and have a spree, as she called it; a high fling, anything to shake her out of the doldrums. Jane and Jack Terrell and their crowd she believed could save her at this crisis if anything could.

“They never read the minutes of the last meeting!” she thought. “One world at a time for them.”

So she fled. Her abrupt departure was little less than that, but Constance did not resent it, though Vance did.

Constance wanted, when Austen came, to be free, to be herself, to be safe from criticism. Vance recoiled from being left to face the perplexity of his state of mind with Constance and Austen at close range. But there seemed nothing for him to do but play his part awhile longer.

So Verity went to the Adirondack camp and Austen came to Coverly.

By that time Vance Warren was walking about without a cane and seeing life dimly, through dark glasses. He was thin, but there was a suggestion of health and strength about him that had been lacking before. The look of one returning to port, not outward bound.

Constance puzzled Austen. She looked well—she was much in the open, and her skin was sun-tanned and wind-coloured, but she looked—and here Austen drew his brows together—frightened! “All her pretty poem,” he thought, “is being transposed into prose. Her years count, now that

Warren can see. She probably *fancies* what *he* does not mean. A woman would. She'll put notions in his head, if she doesn't look out."

Warren's attitude toward Constance was perfect. Without in any way hampering her, he seemed to *live* only in her presence.

"I wonder if he's overdoing it?" Austen thought, and then damned himself for his ignoble suspicion.

The sweet old home life ran on, with the swift undercurrent ignored. There were hours when Warren rested or sat in the tower room, "scribbling," as he explained.

At such times Constance planned walks on the mountains or went with Austen to the Lower Farm to visit the Goodalls.

"Take Aunt Nancy out, Barney," she often pleaded. "The poor dear is killing herself, nursing Jonas. I'll sit with him while you make Aunt Nancy forget. Make her laugh."

And Austen did his best, for this gave his presence another excuse.

When evening came and the broad door of Five Winds was opened to the west, he, Constance, and Vance would often watch the purple shadows fill the valley. Sometimes Constance brought forth the violin and Warren sang delightfully. Once or twice he read, rather hesitatingly, what he had scribbled in the tower room: fragments of verse depicting Italy as his boyish eyes had seen it while they were, as he had believed, growing dim as death crept near. "Past Dreams," he called them. And there were other bits on "Italy Regained." These scribblings caught Austen's attention.

"You must try to place these things, Warren," he suggested.

"You mean publish them?"

"Yes."

Warren laughed, but his face flushed. "You think there is something in them?" he asked.

"Yes, I do. I'm no real authority, but I always feel that a true cry reaches its goal. Your things please me."

"Thanks."

They all seemed drifting into the inevitable.

A week, ten days, passed. Apparently Austen had seen all that he was ever likely to see. Constance, whatever her inward doubts were, gave them no voice. She was so frankly friendly and, usually, so sunnily happy that Austen accepted anew the gift of her friendship and tried, manlike, to be grateful.

Occasionally they talked of Verity, of her development, her charm, her independence; but Austen refrained from speaking of his trip to England until his last day.

And that last day was one that he and Constance Warren were never to forget.

It was such a day as only the mountains know. A north-west wind swept every cloud from the sky; trees, peaks, and soaring birds stood out sharply against a background of deep blue. A "weather-breeder"—as the wise knew.

At breakfast Constance announced that she was going to look at a piece of land adjoining her own property that was for sale.

"I have too much land as it is," she explained, "but this offers an opportunity. On my property there is a fine stream, on this other land we could build a sawmill, give employment to a great many people, take care of our own lumber, and make building cheaper. If I keep my own land I ought to make it serve others."

"I'd like to see the place," Austen said. "Could we drive to it?" He was considering Warren.

"At the best we couldn't drive nearer than Dakota Gap. There's a hard two miles after that."

"I'm going to burst into verse this morning," Warren said, cheerfully. "Austen has touched my fuse by his spark of approval. I wouldn't take the trip you mention for a great deal. I prefer castles in Spain to factory sites."

"All right. I'll have a lunch put up and Barney and I will be back early in the afternoon." Constance rose briskly. "Shall we walk, Barney, or take the Ford?"

"Let us walk."

At nine they set forth and at twelve ate their lunch at the opening of Dakota Gap. Then, unhampered, went on.

The trail was dim, for the forest was dense; the quiet was broken by voices of birds and trees—the speaking trees. The aspen leaves tapped and tapped as if rain were falling; the pines, souging and sighing, reminded one of the surf on a distant beach; the twittering birds, each in his own tongue, sang, and between the branches of the trees, the warm, direct rays of the sun struck like flaming swords into the fragrant gloom.

“So you really intend to be a business woman, Constance?” Austen was feeling strangely excited—though why, he could not have told.

“I mean to be something, Barney, something definite. It appeals to me, this idea of helping my own people. Of course, I *could* go to Italy with Vance and start something there—help people like him, gifted people who are willing to starve and die for the hope that is in them. One sees so many of them there.”

“But you’d rather remain here?”

“For the most part. Yes, I never realized how deep my roots were planted until now.”

“Of course. And you could visit Italy.”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking that I might have a—well, a kind of studio place over there where Vance could—learn to fly; and while *he* worked I could come home and—work; do such things as this sawmill would make possible. My people are not exactly friendly”—a pause—“but *I* want them to be.”

“I see.” And Austen was seeing a little further than he had the right to see. The arrangement looked sterile enough to him, and he found himself pitying Warren. He set his lips grimly and forged ahead, holding back the lower branches of tree or bush so that Constance might pass under.

Once he noticed, as she lowered her head, the soft curls escaping her close cap. This was unsettling to friendship. At last they came to the rocky, tumbling brook.

“It’s quite ferocious in the spring,” Constance explained, “deceitful little midsummer brooklet! See, there is the

marking of my boundary; let's take to the stepping stones. Heaven protect us from slipping—we're miles from help. We'd have to scramble to that hut over there and wait for a passer-by."

They reached the other side in safety.

"And here's the land they want me to buy. They call it Rocky Lonesome. Isn't that dear?"

There it lay in the full light of the sun—a meadow at the foot of the hills. Constance's land was almost solid rock.

"You see, if there were a sawmill built here, Barney, the logs could come down direct by the cut. They are bringing some down now, I hear, and they have to haul them to a mill ten miles away. We could do all the work on the spot—it would be a great economy."

"Of course." Austen saw the possibilities.

"This would be a fine place, too, for cottages; a good road could easily be made over a short cut to the village. I advise the purchase, Constance. I'd like to go into partnership. I'm taken by the name, too: Rocky Lonesome!"

Austen was thinking of the hold the business would have upon them—it would reinforce her roots; hold her to him and give him—excuses. He started guiltily.

Suddenly Constance turned. Her face was aglow.

"I'm going to do it!" Then: "Barney, it isn't late. I hear the sound of axes, they are working on the hill-top. Let us go and see them."

So up the cut they climbed, hearing, as they drew near, the steady, rhythmic blows of steel on wood.

"We'll go down quicker," Constance said, panting a little. "What time is it, Barney?"

"Three."

"I'm afraid we should not have come. I don't want Warren to worry."

At the summit they came upon a busy scene. Several men were lashing logs together with chains, on runners, while waiting horses stood ready to carry the load down the hill over the steep, rough incline.

"When do you start?" Constance asked the men, and her

eyes were wide and daring. "I'd love to ride down on the logs. Would you be afraid, Barney? I used to do it when I was a child."

"I'd like the experience." Austen kicked the raft with his heavy boot. "It's as solid as a rock," he added. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"What yer might say—nothing," one of the teamsters replied. "Such horses as them can be trusted; they was, as yer might say, fed and nourished on logs."

"Are you driving, Mr. Lake?" Constance smiled up at the speaker.

"I be, Mrs. Warren, and I was driving that time when yer was hauled down for the last time. I ain't never forgot the language the old Senator indulged in when he met us at the foot!"

The man and Constance laughed.

"Well, I'm my own mistress now, Mr. Lake. Come, Barney! Now for a short cut home."

Austen was struck by her sudden high spirits. He had rarely seen her in this mood. It brought her girlhood back to him. It was contagious: he found himself sharing the sense of adventure.

They stepped on the raft of logs and crouched down close together while Lake attached the horses to the raft, arranged the chains in such a manner as would serve as brakes, and then, gathering the reins in his hands, addressed the men.

"You can shet up shop and go now. There ain't no more hauling this year."

"Ain't yer got too big a load, Mr. Lake?" one man asked, scrutinizing the raft critically.

"Oh, not so yer need notice, Jim. There wasn't enough to lay off for another haul. These be well packed and lashed. So 'long!"

The men took the trail back to their camp.

At first the movement of the raft was slow, lumbering, and jerky. Constance laughed gaily.

"About as much danger," she said, "as sitting on a rock."

She looked up at Austen and smiled as if care and perplexity were as foreign to her as to a child.

And then suddenly something happened. No one ever knew what caused the slipping of a chain, but slip it did just when the down-grade was the steepest.

Lake gave a muttered oath; spoke sharply to the horses and, half turning his head, ordered:

“Set! Hold tight.”

Austen mechanically put an arm about Constance and they both clung to the logs on which they huddled.

They did not speak. At first they did not realize what was taking place, but the horses knew and Lake knew. In such an emergency the only hope of safety is for the horses to keep well ahead of the logs. They ran madly, blindly. They kept as near to the middle of the rough road as possible, but even so, the raft swung dangerously, bumped against tree roots, and creaked ominously.

Down, down; faster, faster. Once Constance looked at Austen. Her face was white and drawn.

“Barney!” she faltered, and gave a weak, twisted smile.

Austen drew her closer. He did not smile.

Just below was the clearing; the horses were leaping and plunging. Then with an awful lunge the logs wedged among the trees. Austen and Constance were flung into space and the horses, loosened from the logs but with Lake still clinging to the reins, plunged on.

Overhead the clouds were gathering; among the hills the thunder rolled. Time passed unheeded. Austen and Constance, twenty feet to the right of the road, a few feet from each other, lay like the dead with faces upturned.

It was the splash of rain drops that first brought Austen to his senses. For a few minutes he did not move, but his mind began to work. Some detached part of him seemed to stand aside, watching results, receiving impressions. These impressions came like the taps of a telegraph operator: sharp and decisive. They each meant a definite thing, but they were expressed in code. He recalled the climb up to the summit.

He recalled the "short cut home." That impression gave him some trouble. "Short cut home."

Then he shuddered, sat up slowly. Every movement was painful. He looked about after wiping the moisture from his face and finding, to his amaze, that it was not blood.

Then he struggled to his feet—he *could* stand; he could use his arms—his mind was beginning to function; he was disregarding the taps—taps of the code signals; he resorted to thought. Then:

"My God!" he muttered, every sense alert, quickened, and stinging. "Constance!"

He waited, called again, and then stumbled, rather than walked, ahead.

Upon some underbrush that she had carried with her by weight, and half hid by bushes dripping already with the rain, lay Constance!

Austen, at the sight, rushed forward. Bruises, pain, the fogged brain gave way to the force that concentrated upon the one horrifying possibility. He bent over her; felt her pulse, her heart, then he spoke her name, imploringly.

Presently she looked at him without moving bodily, and whispered:

"Barney! Barney!"

Austen, with some difficulty, raised her and held her against his shoulder. The position, the contact gave her strength.

"It's raining," she whispered, "and oh! Barney! my ankle!"

Austen gently placed her upon the ground and tore off her shoe and stocking. She was pointing to the right ankle. It was badly bruised, it was already swelling, and probably bone or ligaments were injured, for at the touch Constance groaned and flinched.

"I must carry you to the hut," Austen said grimly; "a big storm is breaking. Put your arms around my neck. So! Now then. I'll be as gentle as I can. We must get under cover."

On mossy stones Austen staggered across the brook and reached Constance's land and the woodsman's hut, which

earlier in the day had been pointed out. Inside were a rough bed and some bedding; a table, chair, and a fireplace. There was enough kindling and rubbish to make a fire later on; for the moment, a roof, a bed were all that Austen realized were available. He stumbled forward, placed Constance on the cot, and dropped exhausted beside it.

One thing comforted him: he himself was not seriously injured, at any rate. His bruises were asserting themselves; he felt dizzy and confused—he had probably hit his head against a tree—but he would be able, after a few moments, to act intelligently. The storm was coming down the hills madly, deafeningly. Flashes of bluish lightning ripped the growing darkness asunder; the thunder echoed and reëchoed.

For a few moments Austen crouched by the cot, chafing Constance's hands. She had lost consciousness again, but almost at once she recovered.

"Oh! I *am* sorry, Barney. It's fearful, isn't it? The storm; the accident—where is Lake?"

Austen had forgotten Lake, but at his name a vivid picture flashed before him. He saw the wild, dashing horses; saw Lake clinging, bracing, pitching forward, lurching, but keeping the reins in his hands.

"He never let go the horses. He must have got control, I think. He will bring help. Does your ankle pain?"

"Yes."

"I will bind it up." Austen found a piece of bedding, tore it into strips, and bound the ankle firmly. "It will help until we can go on. I wonder"—with new fear—"if you are injured in any other way? Here, let me see." Clumsily, gravely Austen made a superficial examination.

"Arms seem all right—move them, dear. There's a bad scratch on your neck—it is bleeding a little—does it hurt?"

"No." Under the groping hand Constance lay still, but the pain in her ankle brought the perspiration to her forehead.

"I believe you have been mercifully spared, Constance."

"And you, Barney?"

"I am all right except for a bruise or two."

The storm drowned their voices; the rain leaked through the roof; the darkness deepened, the lightning flashed, sizzled, and, off in the distance, a tree fell groaningly while the thunder snapped, crashed, and rumbled.

Austen raised his voice against the tumult. "If Lake doesn't come soon, I must go for help."

"You must not leave me, Barney. I know what this storm means." Constance reached for his hand and held it.

"Warren!" The name slipped from Austen's lips with its weight of significance.

"You shall not leave me. Vance is safe. He must bear his share."

The words pierced their way into the riot of noises like darts.

"Bear his share! We're all in for it, Constance, but we must end the misery as soon as possible."

"Lake will send help." Constance closed her eyes. She still clung to Austen's hand.

The storm sullenly sank into mutterings and sobs; the rain increased as the wind fell and the lightning ceased. The little brook beside the hut had become a fierce stream and bore upon its heaving bosom small bushes, trees, and mossy stones. The meadow, where some day the sawmill might stand, was a sheet of water, and a dozen rods below—though who was there to know it then?—Lake, a crumpled, dead mass, lay huddled under an overhanging rock! The horses had broken from his hold, had fled, not to the home town, but, maddened and blinded by fear, had taken a side course, and it was daybreak before their mute message was understood by the villagers ten miles from Coverly. But help had come before then to Rocky Lonesome.

Constance and Austen waited in the hut.

Thought, action, speech, became, as the hours dragged on, detached; often unintelligible, then again vivid, startling, and almost shocking. At eight o'clock the damp chill in the room struck to the bone.

"I must build a fire!" said Austen.

Constance let go the hand she held and whispered: "That *will* be nice." Then she laughed—she was growing feverish,

it was difficult to hold steady thought. She was afraid to speak; feared that she might say things *that she had no right to say!* Things that were rising like floods in her brain; things she wanted to tell Austen but *must not!*

The fire, with its light and heat, gave a sense of comfort. It quieted her.

"I'm thirsty, Barney," she said presently. Austen found a tin cup and went outside, just far enough to dip a little water from the edge of the rushing brook.

"Barney!" There was terror in the call.

"I am right here, my dearest!" It had come to that and neither heeded the significance.

The water on her lips roused Constance.

"I'm . . . a great trouble," she whispered. "My head . . . hurts. You"—desperately—"must not let me talk."

"I will hold you—so, dear heart. Lean against me." Austen braced himself and Constance leaned against his bruised and aching shoulder. Even in the pain he felt the glow of happiness that the contact brought.

Then, and it was like a dream, Constance heard—or thought she heard—questions. She did not mean to answer them; she had guarded them well; she must go on guarding them!

But if Austen were dying and she wanted him to go out of life happy, why then it would not be wrong to answer the questions. So she compromised dully.

Only life made answers impossible. Death! Not the quick passing that her father had known. No! She and Barney were drifting; drifting slowly, more and more slowly, out and out.

There was time to answer, if she hurried. When they reached the other side—the Other Side—it would all be right to know. That is what the Other Side was for. Knowing! Only this side mattered because of—of vows and responsibilities that were sacred up to the edge of time—but not beyond.

The flashes of conscious thought were like bridges thrown

over the black chasm that stretched between Austen and Constance; some bridges crashed under them, but some held, and over them they reached each other.

"When you went, I thought you had never cared. A woman knows when she loves—perhaps a man doesn't. I knew and it hurt, hurt horribly. I could not speak—I was trained—not to speak. They—they called that—self-control, character." A laugh startled Austen.

"Don't, beloved! Don't laugh like that," he pleaded.

"And there were other things I wanted to know. Life; life. What life meant, what I meant. That longing was almost as great as love—the craving for love. I was afraid; ashamed of my thoughts. Then I became a coward—I made believe—I went far; far, oh! so far, Barney; and after a while, where people did not know me, I—well, I think something happened. I—I tried to let go, Barney; let go and *know*. But I—I could not. The more I tried, the further back I fell on the old, old training. And then—then—I found Vance. I said—I wanted to make his two years—happy, but there was something else."

"You have told me all this before, dear." Austen tried to still the feverish words.

A movement of the injured foot caused Constance to groan and shudder; she tried to lift herself from Austen's hold, but he tightened his grasp.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "You shall not hurt yourself by struggling."

"It's queer, Barney—I'm not sleeping, but I'm hot and foggy. Do not let me ramble, please."

"Try to sleep, my dear. You are quite, quite safe."

After a time another bridge was thrown across the chasm.

"He—he was wonderful. He made dreams seem true. Italy—Italy, and no one caring how foolish it all was. Just day by day—and such a beautiful dream. Then the two years were gone. I had played God so well——"

"Constance!" Austen commanded. "Wake up!"

"Yes, wake up. I did wake up!"

Silence in the gloomy hut; a dying heart of fire upon

the ashy hearth. Austen gently placed Constance on the mattress and replenished the fire. He made it roar and flame; he stood by it while it gathered force and power. He dared not go back to the couch.

“Barney, come here!”

The voice was calm; even; controlled. Austen’s fear vanished, he went to the bedside and sat down.

“Well!”

“Barney—have I—talked—nonsense? I do when I am feverish; fever loosens my tongue. What have I said?”

“You have told me the truth.”

“No. One doesn’t in fever.” This came piteously, defiantly.

“You have told me the truth!” Austen meant to have that clear.

“You must forget, then, Barney. Forget.”

“That cannot be.”

The heat was stifling; the silence racking to stretched nerves.

“Open the door, Barney. Wide.”

And when the moist, fragrant air rushed in, it brought sanity and healing with it.

After a while the two dared to speak, man to woman; woman to man.

“No one could hold you to such a bargain, Constance. Whatever there was to bind you ended with the two years; with his need of you.”

“He needed me more then, Barney, than ever before, and now he needs me most. He has not wakened; he is one who can live in dreams for ever. He is such a—boy.”

“Then you must waken him. It is your plain duty.”

“He loves me, Barney. Loves me as *he* has created me; he *needs* me.”

“It is a wrong to him. You dishonour him in not giving him the opportunity to be a man.”

“And then, what?” Constance’s white, haggard face confronted Austen. “It is not goodness that holds me, Barney. I am not overcoming temptation, dear. But what *then*?”

“Can *you* ask that, Constance?”

“Yes. Oh, Barney, I *can* ask it of you. Ties cannot be lightly shaken off—you *know that* well, my dear, my dear. You bore your part because you had to, being *you*. Oh, Barney, it is only when you *are* that you can *be*, and you and I *are* as we are—as life has made us. We—we have broken down the bars, dear, but we—have no way of escape; we must go on, on, as best we can. To break away in order to gain my own happiness, even to give you yours, my dearest, would end only one way for us, Barney. We couldn’t do it and find our happiness; to us it would not *be* happiness.”

“We might chance it; others have. You and I have been denied much because we are, as you say, as we are. Has it paid?” Austen spoke bitterly.

“Whether it has paid or not, Barney, I do not know. I’ve got to chance that and so have you. We couldn’t turn our backs—it wouldn’t do any good.”

There was a longer silence. Then Austen spoke irritably. The strain was telling upon him.

“Why, in God’s name, doesn’t Warren start something! Where does he think you are, I wonder? You and I?”

“I—I had not thought about that.” Constance moved, groaned, and fell back. “I only thought of him, not what he might think of me.”

CHAPTER XIX

WHAT had happened at Five Winds House was easily explained.

Until three o'clock Warren followed his usual daily régime when alone.

After a late breakfast he paced the broad piazzas for an hour, revelled in the bliss of seeing "as through a glass darkly," to be sure, the lovely hills and valleys, the fast-moving clouds, the swaying trees. This joy in beholding movement was one of the ecstasies of vision.

Then at noon he went up to the tower room and tried to write; instead, he drew a chair close to the west window and thought. Again and again he came to the same dead wall.

He was awake, poor fellow, but was facing the necessity of feigning sleep. Only by using his dreams as shields could he go on. He must fall upon this shield as truly as any warrior ever fell.

How was he to escape from bondage and, at the same time, leave others free?

For hours Warren beat upon his blank wall. He believed that he had eliminated the poison of old Jonas's gossip, but it still flowed sluggishly under his sadder mood.

His limitations baffled not only him, but others. He might go—but where? That question would confront Constance as well as him. He was still too hampered physically to struggle for existence; not that he specially clung to existence, but if he perished dramatically in his endeavour to do the one and decent thing, what then?

He was no coward, but the Open Door often seemed to him a possibility not to be lightly discarded because of mouthings. What did happy, independent folk know of the bitterness of such a lot as his?

And then Warren thought of Verity. How *she* "mouthed"; how everyone who had not been placed on the rack, or who had not plunged into a trap, *could* mouth! That was the trouble. The safe, the protected, the ignorant had always set the pace and made rules and codes for themselves, and *they* did not need them: it was the other lot—people like him—who could show them a rule or two!

And then, if he *were* able to strike out for himself, would he not make others appear brutal? What remained? If he demanded freedom for himself and Constance, how could it be achieved? What could he do; what could she do to satisfy the bestial code that fixed the toll of freedom?

"Bah! Freedom, justice, decency, common sense—where were they?"

And this brought Warren again to the dead wall.

"And I—I cannot be bought off, damn it!" he muttered; "even if she wanted to do it. A fine figure of a man I am, indeed! Oh, no one need envy me my ease and comfort!"—and now Warren was thinking of old Jonas and what he represented. "That is what they are all thinking even if they dare not speak it as that drunken fool did."

Occasionally Warren's thought turned to his aunt. At least a tie of blood held them. If he could be financed until . . . but Warren flinched from begging—it would amount to that—from one who had begrudged every dollar spent upon him in the past; who regarded Constance as a life-saver and who would, undoubtedly, spurn simple fact and place Constance in a disgraceful position. He floundered on.

"My God!"

At four o'clock Warren got up to walk off his nervous condition. At four-thirty he began to be anxious. Where were Constance and Austen?

He went downstairs, called a servant, and made her repeat the message Constance had left.

"Do you know where the land is that Mrs. Warren went to see?"

The woman tried to inform him, but his own ignorance of the locality made the effort unavailing.

"Have the car brought around," he ordered, and then recalled, faintly, Constance's words about the bad roads, rough climbing. However, when the car came he got in and ordered that he be driven as near the meadow land for which Constance had started as possible.

A young boy drove the car. He was a safe enough driver when all went well, but all did not go well. Where the road ended, the boy discovered that something was wrong with the engine, but he rashly thought that he would "fix" it, if Warren would wait.

The storm was then breaking and, restless and anxious, Warren sat in the closed car, smoked, grew more anxious while the bungling fellow on his back under the machine wrought further damage.

At last he emerged, black, oily, and beaten, only to announce that he would have to go for help, and that the nearest house was three miles away!

"How far is it to that damned pasture land?" Warren asked, angrily.

"It might be a mile or two." The boy resented Warren's attitude; besides, he was afraid of the storm and did not like the prospect before him.

"Is there anything like a road leading to it?" Austen stepped from the car only to realize that the rain had begun in earnest and that the thunder and lightning were gaining force with the minutes.

"There's a plain trail, barring the underbrush," the boy told him, "but you better stay under cover, Mr. Warren. You can't help any way at all by getting killed or something, and this here storm is like to be a regerlar one, by gorry."

"You get on to the nearest house," Warren ordered. "Have the car fixed, if possible. We'll probably need it. I'll go up the trail, and I'll keep to the trail even if I have to find shelter, so when you return, if I'm not here, follow me. Do you understand?"

The boy did, but his words were lost in the crash of thunder that seemed to let loose the deluge. With head bent and hands outstretched Warren took to the trail. It was a mad

thing he was doing but it had the effect of uplift. He felt as he had the day he had knocked Goodall down; a sense of proving his soul. Warren laughed at this.

Presently, breathing hard and drenched to the skin, he paused, took off his glasses, wiped them and put them in his pocket.

Nothing mattered now; at least, details did not. The water on his spectacles made him blinder than he would be without them. His eyes must take their chances, for very definitely Warren felt now that something serious was ahead. His face, pale, set, and anxious, was lifted to the storm. It was only possible to go a few yards at a stretch. Still he *was* going on—on and up. It was easier without the befogged glasses.

As darkness deepened and the trail grew narrower and steeper, Warren stumbled and fell several times. Once he hit his head, and that brought on a dizziness. He never knew how much time that cost him. He was bearing his share as Constance had said he must.

At last he dared to go on. He was, to his own surprise, conserving his strength; he did not intend to complicate matters. This was intuitive, not planned.

When he reached the brook, he was, for a moment, dismayed. How was he to cross? He did not see the hut. He could see, however, by the lightning flashes, a level space on the other side of the rushing water.

“That must be the pasture,” he rightly thought, and stood holding to a tree, calculating his chances if he plunged into the stream. For a few moments blank discouragement overpowered him; then desperation. If he did not go forward, he must go back—he could not stand like an idiot looking at the brook. In the days of his boyhood Warren had been an expert swimmer, but this was no test of skill that confronted him, it was one of endurance, and what endurance could he command—he?

Warren muttered a curse that was a potential prayer.

Presently he made an attempt to feel, with his feet, the depth of the water, but he almost lost his footing. He walked

farther downstream; the uproar and blinding flashes were lessening, but the rain was steadily falling. At each rod down, the brook seemed more dangerous.

At last Warren owned himself defeated and with a groan crawled to the semi-shelter of a clump of bushes and sat dejectedly down.

Again he took no heed of time. He seemed to have come to the end of his resources. He must wait until the boy, with help, possibly, came and picked him up.

But strained nerves and exhausted body conflicted. If he remained where he was he might fall asleep, become unconscious—be passed by! If he went upstream he might discover what he had not discovered downstream; at any rate, he would be moving, be on the trail; and in case anything happened to him he would be found.

So, dripping and staggering, Warren took again to the open.

It was not long after that he smelled smoke. Stumbling, feeling his way, he pushed along; presently he saw a gleam—for Austen had piled the logs high in his distraction—and then, half falling, Warren came to the hut!

“Is that you, Lake?” Austen from within called, and came to the door. “Lake, is that you?”

Warren stumbled around the building, he had approached it from the side.

“No, Austen, it is I—Warren.”

Without a word more Warren staggered inside. The place was comparatively light, for the fire was at its fiercest.

Constance raised herself upon her arm and stared, feeling that again fever was swaying her senses.

“Vance!” she called shrilly. “Not Vance, surely?”

“I’m here, Con, a bit bedraggled, soaked to the skin, but otherwise intact and—here!”

Austen was pulling to the hearth a rickety chair. In a confused, amused way, he felt that he must act the host.

“There,” he said, “take off your coat, Warren, it’s streaming.”

“Vance!”

“Yes, Con, in a minute——”

"Vance, my ankle is broken or I would come to you."

This seemed to clear away much *débris* that none of them apparently were aware of; but there was much remaining!

"I knew there must be something desperately bad," Warren returned. "We must get below, Austen. The car is at the stone wall by the trail."

"We cannot start now," Austen said. "We must wait until we can at least see the trail."

And so they three waited in the lonely hut until the red dawn conquered darkness and storm and crept up the mountainside like a revealing Presence. It disclosed Lake's huddled form to the men who had come from the distant village; it made easy the way to the boy and the man who, not finding Warren in the car, had waited only to mend the break in the machinery and then climbed on.

Warren listened to the details of the accident, and trembled; he made light of his own adventure and laughed gaily when Constance urged him to take the ragged coverlid from the bed and wrap it about him.

Austen spoke but little. He mended the fire and watched for the coming of day. As he watched and replenished the fire, Warren seemed to grow in stature—like a shadow on the wall—as he sat on the old chair.

When the man and the boy reached the hut, they constructed a rude litter and, with Constance on it, began the homeward journey.

On the following day Austen, sitting beside Constance's couch, bent his head before her while he listened.

"Barney, dear, you must go away. I must be free to think; think and think; while I see you, you confuse me; and I must not be confused. Vance does not seem to be here; Vance, as I knew him, has vanished for ever. That *man* who came up the trail to find me is a stranger; he frightens me, compels me to see truth. Barney, I must find truth."

"What *is* truth?" Austen clutched his hands close.

"I—I do not know, dear. I suppose when we find it—or when it finds us—we know. You and I, and such as you and I, have accepted the findings of others too readily. We must

find our own. I've been reading something in Olive Schreiner's *Dreams*. You must read it some day. It is about a Hunter—a Hunter of Truth. All his life he struggled and at last, when he was dying, a feather—a white, soft feather—fell upon his breast."

"A feather!" Austen smiled and shook his head.

"Barney, the feather was Truth and the Hunter knew it."

"Oh, my dear, my dearest!" Austen turned his face to the one on the pillow. "It is all beyond me; quite, quite beyond me. To renunciate stubbornly may *not* be best; to take, take may be worse. However, there is but one thing for me to do, and I am going to do it!"

"Do what?" Constance asked.

"Find the woman who ruined life for me once. She must not ruin Verity's life. There has been too much of spoiling lives."

"You mean—oh! Barney, you mean you are going to—to find your wife?"

The words came gaspingly.

"Yes, if I can. She must not ruin Verity's life. I see that now. Young things like Verity demand truth as much as the rest of us. God knows we should give them that at least, if it lies in our power. While I wanted freedom for my selfish desires, I could deny much. I can no longer take that course."

"And you, Barney, *you*? What of you?"

"I, too, must think and think, Constance."

"You mean to give Verity her father?"

"Yes. A poor exchange for dreams." Austen shook his head.

"No! No! Oh, Barney, you are giving her the blessedest thing on earth!"

"*You* think that, Constance?"

"Yes; and I *know*. Look at me."

Austen turned.

"Can you not see, dear, that if we could slink from duty—snatch what we call happiness—we could not look in each other's eyes as we do now? We are not afraid, Barney, you

and I. We know the difference between reality and dreams, and we are not afraid."

"But we're damnably lonely, my dear."

"No, Barney, not even that."

"And—Warren! Has he wakened yet, Constance?"

Constance raised her hand as if to ward off from her sanctuary even so dear a presence as Austen's.

"I do not know; but I shall never waken him. If he wakens it will be because of something outside of my control."

"And if he dreams on——"

"I shall watch while he dreams. Please, Barney, do not misunderstand, but where Vance and I are, not even *you*, dear, can come."

"I understand. At least I think I do, Constance."

"I shall remember that always until—until you come back, Barney, come—home! Remember that you understand. Some women, some men, could fling off any hold and perhaps for a time find happiness, but, Barney, I believe to all such a time will come when they cannot, knowing all, look as you and I do—into each other's eyes. There are worse things than keeping to the blazed trails, dear. We *must* hold to that."

CHAPTER XX

AUSTEN reached London in September and, with the insufficient data that Lewis had been able to gather for him, set about the task of finding Mary Carlin.

The sense of the hunt is keen in most men, and Austen found a grim interest in the work he had put his hand to. It, at least, filled his waking hours and brought him to the day's close so weary that sleep followed in spite of anxiety and backward glances.

Early in the week after his arrival Austen established two or three important facts, and then they merged into a blurred, confused conjecture, for Mary Carlin had resorted to old methods of procedure and adopted *noms-de-plume* as casually, apparently, as she did new modes of life.

As Mary Carlin she went from the steamer to a certain lodging house in a respectable part of London.

She had remained there but a few days. Restlessness, or perhaps a fear that she was living too luxuriously, drove her forth to a less attractive place. After that she evaded pursuit by her disguises.

Austen, at this stage, engaged professional aid. Selecting a man whom he could trust and respect, he gave what information was necessary, and then waited.

That was the most difficult thing to do. With empty time on his hands he discovered that he was feeling not only worried, but physically ill. He had never got over the shock and subsequent events of that day and night at Rocky Lonesome. He was nervously and physically at low ebb and, as if Fate were but waiting to deal him a harder blow and eliminate him from the scheme of things, he contracted typhoid—the dangerous, walking type, and for a full week felt, as he later

described it, as if he were being wafted through time and space without volition.

He got up, went to bed; he supposed that in between he ate and acted, but he was never clear as to that. He felt elated; wondered why he did not worry about things; had difficulty in recalling just what it was that he should worry about. He concluded that it must be Verity. He thought a great deal about Verity.

Letters came to him and he read them over and over; each time he found something that he had overlooked before. Verity was having a marvellous time in the mountains. Austen laughed at Verity's letters; he wrote to her when he could. He told her once that youngsters like her who had thrown everything overboard had better look and see what ballast they could get to replace it—she had better not sail without ballast.

It's all right to tear down, but what are you and your mad crew building? What are you *giving* while you are throwing away?

Austen wondered what Verity had said to cause him to write like that; but he could not remember and he could not find her letter.

Lewis's letters were balm. They were full of business. Apparently Lewis was taking life seriously. Too seriously. It did not pay to be too serious. He wrote:

Everything is adjusted. It's easier than carrying your load unevenly.

Austen did not understand that, but it gave him comfort to know that someone whom he liked as he did Lewis was finding things easier.

Constance's letters, few but full of tenderness, disturbed Austen more than anything else. She handled so openly the sacred tie that held but did not bind them that he resented it.

No woman has a right to risk too much with any man unless she is willing to bear part of what may happen.

He was thinking of what Warren might demand from Constance's tenderness.

When Austen muttered that to himself, he got up from his chair—he was sitting in his room at the hotel—went to the desk, took all his letters, papers, and valuables, jammed them into a satchel, and then telephoned to the office for a physician. The thought of what Warren might exact maddened him. His head was aching terribly—it blinded him; made his ears ring. The doctor who came to him was, happily, not merely a good physician, but he was a kindly, wise man as well.

Austen talked a great deal to him for some time, by a mighty effort made himself understood, and gained his sympathy and coöperation.

“Of course, if things look fatal, cable here.” Austen handed Lewis's card to the doctor. “If you'll be good enough to write and say I'm off—oh! anywhere will do—on business for a month or so, and cannot be depended upon for mail, I'd be greatly obliged. I do not want any one to come here just now. Then there is this business for which I came over. Please get in touch with this man.” Austen passed over the card of the London detective. “And now, having made myself as complete a nuisance as possible, what do you advise?”

“A hospital, my dear fellow, and you may depend upon me.”

So to the hospital Austen was sent and, promptly, passed through all the stages of the disease. He rather dizzily skirted the edges of black chasms; twice the doctor had a cable ready, twice tore it up and put his shoulder to his task with renewed hope.

In the meantime, several things occurred that greatly concerned Austen, but which he heeded not at all—being absorbed by his ventures near the edge of things.

From one dreary lodging house to another Mary Carlin merged into Flora Dean; then into Susan Reeve; and, lastly Clara Owens. As Clara Owens she was taken, after a dan-

gerous heart attack, to a charity hospital, and there, because an epidemic prevailed and much confusion existed, she was supposed to have died and been buried, at the city's expense, as Claire Owing.

As a matter of fact, Claire Owing was not Clara Owens, as later developments proved; but Clara Owens, if not dead, was, to all intents and purposes, obliterated. The detective resigned from the case.

The physician in charge of Austen was young enough and idealistic enough to be deeply interested in his patient. He took upon himself many duties besides the main one of keeping Austen alive.

He wrote to Lewis and, once, to Constance Warren. He posed as Austen's confidential man—Lewis believed the writer to be a lawyer. He drew upon his all but sacrificed imagination and, with what Austen had confided and the detective had confessed, he constructed a really dependable bridge that bound the past and present, the true and the false, together, and so gave Austen time and opportunity to find his way back to life at his leisure—and he was very leisurely about it—without unnecessary complications.

Late autumn found Austen a mere shadow of himself, but still himself! By degrees he picked up the dropped strands; read a few letters each day, letters that had been piled up during his illness.

“I hope you'll excuse my opening them,” the doctor explained. “It seemed necessary—but you understand that everything is as if I knew nothing.”

“Of course, and I'm no end grateful, Mandville.”

The two men were friends now, not merely patient and doctor.

“Do you believe this Clara Owens *is* the woman I was seeking?” Austen asked one day.

Mandville, feeling his way, replied: “I cannot be sure, the chances are that she is. But does it really matter, Austen?”

“It does.”

“Well, then, while you put the dogs on the scent again, you had better come over on the Continent with me. You can-

not do much by hanging around in this smutty fog, and you cannot go home looking as you look now. Come across and get a layer of flesh on your carcass and a grip on yourself."

So Austen put his affairs once more in capable hands and followed Mandville's advice.

When he could trust himself, he wrote home—wrote as if nothing but business and necessary absence in out-of-the-way places had caused his apparent neglect.

To Lewis this explanation meant that Mary Carlin was giving trouble and eluding search; to Constance it meant that Austen was having a hard and lonely time and bearing it, as was his fashion, silently and, for the most part, alone; it was Verity who puckered her brows and grew thoughtful, so thoughtful that the gay, heedless young people in the Adirondack camp looked at her curiously and began to jibe. That was their antidote for anything that puzzled them—laugh it to scorn!

Verity laughed, too; laughed as boys whistle: to keep her courage up. She was tasting the cup of life, as her associates were, but with this difference: where they gulped and sputtered, she sipped as one does who is enjoying the flavour or, if disliking it, need not get too much. When her companions preached the gospel of "grab all you can and at once, and discard later," she selected, preserving always the right of selection. Her gaiety, beauty, and nonchalant daring made her a delight. She was never afraid to do, or go, but she often turned back with the indifference born of high courage.

"I'm not going to do things I hate just to shock others," she often declared. Then she added: "I like to respect myself."

"Cut it out," her young hostess replied. "Yourself! What is yourself? You're making yourself as you go along, Verity. What you respect *now* won't be in sight when you are fifty."

"Perhaps so," Verity returned, "but at least I can have some sort of plan. Even if I am patchwork, I want to be rather firmly welded together."

"A little more talk like that," Jane Terrell flung back, "and we'll have to save you from yourself."

"Try it out, try it out!" and Verity tossed her head.

It was during this time that Austen's actions, or lack of action, drew Verity's brows together.

Perhaps no quality of her mind was so highly and sensitively developed as loyalty, and Austen appealed to her as no one else on earth ever had—not even her mother who, more and more, was becoming dreamlike and vague.

The years of Bluff End, also, began to press in upon Verity's memory during her gay, heedless summer. She thought of old Ezra as she had not thought of him in years. He had been sacrificed for Austen, but the thought hurt now. Austen had transplanted her, shaking the earth from her roots; old Ezra must have agreed to the wisdom of this, but often as the riotous mob in camp danced and sang and drank until they were dizzy, she pictured Ezra sitting by his cabin door mending nets. God's work!

"When Barney comes home there will be a time of reckoning. He may have my father for me and I will be *fixed*. Then I can afford to go back and pick up dear old Granddad Ezra!"

That craving to belong to someone in a definite, special way often overcame Verity with sick desire. In every phase of her sad little detached life she had always reached forth desperately to secure something, someone for her own, but she had always failed. Old Ezra; the grave of the Unknown Woman; Barney! They all seemed unreal.

"And you have to sacrifice and pay for the luxury," she thought, "and then not get it. I don't like Barney's long silences," she thought on. "If he and I really belonged to each other, they could not happen. He would confide in me or I would go to him."

Letters from Coverly were almost as perplexing, and they brought sharply to Verity that confidential conversation so like reading another's letters. Constance, after her accident, was confined to the house; her ankle in a plaster cast held her like a trap.

But she wrote as if she and Verity had never looked into each other's souls, and this irritated the girl.

"People have no right to dump their confidences upon you

and then shove you off as if you were a nosey little thing that had to be put in her place.”

But she was, at the same time, grateful for the detachment. The recital of the night in the cabin, as Constance told it, had thrilled Verity. Vance Warren's part was heroic. It gave food for thought. Constance wrote:

Vance will not let me praise him. He wants to know if I expected him to hang about like a cat. One never knows what he expects of another—really.

With that Constance changed her thought.

“I wonder what rôle Barney acted that night?” mused the girl, rereading the letter. “I bet Barney wasn't skulking. What a mess!”

Somehow the letters of Constance made Verity feel lonelier than she had in years. “More like a poor relation,” she said, and smiled wanly. “Take, or leave alone.”

In her determination to hide her true state of mind—strangle it if she could—Verity went to great lengths.

And while the game went on, Mary Carlin drifted from one dreary lodging house to another, then to the hospital where she, to all intents and purposes, became dead and done for. Loneliness at last amounted to despair. She even contemplated suicide. “I cannot seem to die regularly,” she sobbed in her lonely, grim rooms. “Why not?”

There was no reason. But she clung on.

The power to make friends had long since departed from her with her poor little lures of beauty and sex. The lack drove her in her shame and weakness to a craven humility—she tried so hard to win a little pitiful attention and liking that she repelled people.

When she left the hospital she frequented cheap theatres and tea houses. She was glad to be with people on any terms. When strength failed her she read fiction. The sex novels did not move her, but she read them in greater numbers, wondering; wondering why *she*, she of all women, could not under-

stand; why they sickened her. Then she began to count her money; her bank book was always with her and she drew smaller and smaller sums, fearing, fearing.

On Sundays she went to church. She was near people there, and Sunday was such a terrible day to be alone. She heard words which in the past she would have laughed to scorn; she heard hymns and caught the thought; the music carried the words deeper, for Mary Carlin had an ear for music and once she had sung.

Always, always during the desolate, dreary time she recalled Verity as she had seen her rushing to Austen in the railroad station. The memory became an obsession. The beauty, the aloofness of the girl had all but driven away the memory of the little waiting child who used to nestle in her arms. Her baby seemed dead. Night after night Mary Carlin tried to resurrect the baby-thing that was, or had been, her own; but instead that tall, fair, eager girl stood guard, pushing, pushing her away into outer darkness and never looking. Just pushing, and then going on.

At last Mary Carlin, passing through her various assumed names and so eluding Austen, became a victim of such fear as she had never known. She was afraid of life and death; afraid of the day; terrified by the night.

She used to leave the door of her wretched bedroom open and listen for a step, a word—even a deep snore that gave her a sense of human nearness.

At last she began to barter and trick her conscience.

“What difference can it make to them where I am? If I hide, keep out of their path, why should they banish me? I could live cheaper back home—I know how.”

The yearning for America became sickeningly intense, and she, who had no home, no welcome, prayed for strength to go back—to nothing.

Then Mary Carlin—she had now become Jean Fancher—wrote to Anna Thomley in Philadelphia and poured out her soul on six sheets of paper.

She confided almost everything; repeated; reiterated. She harked back to years when she and Anna Thomley had danced

and pranced together on brittle surfaces; had held each other up and, when necessity demanded, had brought each other to semi-safety after accidents. In those days it had been in Mary Carlin's power to help often and, to her credit, she had not been niggardly. She drew this to Anna Thomley's attention.

Mrs. Thomley read, reread, and digested the epistle and gathered her own conclusions.

"I paid back everything I owed her when I fed and clothed her child for years with little or nothing coming in. We're quits, all right." Anna Thomley sniffed. That being discarded, what next?

Anna Thomley was keeping a lodging house, and body and soul together, at the same time. While outwardly respectable, she was constantly alert as to side issues. She had the strain of an adventurer running in her blood but was too cowardly to take chances. Her mind was a ferret mind; she never gave up anything until she ran her quarry to earth, but she travelled as the mole does, under cover.

She knew all about Austen, Verity, and Lewis; she had even scented the Warrens' trail, and she had enough imagination and cheap dramatic instinct to gloat over the situation.

"God! how they would hate to have the spotlight turned on them!" she thought. Her own lantern was a dark one, but in Mary Carlin she saw another possibility at last.

So she wrote a kind and genial letter to her old friend and invited her to visit her. Then she went on:

There's that old house on the Massachusetts coast—the Barnacle, I call it. It is furnished, boarded up, and in fair repair; it's at your service. You could eke out a living there, once you got on your feet, and be as safe from spying eyes as if you were in Africa. I shall never return there. I cannot rent it or sell it. As Mrs. Fancher no one would suspect you.

Anna Thomley, believing Austen had acted for the Delmars, wrote on:

They all pulled the hole in after them when once they took steps. You've kept pretty mum about your part in the big sale, but I sup-

pose you have some money, though you never were good at driving a bargain. You should have consulted me before letting that young Lewis fellow buy you off.

As for Delmar, he deserved all he got, but Lord! a woman who went to the lengths you did can't name a price.

When the Thomley letter reached "Mrs. Fancher," she was torn by emotions. Would she be less lonely in the deserted house than she was at present? Must she always grovel and hide and know the horror of loneliness? Must she at last be found dead?

That was the crowning fear that haunted her.

And then the thought of the place where Verity had lived and waited lured her magically. Perhaps she could recall her baby-child there—if she never, never tried to reach out to that wonderful, swift-moving girl *who was not hers!*

At this juncture Mary Carlin vowed, to whatever stood in her as conscience, that she would keep to her promise to Lewis. She had never been more keen, but she had a right, so she temporized, to choose her hole to die in.

And so Jean Fancher went back to what she miserably termed home.

At first Anna Thomley seemed like a rock in a weary land. She was friendly and comforting and, in order to shield much, Jean Fancher declared that Verity *was* Delmar's child and that Austen was acting in the Delmar interests. Always the lie and the truth were resorted to as need arose. And this seemed the easiest way.

"They must pay him a princely sum for what he's doing," Anna Thomley explained. "He acts like the girl was his."

"I guess they do pay well," Jean Fancher admitted, hungering for news.

"They might be induced to pay more," Mrs. Thomley suggested, but at this Jean Fancher quailed.

"I am not ever going to take that course." She bridled as she spoke. "That's ended."

"I suppose you'd rather starve?" Anna Thomley sneered.

"Yes, I would. I was *mad* when I shot Delmar."

From that time on the friendliness dwindled to indifference then to positive rudeness.

"If you're so proud and mighty, you'd better pack off to Bluff End and see what you can fish as a living," Anna Thomley said.

"Very well, Anna, I can at least try—and if the fishing is not good, there'll at least be plenty of water."

"I haven't any feelings to be touched, my dear." Anna Thomley tossed her head. "When a woman's sensations get dulled she cannot be sentimental. If you ever want advice——"

"I don't! I only want peace."

And so Jean Fancher, with her bags and shabby trunk, made her lonely way to Bluff End, and upon leaving the boat came upon Ezra mending nets by his cabin door.

There were many nets awaiting his attention, for it was early spring and the winter had been a hard one. Ezra, a bit dimmer of vision, but strong and hale, gazed up suddenly and saw a stranger at his gate.

"Can you tell me"—how desperately weary and thin the voice was—"how I can get my trunk and bags to a cottage called the Barnacle?"

"Why"—and here Ezra stumbled forward—"the place is plumb empty and shet."

"Yes. I've hired it. I am going to open it. I'm going to stay there."

Ezra got active at once. This was but another net to mend.

By night the yellow house was partially opened, a fire lighted on the long-empty hearth, and some bedding aired; food obtained.

"And now," Ezra explained when at sunset he turned his face toward home, "just set forth a call if you need a haul. We ain't overflip with tongues on the Bluff, but our hearts are willing."

Jean Fancher thanked him with trembling voice. "I did not know such as you lived," she said.

"I'm common enough breed, ma'am," Ezra replied, as he

laughed his cracked laugh. "The Lord Almighty made a lot of us and scattered us plentiful."

"Not along my way." Jean Fancher put forth a thin, hot hand.

"Maybe, ma'am, you wasn't looking for 'em," Ezra returned, and went chuckling away.

CHAPTER XXI

THE new tenant of the Barnacle was certainly a peculiar person. She excited some interest and a good deal of sympathy, but eventually was taken for granted, as was Bluff End's custom with Off-Enders, whether they drifted in from the sea or travelled afoot. It was the code of hospitality to accept them. They were left alone to live their lives, or sleep their endless sleep.

When the days were warm, Mrs. Fancher walked abroad, smiled, if any one looked at her, made no demands, and apparently expected nothing.

Milk, eggs, and other necessities were left at her back door, if she did not respond to the knock, and she always paid promptly.

When night fell the wooden shutters of the Barnacle were closed, but these shutters had in the upper half quarter-moon slits which looked like raised eyebrows; through these slits the living-room light shone forth, far on toward morning, testifying to the presence of the mistress.

Old Ezra, on his long, wind-swept walks, grew nervous about the closed shutters and the lights.

"Looks queer!" he muttered, and drew his old pea jacket closer about him. Ezra rarely walked by day, but night had always charmed him.

"Seems like I oftener come upon Him walking by the sea when night falls," he explained if any one questioned his lonely rambles. "God seems terrible near under the stars, and there be times, when the storms rave, that I can almost hear Him say, 'Peace, be still.' More than once I've watched the sea flatten out and the wind drop, for no reason whatsoever but His command."

And if Ezra did at times find Him by the sea, it was to

good purpose, for holy thoughts came to the old man; it was like communing with the God he knew, not merely knew about. And since that God has only the hearts, heads, and hands of men to use for earthly interpretation of His wishes, Ezra was chosen for special work.

It came gradually to the lonely man that the woman in the yellow house had not *happened*, but had been *sent*. He did not ask any questions, once this idea presented itself to him: he accepted it. In due time he would know why; he told what to do. Then, as if it had no connection with the stranger, Ezra thought of his money. This astonished the old man, but he could not disentangle the two thoughts. Money! The Stranger!

"It is growing mightily," he muttered, and shook his head, thinking of his money; "but what is one to do if he cannot spend it?"

With food and shelter provided by a generous God, with neighbours supplied with all they required, with the church long since closed, what was an honest man to do with money?

"Why, it fattens on itself," poor Ezra thought. And then the stranger loomed over the worrying hoard.

The captain of the Boston boat attended to Ezra's financial affairs, and every time he landed he discussed matters with his old friend.

"You might give yourself some luxury," he once suggested. "You ain't got any one to leave your money to."

Ezra scratched his head.

"Luxury?" he thought. "What *is* luxury?"

He mulled that over for a week, then ordered an extra suit of clothes, two pairs of boots, several pounds of tobacco, and six jars of broken candy.

"Them is all the luxuries I can think of," he chuckled; "a little more of everything I have; a feeling that I've got more than I need—and the candy, being hard and lasting, will keep my jaws busy. This, I reckon, be luxury."

But still the money fed upon itself and swelled the bank account.

"I just can't throw myself at Mrs. Fancher's head," Ezra

ruminated one night on his stroll, "and while she's pleasant-looking for all the damage done her face, she ain't what one would call welcoming."

But the Lord was looking after the details of Ezra's piece of work, and one day—it was a hot August day—he came upon Mrs. Fancher by the grave of the Unknown Woman.

That grave had become during the years an altar to Ezra. Long since he had had a stone erected—that had relieved him of a little of his money—and on it was carved the original words and, as near as he could recall, Verity's also. The stone-cutter had marvelled at the jumble, but Ezra declared that since it was his money that was to pay for the stone, he meant to have it as he wanted it:

Here lies an Unknown Woman
Washed ashore December——
My Mother.

Dates, being non-essential, were omitted.

Ezra always approached the grave reverently and with bared head; he planted flowers near it; kept the stiff grass close-cut, and had placed a rough seat near by, where often he sat and smoked and thought of little gal Verity.

And there, that hot August day, he came upon Jean Fancher. She looked up at Ezra, smilingly.

"Do you mind?" she asked. "This seems such a pretty place—someone loves it; takes care of it."

Ezra with rare dignity lifted his old cap and stood leaning on his cane like a benign and friendly pilgrim, glad to share his shrine with another.

"It is all that, ma'am," he said. "And you be more than welcome to the spot."

"The—the words, I cannot understand them. Perhaps you will explain."

Jean Fancher looked friendly and, as her scarred cheek was turned away, she seemed almost pretty and certainly much younger than Ezra had supposed her to be.

"I'll be glad and free to explain," Ezra said and came

nearer. "It began with a poor, lonely little soul, as I called little gal Verity. She was that starved and longing that she took the dead and made it hers."

Jean Fancher thought that she was dying. Her heart, which menaced, but which would not cease its beating, for a moment seemed to have given up the struggle.

Had Ezra been less preoccupied he would have heeded the white, deathly face; he would have stopped his rambling story in dismay, but his far-off blue eyes were turned away from the stranger and she had time to sink into blackness, emerge, and draw a deep sigh, while the old cracked voice, sometimes chuckling, often tear-choked, ran on and on.

"There be times even now, ma'am, when something in my heart tugs for her, but I mind how I gave her up, first and last, when she needed me no more, as a proof that I cared for her that deep and true that I wouldn't hold her back for the selfishness in me that besets me still at odd moments. It's comforting to know how I could do that for her. You see, ma'am, there be some fitted by Almighty God for the open sea, and others for the nearer waters. She was made for the big places outside the bar. If she drifted back close to shore for any reason, who knows? It's the nearer waters as does most damage to deep-sea craft. What with tossing them hither and yon and dashing them agin the bar, it's more than likely to strain their timber, if it don't eternally wreck 'em. I've seen many a bark shattered in my time, due to the wrong idea of duty, or selfish holding, or what you please to call it. I ain't ever held anything back, please God, but I have tinkered on weak spots and lent a hand at pushing off, when the time came."

Jean Fancher was hardly listening, but something of all that was being said surged over her, retreated, but always left a bit that, later, she would be able to hold and cherish.

During her few days with Anna Thomley in Philadelphia she had tried to get the woman to talk, to tell her of the days that Verity had been in her care. But Anna Thomley either had a bad memory or thought the demand sentimental and futile. She had been more interested in Verity's paternity,

the possibility of making fresh demands upon Austen, via Lewis.

Jean Fancher sat rigidly now, drinking in old Ezra's words; struggling against the faintness that numbed her and left her panting, but through which dropped, like blessed rain on a perishing flower, the things she wanted to know.

"Does she never come to see you?"

At last words were possible and they were weighted with fear; hope; desperation.

"No, ma'am, she don't ever drift in, and like as not she's forgot; and I ain't holding that against her, either. A cargo of dead matter ain't no fit cargo for a far-reaching journey. Some one or nuther done great harm to little gal Verity before she came here—I feel sure and certain of that, ma'am. She was deserted and set adrift, I take it, and when one came and rescued her, tugged her to a safer port, it ain't likely I'd send a call after her."

"Don't, don't!" Jean Fancher raised her thin hand; she seemed warding off a physical attack.

"Ma'am!" Ezra now looked at his companion; was shocked at the blue-white face, the purple lips.

"You are ill, ma'am!"

"Only—weak. I am getting better all the time. I must go now—go back to the cottage."

"May I help you, ma'am?" Ezra stretched forth a bony, strong right hand.

"Yes." And holding to Ezra, Jean Fancher made her way slowly to the yellow house.

"I'm wondering, ma'am," Ezra asked, as he was about to leave the cottage, "if you're just naturally shy or wrongly unfriendly?"

"Oh, not unfriendly—not that! I'm desperately lonely, but——"

"Perhaps, ma'am, you'll let me come, now and then, and set with you between the daylight and dark. It's then that I set out for my walks. And—" Ezra paused—"I don't like the idea of your being shut away when night falls. I'm studying this way about it. Mightn't it be safer for you

to leave the door ajar while the weather's fine and, should you need help at night, set a light in the north window of the cottage? I could see it from my house and fetch help. There be kind and friendly souls on the Bluff, ma'am, but they're not given to showing off their wares. You are safe, ma'am, with us. We are a God-loving, not a God-fearing, folk."

Jean Fancher bowed her head.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'll do what you suggest. Thank you."

And so it was that old Ezra became the one vital thing in Jean Fancher's dull life.

She lived through the long hours for that time, between the dark and the light, when Ezra came. Storm or purple gloaming against a golden west, Ezra Taber made his way to the yellow house. Often he would urge Jean Fancher to stroll on the hard sandy beach when the tide was low; over and over he related the doings of little gal Verity to her, who listened breathlessly, silently, thus flattering him, poor, faithful old soul.

Sometimes, when the night boded no good to sea or shore, Ezra remained longer with the sick woman and comforted her by singing, in his sweet, cracked voice, hymns whose words were to the old man little less than God's own messages.

"Jesus Lover of My Soul" was Ezra's favourite, and presently the words and tune found their way into Jean Fancher's consciousness. She listened to Ezra's interpretation, smiled, grew tear-dimmed often, and whispered: "That's beautiful."

One night the furies descended upon Bluff End; the surf beat and roared; the bar moaned and the wind drove the sand in clouds and laid the stiff grass flat.

There was a fire on the hearth of the Barnacle; Jean Fancher crouched before it and shivered; Ezra paced the room as if it were the deck of a battered ship. He was singing, and at intervals he stopped, spoke explainingly, and bade the shuddering woman to remember that God was there.

"Them is only the nearer waters, ma'am," he said. "I reckon that out beyond the bar it is peaceful and safe."

“But we are here!” Jean Fancher moaned; “here—and the danger is here.”

“Guide me, oh! my Saviour, guide,
Till the storm of life be past,”

chanted Ezra as he walked to and fro seemingly forgetting the crouching form by the fire.

“Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.”

And then, by the magic of a power over which Jean Fancher had no control, she called:

“Come here. Sit close—I want to tell you—something!” Her secret burst from her; she lost control and she told much—not all. Told of her own wrongdoing, her suffering, her desperate state. She mentioned no names; swept wide of Verity. What Ezra gathered was that a sad and wrecked Magdalen had drifted to Bluff End and that God demanded of him justice and mercy in her behalf.

“I—I swore to trouble them no more,” the woman moaned, “but what am I to do? God will not let me die. I am afraid to live. Oh! what shall I do?”

Ezra came close, placed his hands upon the back of a chair, and lifted his face as if listening; waiting for orders.

He was seeing the scene of long ago; the woman at the feet of her Saviour.

“Sin no more!” The words were like an echo of what rang in Ezra’s ears. The howling wind drowned the gentle, wavering voice.

“You must bide patient till the truth comes to you,” Ezra droned on. “He is mindful. It remains to be seen what He has in store for you. At evening, there shall be light!” The words ended triumphantly and then: “See, ma’am, He has sent a sign and a symbol. Behold!”

The wind, with a last wail, fell pantingly; the surf lessened its thundering and, off in the west, the clouds broke,

revealing what seemed to be a glimpse into a city of gold and purple.

Jean Fancher, crouching, shuddering, glanced up. Then reached forth a trembling hand.

"It is beautiful," she murmured, "beautiful." And she smiled.

"Are you—poor?" Ezra spoke calmly and the woman, held by the beauty of the western sky, replied faintly:

"Yes."

"They bought you off, I take it?"

"Yes, they thought they *bought* me off. But I was not bought—I gave!"

"Then, ma'am, there must be no turning back."

"I do not understand." Jean Fancher's eyes fell away from the radiant pathway; she seemed to fall back to the coming night with its chill and loneliness. "I do not understand."

"A vow be a vow," Ezra explained. "But it is as I suspected, ma'am. You was sent to me that I might care for you till such a time as the Almighty needs me no more."

"What do you mean?" Jean Fancher lifted her blanched, scarred face. Because life had been to her what it had been, she shrank back in horror.

"Oh, I cannot!" she groaned, and then she gave a mad laugh—a laugh that had its roots in the ugly soil where men bartered for women and women sold themselves.

But Ezra's eyes were calm and his ears caught not the sound of scorn and despair. He was puzzled, his fine old face softened in pity.

"What do you mean?" Again the woman put her question, but she ceased her mocking laughter; her eyes clung to Ezra's.

"That what I have is the Lord's." Ezra spoke slowly, as one might to a child who is learning a foreign tongue; and indeed he was nearer the truth than he realized. "That's what I mean, just that. I clothed and often fed little gal Verity, and while I done that the Lord had His way with her. I've stood by many a wrecked seaman, in the Almighty's

name, offering the money like it was a life line, to help 'em to the harbours where they would be. So, ma'am, I offer you what you need, biding the time when the Lord takes things in His own hands."

Ezra spoke austerely. He looked steadily upon the uplifted face, on which surface expressions drifted, at first like light clouds, then dark clouds; then complete blankness.

"I did not know that such a thing could be!" Jean Fancher breathed the words on departing doubt.

"The ways of the Lord passeth understanding," Ezra suggested.

Outside the storm was hushed; the rift in the darkness had closed, but the stars were breaking through, and a wan moon gave a ghostly gleam where the drifting clouds were thin.

"And now, ma'am, since all danger is past and gone, I must leave you. There will be food and drink day by day; there will be wood and what not for your needs. Accept them as sent by God."

Ezra straightened his bent shoulders as if shifting a new and sacred burden upon them. Then he smiled his beautiful smile upon the woman still seated on the hearth, hands clasped, scarred face raised in awe.

"Heaven bless you, Ezra Taber," Jean Fancher whispered as if in prayer. "I—I cannot understand, but I am no longer afraid. I feel safe."

"And so you are, ma'am, safe."

CHAPTER XXII

LEWIS'S affairs were ruffled enough in some respects, but he found solace in a most unexpected quarter.

Aunt Jane came to the surface in an amazing and breathtaking way.

After all her years of submission, first to her brother's mandates and then to her sister-in-law's, the quaint old lady suddenly realized that she had a safe little income of her own and, unless she had been hopelessly crushed, she might rise to heights of independence and self-expression never attempted before.

She was very much frightened and wildly excited, but a new light came to her patient eyes and strength to her gentle lips.

When she had bidden Lewis good-night after his reading of the riot act, something rose within her. All the unrecognized desires of her nature sprang to life. "Sprang" was a rather strong word; rather they limped, pathetically, to the fore and refused to be downed.

The hardness and injustice that she had borne herself she had tried to believe her Master's will, but she revolted in Lewis's behalf.

"God may have demanded that I should bear my cross," the dear soul pondered, "but I never can believe He demands that I stand by and see *this* outrage."

So she flew her first signal.

"Sister-in-law, I am going to see Theodore."

Mrs. Lewis turned, as if on a pivot. Her code included the loyalty of others to her far-reaching dictates.

"See him—where?"

"I'm going to his rooms."

"Jane! This is, from every point of view, indecent."

"All the same, I am going." Jane looked like a mutinous kitten.

"Perhaps"—sarcastically—"you contemplate taking rooms yourself in which to entertain friends unfit for your home. Jane, are you mad? Cannot you see that if Theodore is to be brought to his senses you and I must stand as one?"

Jane took up, in order, the items of this tirade.

"If it becomes necessary for me to seek other quarters," she said demurely, "it can be done. Our lawyer tells me that my income is eight thousand a year. I could cut down foreign missions and have rooms, if the worst comes to the worst. As for friends, I'd like to make a few new ones. The ranks are thinning. I'm not mad, sister-in-law, and I do not think you have any right to try and control Theodore. As to us standing as one, that is plain foolishness, and I do not intend longer to act as if I were a periwinkle!"

The climax was absurd but dramatic. Periwinkle took on the aspect of dire evil.

"Jane! Periwinkle! What *is* the world coming to?" Mrs. Lewis sank into the nearest chair. She had all the appearance of having been crushed under an avalanche, or flattened out by a steam roller. "If you take this step you do it at your peril," she gasped.

"I am prepared for that." Jane Lewis remained standing. Whatever had descended, she was safe for the time being.

And that very day she went to Lewis's apartment. In her ignorance she planned a dramatic scene, and her ignorance obtained for her what experience might have failed to procure.

She, all aflutter and dressed in her daintiest, presented herself at the house office and smilingly asked if she might see Mr. Lewis.

"He's not in, ma'am." The man at the desk looked interested and Aunt Jane grew communicative and intimate—she saw she must, as she mentally put it, be diplomatic.

"Of course! How stupid of me, but you see I am his aunt

—I wanted to surprise him. I've come from a—a distance"—and so she had, dear soul; she was quite breathless from her travel. "I thought—well, perhaps you can let me in!" This came triumphantly.

The man turned to the key rack. He was overpowered. It was an hour later when he realized, fully, what a chance he had taken.

"Here's Mr. Lewis's key, ma'am. He always leaves one in case the dog needs attention."

"Dog!" Aunt Jane exclaimed.

"Dog, ma'am. A kindly, patient animal named Scruff. The creature wouldn't hurt anything."

"Oh, I'm not afraid! I'm only glad. You see——"

Aunt Jane almost confided to the man a scene long past when Theodore Lewis had smuggled a homeless cur into the home of his father and had wept nearly all night when the poor beast had been ejected.

The elevator made Aunt Jane a bit more breathless.

"If you should let go of that rope," she gasped, "what would happen?"

"Nothing," the man comforted.—The elevator boy had overheard much of the conversation at the desk and was surprised at what was taking place.

"Young people take great chances these days," Aunt Jane said, vaguely.

Having deposited his fluttered passenger in Lewis's rooms, and having bade Scruff "mind his manners," the coloured boy took himself off and, regaining the street level, remarked to the desk man that the "queer party" had no luggage.

"That she ain't!" The man at the desk was beginning to doubt the step he had taken.

"They be up to all kinds of tricks"—this darkly from the boy.

"Keep an eye out!" said the man, and prepared to do likewise.

But it turned out amazingly—this move of Aunt Jane's—for all concerned except Mrs. Lewis.

Lewis himself was deeply moved, and when he heard how

his aunt had gained admission to his rooms, he laughed delightedly and tipped rather wildly.

A new era broke in Jane Lewis's life and she met it tremblingly but triumphantly. Her imagination was fired, and at times she flushed at her own shameless thoughts. By eliminating Lewis *as* Lewis the affair took on an air of debauch.

"A key to a gentleman's rooms!" Aunt Jane fluttered; and oh! the bliss of messing about the absurd kitchenette and producing dainties and storing them away in the tiny ice box.

"I declare," Lewis remarked boyishly, "I feel like Mother Hubbard's dog—only there is always something on the shelves."

Scruff soon became Aunt Jane's abject slave, and it was a sight that Lewis never tired of telling about—the sight of Aunt Jane sewing at his west window with Scruff's nose buried in her skirts.

"I'm sure, Theodore," Aunt Jane said one day, "I do not see what your mother expected. No one to sew on buttons; no one to mend your socks. I suppose she overlooked that."

"I suppose she did." Lewis beamed on the little figure in the chair—he had bought a small rocker for her, the best he could find. "Buttons and socks do not figure largely to Mother in the face of grave danger."

"Theodore, don't speak lightly of your mother."

"Heavens! I should say not, Aunt Jane."

Sometimes Lewis, at the day's end, would find the little lady ready to depart, but wistfully lingering.

"Now, my dear," she would say, "you must let me go, indeed you must. I've had a wonderful day; wonderful, but young gentlemen cannot be bothered or pestered with old ladies."

"You're to stay on!" Lewis would say. "I want to take you out to dinner. I want to ride on the bus with you. I want to chin."

And such dinners as they had in the most unbelievably delightful places—and the rides on the bus! Bobbing and wobbling on a top seat, held in place by Lewis's firm arm, the stars near and friendly and the shameless lovers close by,

bringing a blush to the delicate cheek, Aunt Jane was lifted to the only heights she had ever known.

And then one night Lewis spoke some of the innermost secrets of his heart to this small, starved woman who had been strangled by a dead hand from which he had escaped, and to his amaze Aunt Jane seemed to understand.

"Oh, my dear boy!" she whispered, wiping her eyes furtively. "I hope you will never let any one cheat you of the best that life has to offer."

Lewis expanded; skirted nearer the personal.

"Dear son"—here Aunt Jane looked about apprehensively—suppose any one were to hear her!—"I—I gave up one I loved. It's an old story, the giving up of a beloved one for one who has no right to command. The suffering is all on the wrong side, my dear. I was so pretty and the—the family expected such big things of me—and then I faded and disappointed them, and they did not stand by me. The man I loved would have stood by! He married later—men can, you know—and I used to stand outside his house when no one was watching, just for the chance of seeing him. I saw him; saw his wife—a brave, fine, upstanding woman she was—and I saw, in time, little faces pressed against the glass, waiting for him. Sometimes I fancied how it would be if I went up the steps with him and met his family, he not remembering. I grew to love his family."

"There, there, dearie!" Lewis drew her close. "It's hell that they hand out to us in the name of Duty! Good God! I'm free at last, and I have you, Aunt Jane."

"Say that again, Theodore!"

Lewis repeated it.

"I—I pity your mother, Theodore."

"So do I, Aunt Jane."

It was after one of these sacred evenings that Jane Lewis confronted her sister-in-law. Loyal to the heart's core, she never gave up the hope of re-uniting Lewis and his mother.

"I've been to Theodore's to-day," she began; "he's all right, sister-in-law."

Mrs. Lewis laid down her book of sermons.

“What do you mean by ‘all right’?” The question and the look flattened Aunt Jane.

“And that dog—Scruff is his name—is such an intelligent and friendly creature.”

“Don’t be a fool, Jane. And do you suppose if anything were wrong Theodore would let you see it?”

“But there *couldn’t* be anything wrong!” The small, defiant woman across the room stood at bay.

“Wait and see!” This ominously and on a hard laugh. “A nice figure you will seem in that day, Jane. A trouble-maker in the family is a dangerous person. I have confided in our rector. He is to talk with you.”

“I shall refuse to be talked to!” Jane flared courageously. “I have taken my stand.”

“And I mine. I shall not leave the city. I shall be here when the sword falls.”

And so they sweltered in the hot city.

Lewis took small heed of the passage of time. He worked hard, gave a great deal of attention to Aunt Jane, and, in strangely calm fashion, was happier than he had ever been.

Verity’s letters—and she was a prolific letter writer in an erratic way—gave him food for much amused and sardonic thought. The girl poured her opinions upon him without restraint.

“Just as if I were some damned priest,” Lewis profanely sneered. “I want her confidence, but I’m no confessional. There are limits.” But apparently Verity did not observe them. Still, through those frank epistles Lewis learned to know the girl as he might not in any other way.

He paced the stifling city streets and felt nearer to Verity than ever before. Sometimes, absent-minded, often stumbling, he regarded the other pacers of the night streets, men and women; occasionally causing others to regard him—thinking, thinking! Sometimes he longed to speak to them, ask them what was “getting” them, but he never did. He simply strolled until he was weary; often he sat until late on park benches—thinking, thinking! He was deeply, absorbingly in love with Verity.

“I seem to have had a hand in bringing her up,” he mused; “sort of trained her.”

He pictured the little girl Verity, shy, so piteously anxious to please, so loyal and strong. This picture merged into the tall, reedy girl going away to school with her head up and her heart dragging her by its weight of apprehension. Then came Verity, the girl of nineteen, like a suddenly opened flower before him. It was like a miracle he once saw on a motion-picture screen. The closed bud, the quivering, the revealed flower!

On one vacation Verity had been the awkward, slowly emerging girl—the next, the radiant, self-possessed young woman. And this brought to mind that day when Verity moved through the railroad station to meet Austen, while he stood with Mary Carlin by his side. At that memory Lewis always emitted an expressive “Gee!” and walked faster.

Mary Carlin; Verity Leighton! The names linked, snapped, and sprang together again.

Would Austen find Mary Carlin? If he did, what would he do?

“If she were dead!” he muttered, and then felt scorn for himself. He knew why he wanted Mary Carlin dead. If she were definitely disposed of, Verity need never know. The shadow removed, Verity could walk in light and no one be the wiser. He and Austen would alone keep guard. The business would be easy enough.

For himself—and here Lewis was sincere—it did not matter. Indeed, it gave him opportunity to prove himself. But do what he might, he could not shake off the sensation of horror when he contemplated the effect upon his mother if she knew all.

Mrs. Lewis was always to remain a woman to her son; never again a mother.

“We owe them something,” he argued, “we the younger generation. We owe to them our life, our ideals—often rotten ones, but the best they had to offer. How far should we let the hold of the past control the present, dominate the

future? "The future is ours, anyway!" This convincing conclusion was like a firm rock upon which to stand and gaze back and forward while he paced the hot streets.

"I'm crazy about the kid!" mused Lewis, and then reflected that others were probably feeling the same and that he was a consummate ass to expect—well, what did he expect?

"She's running wild with that assy crowd," he thought. "There's something to say for the way girls were guarded in the past——" but this brought Lewis up rather sharply against a wall. "None of *that* rot!" he said to himself. "If *you* couldn't stand it, why want to inflict it upon others?"

And Lewis thought more and more often of Austen and the woman who had ruined his life.

"Gosh! How some kinds can blur the face of the world for others."—Again Mary Carlin stalked!—"Austen should have cut her loose while the cutting was good."

And now Austen took the middle of the stage.

"Fancy! I thought I knew Barney all those years—and there he was quite another sort from what I thought. I wonder how much we know of any one? There's a confounded wall around us all. Walls with little doors through which we crawl out, at times, or let others crawl in; but walls, walls! God! And we all live our real lives behind the wall. God!"

And the word was a prayer, such a prayer as often rises from a park bench.

There was one letter from Verity that Lewis read and reread. It cleared his vision, in a way:

I will never do things just because others do them, Ted—at least not after the first time. If you do not *test* things how can you know? I'm game for the *test*, then I'll choose. I do not drink, because I hate the stuff and I do not like to let go of myself. I want to be on the job, my job, and when people get whoozy they look so silly and do such mad things. I do not do some things after the first time, because—well, I *am* myself and Constance Warren made me feel that I do owe something to others' ideals, and her words stick. I go so far, no farther.

And here came something that staggered Lewis, who had not read much psychology:

Our forbears, Ted, *wanted* to do all that *we* do. That's what they did for us, handed down their unfinished jobs, and then they stand off and cry to heaven! We're working things out for them and they haven't decency to own up.

A chill rippled up and down Lewis's spine. An awful truth seemed to burst on him from the dark. At such moments, shattered and blinded, he would seek his dog as the one safe, living thing in his universe.

Lewis ground his teeth and set his jaws when he reflected upon Verity's "tests." That was the wrong of it all with the kid tribe. They never counted the possible cost of the tests to others, or themselves.

Lewis felt old, old.

And while he puckered his brows and, occasionally, swore under his breath, Verity was swinging along, testing and tasting life with high courage until——

"Did you ever sleep in the open?"

It was Jack Terrell who asked Verity the question. They had been dancing on the moonlighted piazza. They were warm and excited.

"Open what?" Verity pulled the strap of her dancing frock up over her shoulder and laughed.

"Just the open! Don't cover your shoulder, Verity, why be a tightwad?"

The young fellow was big, handsome, frankly appealing. He played a splendid game of golf and tennis, could manipulate any car; was openly daring and charmingly friendly.

"Let's come inside," Verity suggested, for no reason at all except that there were moments with this boy, and some of his friends, when she felt her youth alarmingly; her "lack of background," she called it.

"Here's a dare, Verry." A broad hand touched her arm, her slim, childish arm. "You have the reputation of never

taking a dare; you're a bully sport; let us see the sunrise from Indian Head to-morrow! I dare you. It would be a great stunt. Listen. I'll take my chummy up to the curve of the road and park it. At two o'clock I'll tap at your door; we'll steal out—safety-first trick, you know; eat a snack—I'll have that ready—and then make for the car, take a nap or two, and reach the top in time to see the blooming sun come up. What do you say?"

"A crazy scheme." Verity tossed her head.

"You're not a sport, then," indifferently. "I'll tell you, then, for your edification, that three other couples are going to do it. A picnic at sunrise, fancy! I thought I'd give you the opportunity to prove your mettle; and now I have your number. Mid-Victorian is license compared to you, but even old Vics had picnics. Say, then, Verry, will you come to the sunrise shindy with the bunch? I'll provide a chaperon if you say so. I hate to have the others find out what a Puritan dub you are."

"Who is going?" Verity was serene.

Six perfectly legitimate and conservative names were mentioned.

"All right, I'll go." The beauty of the scheme caught Verity's fancy. "But I'll have to get some sleep. Will you wake me?"

"Sure thing!"

When the knock came upon Verity's door, she stumbled from her bed, tried to remember what it was she had promised to do, and finally, recalling the picnic scheme, dressed quickly in bloomers, flannel shirt, sweater and cap, and issued forth into the dark chill of the early autumn morn.

The big house was deadly still and the waiting boy led her forth without a word. Led her down the home trail, out upon the road and toward the curve ahead, where his car was hid behind the underbrush and there the "snack" and the thermos bottles awaited them.

"Where are the others?" Verity asked, her teeth chattering.

"We couldn't park all the cars in one place. They're scattered." Terrell laughed lightly.

This was quite true. Verity heard several "chuck-chucks!" as she listened.

Once they were on the way, the fun of the thing caught her. There were the heartening sounds of cars on ahead; they would soon overtake them; there would be safety in numbers and more fun. That was the way—nothing was really horrid. Folks only liked to make believe there was for the sake of the thrills.

"You're shaking with the cold," Jack Terrell said, presently. "Or is it blue funk?"

"Cold," Verity chatteringly replied, "and I'm still hungry. I'm as hungry as a gray wolf."

"Here, take a swallow of this." A flask was produced. "It will tide you over until breakfast."

"Thanks, but I hate the stuff."

"Well, you hate quinine, too, don't you? But if you have a chill, why not take medicine?"

Verity never could clearly recall the next hour—or perhaps two. She took a "swallow"—several, in fact—for the flask was pressed against her lips.

Then—and she wondered if she had been asleep—she felt a kiss upon her lips, an arm around her. The car was parked beside the road. There was a sharp decline close by. Some words were being said; words that she vaguely understood, words that sounded like words in books which she had read, without in the least comprehending, and through them, like vanishing hope, the "puff, puff" of cars ahead. Cars that were going on, on—leaving her, and the boy beside her, alone!

And then Verity suddenly seemed to be someone else. A little ragged somebody beating off—what? She remembered! In that far-away time she had beaten off what now threatened. She did not know what it was, now, any more than then, but she *must beat it off!*

She struggled; she called aloud indignantly. She was hushed, held close. Then her mind cleared. She battled,

and was free! She struck out with all her force, struck angrily—there was desperation in her aim.

As she had triumphed, at fearful cost, long ago on the sandy road at Bluff End, so she triumphed now. She sprang from the car and stood perilously near the embankment.

“Don’t be a fool!” Terrell muttered. “You’re not only a tightwad, but you have no sense of humour or fair play.” He leaned forward, his young eyes blazing.

“If you touch me I’m going to jump into that ravine!” Verity’s words rang sharp; each word was like a pellet of ice.

“I’m not going to touch you—I wouldn’t, with a ten-foot pole. I know *your* kind, all right. You’re the kind that sets forests afire and then runs away. Get in—I’ll drive you back.”

Verity paused.

“Don’t you believe me?” Terrell laughed. “Can’t you trust your precious self to me? Well, get this into your silly little noddle: I’ve lost all the appetite for green fruit that I ever had. You’re as safe with me as you would be with your grandfather. Come on!”

Verity got into the car. She was shivering and numb; she wasn’t afraid; nor was she any longer disgusted. She sat very quiet and kept her eyes ahead on the road as if she, not her indignant companion, were running the car.

Certain detached thoughts and words kept recurring to her.

“Green fruit!”

“Grandfather!”

In a strange, twisted fashion these words got linked.

And then suddenly, with sickening longing, Verity yearned for old Ezra Taber!

She had thought of him often lately, but she needed him now. He had understood, that time when she had beaten the boys off with a broken oar; he would understand again.

Barney wouldn’t; Lewis couldn’t; Constance would be appalled—but old Ezra would comfort her; would let her help

him mend nets while he set her world to rights; he would mend *her* net while she listened and forgot.

When the roadster came within sight of the camp, the boy stopped short.

"You'd better beat it by the side door," he suggested. "You ought to be able to get under cover without being seen. Does it fit in with your ideas of propriety to keep your mouth shut?"

Verity stepped down and then turned her white, drawn face to the boy.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know what you mean about me. I wish that—that it hadn't happened. You see, some of us *are* green fruit. I guess we'll always be green fruit. Good-bye. I can keep perfectly quiet. You need have no fear and—I'm going away to-day."

"Oh, come off!" the boy was touched. "Sleep on it."

"I will. But I'm going——"

"Where?"

"To my—my——" almost the words "Granddad Ezra" escaped her.

"To my grandfather!" this came proudly.

"Didn't know you had one."

"Didn't you? Well, I have, and I want him!"

"For God's sake, don't cry!" The boy looked frightened.

"I—I won't. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXIII

AT COVERLY life went monotonously on. It was like living in safety behind a barricade. Once the defences fell, who could estimate the danger from without? So it behooved one to look to the defences.

Constance lay for weeks upon a couch in the living room or on the porch by day and hobbled, with Warren's help, to her room at night. He always left her just outside her door, with a light kiss and a cheery word.

He repeated to her at times when they were alone snatches of verse that he wrote in the tower room, or on his walks. His eyes were gaining strength and vision; he was amazed at times to realize how indifferent he was to this marvellous thing that had happened to him.

"To see!" he repeated. "To see!" Then added: "See what?" Mentally and spiritually he was stretching. He knew, at his best moments, what it was he saw. He saw reality for the first time in his life.

His early youth had been vision-swept and melodramatically lived. It had been glory to starve for his art. All the cant phrases had upheld his irresponsible existence; had helped him to defy opinions of saner people.

"Sacrifice everything for your art. . . ." "Die if you must, but on your shield."

It was comparatively easy while that small but safe income from his aunt existed. She believed, or tried to believe, she was giving him a start. He had laughed and sung his way along. Sometimes he had been hungry, sometimes threadbare, "all in the day's work." He had taken deep draughts of certain phases of life during those few years, and then the appalling catastrophe fell upon him. Sickness, blindness, approaching death!

Warren had read of such things, but that he should be singled out for such a tragedy seemed more than he could bear. But he had borne it, and because he was too cowardly, or too brave, to end it, he bore it with courage and a dramatic bravado. He would "go down with flags flying!" Mere phrases, but they helped him play his part while he was dying in Italy.

Then Constance—and more dreams; dreams tinged with reality, as he neared the waking stage, deserted by death.

Looking back, Warren believed he had got his first clear vision with Austen's coming. He had tried to close his mind to the interpretation others gave, but he felt that he had always *known*, from that moment, and that it was more anger than surprise that had caused him to strike so viciously at old Goodall.

He had been forced to face what he already knew!

"A blind beggar sunning himself in a woman's generosity," he groaned. Never, for a moment, did Warren doubt Constance's finest qualities. Goodall's poison at last became merely a quickening force in his brain; never a killing one.

He felt fairly certain that he had the right idea about Austen and Constance. Something had driven them apart, and with the wildness that ran in even *her* pure blood she had sought escape through her mad marriage.

"But why, in God's name, should she annex me?" he pondered in stern humility, little comprehending the madness of suddenly unleashed tendencies and untrained imagination. "But how she *did* act her part!" At this, poor Warren groaned again. And then, something had driven Austen across her path again only to find . . .

And here Warren steeled himself to confront the issue.

Austen had seen plain enough what all the world—even that drunken scoundrel, Goodall—saw. Austen could estimate dreams and call things by their right names.

Austen had never dreamed. Whatever his part in life's game had been, it was no dream rot.

Verity!

Warren even clutched at Verity without shock. That much his early years had done for him. They had made him shock-proof to the consequences of vagrant passion.

“But why bring the girl and Constance together? . . . Queer! Queer!” And so Warren dragged through the days.

For comfort, he would, in a humorous way, count the events that at least held a semblance of self-respect.

He had not been a beast with Constance—he had left her with memories that need not shame her. He had never demanded; he and she had known a little hour, set apart, even from his damned dreams and her reason, for knowing life at any cost.

What an hour that had been! No past, no future—just a bubble freed from its source. It had held colour, form. It had floated in space and—burst!

Then Warren reflected upon the south chamber. He was glad that he, not she, had sought the south chamber!

He was glad he had felled Goodall. In patches he *had* played the man. At least played it.

And now if he could, without too much brutality, set Constance free, really free, he might hope, in the future, to find peace. If he could make her believe that years *did* count; that with seeing eyes he recognized that there had been a cruel joke played upon him and her by a humorous Fate—— At this juncture Warren flinched. Any such course would be brutal and heartless, but at least it would set her free. Her pride, her fineness, would come to her rescue. There was only one way!

Warren felt as a surgeon might who has vision to see beyond the operation and to the gain to be secured by the operation.

But, Warren plunged on, what would happen after? Without a cent, with nowhere to go—where could he go? A beggar, even with slow-coming sight, could not travel far on nothing. Facts *were* facts.

Defiant as he might be, insulting as he might be obliged to appear, he could not escape the divine pity and tenderness of Constance.

There were times when Warren again contemplated throwing himself on the mercy and blood ties of his Aunt Charlotte. Surely if she knew the truth she would rally to his need.

But would she? Warren smiled grimly. His aunt was a woman to whom truth meant what she accepted as truth. And what could he offer, as security, for any loan she might make? Pictures that no one wanted, verses that lacked promise, even?

And so the days at Coverly passed: Constance consecrating herself anew to Warren—what else could she do?—and Warren beating against the cruel wall of his helplessness and poverty, while his generous soul longed at last to prove itself.

The routine helped. There were the daily rounds, and when Constance began to hobble about, new duties appeared.

“How strong you are growing, Vance!” Constance would say, leaning heavily upon his arm. “I am always seeing you now as you looked that day at Rocky Lonesome. After such a feat, what may not one expect of you?”

“Anything, or nothing!” And Warren gave his long-practised laugh.

It was in September that letters from Austen mentioned his homecoming. And then old Jonas Goodall died. He had become, at the last, a helpless, trying child. He demanded all of Nancy’s strength and time; he cried for her, held her when she came near him; obeyed her slavishly, muttered sense and nonsense, and strange to say, became dearer to Nancy than he had ever been. In him she saw her little children; his clutch became their tender hold. By shutting her eyes against the grizzled face on the pillow, she could see little baby faces, and to her quivering lips rose lullabies that long had lain buried in her faithful heart.

As the end drew near, she treated Jonas like a loved but troubling child.

“Come, dearie,” she would say, striving to make him ready for sleep; “come and tell Mother all the naughty and good

things he has done—then we'll wash the slate and sing a good-night song and say a prayer."

This method of procedure had a remarkable effect upon Jonas. At first he would resent it with flashing intelligence.

"None of that, now!" he would fling out. "None of them Smith wheedles and whozzles. Do you forget who you're talking to?"

"No, son dear, I know full well. But what are Smiths for but to help Goodalls up and on? Come, now, let me bathe you and sing you to sleep."

The bathing accomplished, the prayer was insisted upon: "Forgive; make me good. Amen." Then the blessed old crooning song—and sleep.

Nancy became a mere shadow of herself and her shoulders bent under her burden, but her spirit flamed in her brave eyes, and she walked as one does who carries a sacred cross to Gethsemane.

A week before he died Jonas seemed to regain, somewhat, his mentality, and one night after the bathing he muttered:

"I want to tell you something—something I done—bad. Do you think God can forgive if I own up?"

Nancy was startled. The tone, the clear eyes, frightened her. Her pose as mother to a troubling child vanished.

"I'm listening, Jonas," she said firmly.

"He had no right to hit me! He's a young feller!" the weak apology!

"Who, Jonas?" There was iron in the tone.

"Warren."

"What did he hit you for?"

"I ain't going to answer your questioning," Jonas scowled.

"You'll have to answer to the Almighty, Jonas." This frightened the old man and he whimpered. Nancy did not stir; she was waiting.

Presently, in choking, gasping words, Jonas confessed.

"I guess I was drunk—things I had heard leaked through—and I couldn't stop 'em. I heard once as how Constance had bought Warren for—for hiding a dirty secret——"

"Stop, Jonas!" Nancy seemed to rise and tower over the

bed, though her little crooked body did not move. "I ain't going to have my mind filled with filth. Go on, leaving that out!"

"If it ain't true, why don't he cut and leave, then?" Jonas blubbered. "There's no getting away from common sense. Warren ain't staying on for nothing."

Nancy was speeding ahead of Jonas, lighted by a gleam of pity.

"You bore false witness, Jonas," she whispered when Goodall paused to pant and catch his breath.

"Where there's much smoke"—hoarsely—"there's bound to be *some* fire," the old man wheezed.

"Tain't up to us to fan the flame to fury, Jonas."

Then, after a heart-breaking silence, Nancy gazed upon the face on the pillow and her heart softened, for she saw intelligence fading.

"Jonas, can you tell that tale to God and hope for forgiveness?" she asked, with the last remnant of sternness.

"He was young and I was old," Jonas wheezed.

"You must offer to God fruits of repentance," she went on.

"Don't, don't punish!" whined the old man, sinking into senility. "I didn't mean to, I'll be good. Drink . . . just for fun. I'll make it all right with him—tell him it was a—joke. Give him money!"

Inspiration seemed to flare in the weak voice.

"Stop, Jonas! Stop!"

"Going to punish me?"

"No."

"Then sing to me. I'm plumb tired."

And Nancy sang.

"Say a prayer. Too tired . . . too tired to say it."

"God forgive him. Make him a good boy, because——"

That was it: Because! Because what?

Well, God alone knew what had driven Jonas one way and her another.

"Because . . . Because . . . Dear God, help us all, Amen!"

And that night Jonas died in his sleep.

The night of the funeral Nancy closed the door of her home and sighed. She was desperately lonely; her arms ached from emptiness, but she had a sense of relief that she had never known before.

“I declare,” she faltered, “it feels like I had all my children tucked up for the night—even the erring one.”

Always after that Nancy thought of Jonas as the “erring one.” It comforted her, gave her courage to undertake the righting, as far as in her lay, of the mistakes he had made.

As she folded his old, worn clothes she folded with them the emptiness and resentment that she had often felt. She began, as people often do, to blame herself. She should have been more patient; perhaps she had been too stern, had restricted him too much. It must have been humiliating for a Goodall to feel dependent; to have only his pittance from the Government with which to indulge his personal tastes.

The faded, patched garments rose in mute protest against Nancy’s thrift and miserliness. Poor Nancy. Her “erring one” soon became her dearest. All his virtues and generous deeds sprang into bloom. Nancy could not see, dear soul, that they were of her own sowing, not his.

And then when the old house was once more orderly and cheerful, she faced the lonely future.

What was she to do? To live for herself alone was impossible. She, with her lawyer, took account of stock.

“Mrs. Goodall,” he said, “you are a rich woman!” Then he smiled. “Let me see. You have an income of four thousand a year and your land. You should make your land swell your income. Vermont is no longer a farming state, but it is God’s own garden spot. I would advise putting your property on the market and so turn it over to summer folk. They pay high.”

Nancy nodded. The Goodall land was not sacred in her eyes—she came of a roving stock—but suddenly, as inspiration comes, she saw a way to serve her erring one. She would be his deputy; it was his land, it should wipe out his obliga-

tions. It should, in some way, make people remember him kindly.

"I would take it as a kindness," she said to the man of business, "if you would manage the sales. I'd like to keep Lower Farm and the hill"—there lay her babies and Jonas; there lay his stiff-necked, irresponsible forbears—"for the rest it would be mighty comforting to me to have it made to bloom and flourish."

The man smiled again, and reported in the village that "blood would tell. No sooner had Jonas been buried than that old skinflint was ready to put his land upon the block! No wonder Goodall kicked over the traces. Fancy the life he must have led."

But Nancy was following the gleam that had come to her while the lawyer talked.

She undertook retracing old Jonas's tracks. She discovered to whom he owed money. Often this was not necessary, for claimants pressed their rights. She paid with interest and pitifully stipulated that "nothing more should be said."

And in due time Nancy inevitably came to Warren in her investigations. Suppose! Her kind old heart ached. Suppose there was something; something innocent and pitiful enough, God knew, in what gossip said.

"Poor soul! How can he do the right thing—show himself a man—if he hasn't a cent to his name?" she whispered.

Surely no more delicate and treacherous a task ever confronted a woman than confronted Nancy.

"And yet," she thought, her face shining, "between men it might be possible. One lending, the other borrowing and paying back. And Jonas is a rich man."

CHAPTER XXIV

OLD Ezra let fall the strands of the net that he was mending. Some breaks are so discouraging. This one had been so.

“Just tarnation carelessness,” Ezra had remarked when he first saw it; “left to be trampled on, when a little thought about hanging it up would have spared it.”

“Is it past mending?” the owner had inquired.

“Till there ain’t no strand,” Ezra retorted, “I ain’t ever going to say that about a net or a human.”

But the task had been tedious and the old fingers were stiff, so the strands continually dropped.

There was a brisk breeze blowing off sea, a breeze that might develop into a vigorous gale by nightfall, and winds and storm meant more to the old man, now, than once they had. He realized, often, that the comfort he had given the woman of the yellow house, concerning a light set in the north window, was really not to be relied on. Between Taber’s cottage and the Barnacle stretched a level, open, sandy space. Several houses, once occupied by the summer people, had fallen, or been burned, and on a clear night a light might easily attract Ezra’s attention if Jean Fancher set one, but fog or “dirty” weather would blot it out, and so Ezra put it frankly to his God and prayed that, should need arise for help, the night might be propitious.

Jean Fancher was a stern responsibility to Ezra. He often felt mentally weary “pulling her to shore” as he put it.

“She can’t seem,” he thought, “to open up to the Lord and let His mercy in.”

While Ezra sat with her and sang his hymns and explained the words, the woman listened, transformed. She caught

the glory, but the glory seemed to follow Ezra when he went out into the night.

"I have the feeling," Ezra admitted to himself, "as if she was following me, holding to me, whispering."

The truth was, Jean Fancher was haunting Ezra, as she had haunted others, binding them by her weakness, not her strength, poor soul.

And as Ezra with the net at his feet nodded and dreamed, the Boston boat came quietly in and someone, bag in hand, walked up to the cabin; stopped short at the sight of the dear old sleeping man, with his white hair rising and falling in the breeze, and regarded him through dimming eyes.

Behind the magic mist of tears the searching gaze noted the thin, blue-veined temples, the sharpened jaw, the drooping, patient hands. Old age had dealt sacredly with Ezra, but it had claimed him for its own and, in sleep, set its mark definitely upon him.

When he awoke, the undying, unquenchable soul of him would defy age, but now Ezra slept and dreamed. Presently he shivered, opened his eyes—was it raining? Something like rain drops had fallen on his cheek.

Then Ezra looked. Looked, and with the vision that sees back and beyond, he saw.

"Little gal Verity!" The whispered words were faltering. Dreams and reality—they merged at times.

"Granddad, say that you know me. Say that you remember."

How beautiful she was, leaning over the old man like a tall, pale, golden-white lily.

"Like a tall lily!" Someone had called Verity that once—it was Jack Terrell, the boy who had imagination even if it were often wrongly directed.

Gazing, reaching out, old Ezra feared that he was still dreaming. Verity might look like that, he reasoned, in heaven, but not on earth. So might one hope to recognize his dear ones, gone long since.

He knew her. Would he not know her anywhere, at any time? But what had happened?

"Little gal Verity," he repeated dully.

Then Verity bent lower, seemed to take him in her arms. That touch of healing worked a miracle; it cured the weariness, the loneliness.

Presently he founds words to ask:

"What favouring wind bore ye to this port, lass?"

"Oh, I am going to tell you, Granddad, tell you everything. But first let me change my clothes. I've brought things that will make me feel, and look, less strange."

"You look mighty fine and dazzling." Ezra noted details.

"That's what I do not want to look. Oh! my dear, my dear. Stay just where you are until I come back." And she drifted from sight.

"Just like mist," the old man thought.

Ezra did not move. His brain reacted slowly; he would not be surprised if the vision did not reappear, but from off in the quiet of "God's Room" a song rose and fell, reassuringly. The words made Ezra smile—they were from a rollicking sea song:

And it's all sails set, and all hands on deck;
And here's to the blue, blue sea.

While that voice sounded, Ezra could afford to wait and hope.

Soon she came back to him. She had put on a simple linen gown; her short, fine hair was free—she looked like young Launcelot, and her eyes were happy and at peace.

"I'm going to stay until I've emptied my soul, Granddad, and no one knows where I am. No one shall know until I'm all through."

"That's high-handed, lass."

Oh, the luxury of taking her for granted; feeling free to speak to her!

"I'm going to be high-handed and stiff-necked, Granddad. Barney is keeping his own counsels, and he is the only one who has any claim on me. By the time he knows anything he'll know all about everything."

Verity turned a basket over and sat down.

"What's the news, dear?" she asked.

"Well, there's lobsters for supper." Ezra chuckled. "The critters acted all day yesterday as if they was bent on getting caught. Like as not they sensed your coming."

"Very likely!" Verity smiled.

"And"—the uppermost thought leaked out—"the yellow house is rented."

Verity turned startled eyes on Ezra.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"Not her as once was, child. I reckon the woman who is there is only a passer-by."

"I had hoped the summer folks would never come back, Granddad."

"They ain't—nor like to come. Most of the houses are fallen flat or have burned down. The Barnacle, as its name is, stuck, and this poor soul as bides there is health-hunting, that's all."

"Well, I'm glad we need not count her in. Oh, Granddad, how I have wanted to come back, and find that things had waited for me!"

"Well, there ain't much change." Then the old eyes grew keen and wistful, and Ezra asked bluntly:

"What brought you here, lass, sudden and unspoken? After the telling we can go along more comfortable-like."

Verity, rocking to and fro, her arms encircling her knees, answered simply:

"You know how I always was, Granddad, when I was most frightened?"

"Yes, I recollect, lass."

"How I did the wildest things?"

"Yes. You was a reckless, fearless lass."

"Granddad, I have been so frightened!"

"What's scared you, child? Like as not it ain't reasonable. Most scare things are not."

"That day when I beat the boys off with the broken oar, Granddad—do you remember?"

"I do that!" Ezra smiled grimly. "Not long since, Nat Coles—he was one of the boys—came in from a foreign voy-

age and stayed with me. He's an upstanding, decent man now, but he spoke about you, child, and he told me that when the devil rose in him, as it does in some men of his sort, he recalled the look in your eyes that day you beat him off. He 'lowed that that memory had saved him many a black hour of shame and many a woman from cursing him. There is a scar still on his cheek bearing witness to the clout you gave him."

"Oh! Granddad, is that what one must always fear—women, I mean?"

"It's a danger, lass."

"I am a woman, Granddad, and I am afraid!"

"A woman, sure enough"—Ezra held the girl in his protecting glance, firmly—"made out of odds and ends of the gal Verity, but the hand of the Lord has fashioned the woman of you. Perhaps He's had to twist and turn the scraps to make them fit His design. He may have snipped a bit here, and patched a bit there, but what He has wrought need fear no harm. Perfect love, lass, casteth out fear. What has taken you off guard?"

And how easy it was to speak and tell the old man everything! It was as Verity knew that it would be; Ezra, with the unworldly wisdom that draws its power from unfailing sources, understood.

"'Tis dangerous, Verity," Ezra spoke at last, patting the fair head resting, now, upon his knee, "to tackle any job till you know the nater of the job. But them is young ways—the ways of sailing without a chart. I don't know as them ways are altogether bad, either. They open up grand channels, sometimes, and find new gifts of God. But I'm glad ye came to me, lass, to get your breath, so to speak."

After that the days passed like unbroken links in a strong chain. Happy, safe days. The recent past was rarely referred to: the present held them both.

"Will you join me and visit her as is at the Barnacle?" Ezra asked on the third day.

"If you do not mind, I won't, Granddad. I want only you; I'd like to shut everyone else out, and if I went to the

yellow house I feel sure I would see poor little ragged Verity slinking about and—well, I don't like ghosts!"

So while Ezra took his long strolls, or sat between the dark and the light with Jean Fancher, Verity cooked and mended; fished; played with the children on the sands and grew unafraid.

To the woman of the yellow house Ezra did not mention his visitor.

"I ain't yet lived to see the male or female that wouldn't feel curious," he thought, "and unless the Lord brings folks together in spite of everything, it's just as well to keep your hands off."

Jean Fancher was not so well. More and more she sat in the sun on the porch, or lay on the couch in the living room. She used but two rooms of the cottage, the kitchen and the living room. Ezra had brought her bed to the latter and near it stood her trunk. When the night fell and the shutters were drawn, the light would shine through the half-moon slits far on toward morning, and often the lonely woman would take her treasures from the trunk and lay them, side by side, upon the bed while she counted them, as one might the beads of a rosary, for comfort.

And at times, when all the world seemed asleep, Ezra and Verity paced the sandy shore and found happiness in the lonely dark that so terrified Jean Fancher.

Eventually Verity wrote to Lewis. Taking for granted that he knew more than he did, she spoke openly of Ezra, of childhood days, before Barney came.

"So that's where they hid the kid!" Lewis whistled amazedly. "They certainly had the nerve to set her adrift down there and, by the Lord Harry, how I have been thinking I knew things!"

Do not come down here, Ted. I demand this. I am finding myself, and I do not want any interference. My blessed Mender of Nets is all I need, all I seem to want—just now.

When I get ready to come home, I'll come. If you hear of Barney's return, fly a signal. Of course I want to be there to meet him. You may write to me, Ted. Short, breezy letters. Tell me

about Scruff. Tell me about Sheila O'Neil. Isn't it queer, Ted, how some people and some dogs rise to the surface?

Lewis read, reread, laughed a little, grew strangely serious, and wrote short letters.

Occasionally Ezra and Verity spoke of Jean Fancher, for the woman was largely in the old man's thought.

"Where did she come from, Granddad?" This was asked indifferently, for Verity rarely thought of the yellow house as it now was.

"From wandering up and down the earth, lass. She's nigh spent. I reckon"—this slowly, compassionately—"I reckon she was one as—as couldn't beat things off—the things that beset women. Even a broken oar is more than some folks have." This with a hesitating laugh, for the figure of speech pleased the old man.

"Oh!" Verity raised her head a bit.

The gesture hurt Ezra; there was a spiritual withdrawing.

"Don't scorn such as have no weapon, my girl," he said, almost sternly. "Him who walked by Galilee took time to point our way when dealing with such."

"I—I have no scorn, Granddad, but the old fear—I hate that, and I do not want to—to think of it."

"That will pass, lass, and, please God, it will give place to a love and helpfulness that can be used for them still in the fear and who cannot seem to defend themselves."

"Oh, you blessed!" Verity gave a happy laugh. "How strong you are! No wonder that God of yours uses you to the limit."

Then, casually: "I was thinking the other night, while you were calling on that woman at the yellow house, that some day I would go with you. There are certain things I'd like to find, if they are still there. I do not suppose this woman would mind——"

"Mind what, lass?"

"Oh, if I snooped a bit. Up in the attic Mrs. Thomley had some boxes; in one were letters, I—I think some from

my mother—and photographs—sometimes she let me see the pictures.”

“Like as not she took everything with her that she prized,” Ezra remarked, “though there was a litter left as ain’t been touched, as far as I know.”

“I’d love to find out, Granddad. There was one photograph of a garden—I lived there before I came here. I used to tell you about it.”

“I recollect.”

“And there were some others of me—queer, sorry-looking little snapshots. Mrs. Thomley used to send snapshots to my mother while she cared for her.”

“Well, I fancy Mrs. Fancher won’t object, if you chance in on one of her best days. She don’t hanker after company, but she is a friendly sort, once the ice is broke. “I ain’t going to warn her—she’s terrible skittish—but I was studying out the other day that I might run to Bosting while you’re here, lass. There is business what Captain Locke says that I oughter tend to. Drawing money and signing papers and what-not. If I go you might happen up to the Barnacle and explain and take some things. I’ll make a list——”

“Granddad, are you giving that strange woman money?” Verity pointed an accusing finger.

“I ain’t, that! I’m lending the Lord’s money, that’s all, and a pitiful little goes a long way.”

“Oh, you dear! I used to tell the people at Five Winds about you. They called you names.”

“Names ain’t scaring me none!”

“They need not, Granddad—not such names as they called you.”

“Well, as I was saying,” Ezra went on, “you might happen up to the Barnacle and things would naterally fall into line. You have a wheedling way, when you’re after game. What you say?”

“Of course, go, Granddad. I’ll be glad to stay and help. May I see your bank book?”

“You may not! The impudence of you!”

“Granddad, you’ll wreck yourself.”

"I'll chance it. I know whose hand is on my rudder."

A few days later, garbed in what he termed his "luxuries," Ezra went off with his friend on the Boston boat.

Verity stood on the wharf, waving her hand. Then suddenly, irrelevantly, she thought:

"I wonder what we can ever give that will equal Granddad, Aunt Nancy Goodall, and their kind?"

She was thinking of school talks. Talks that started from the supposition that the young owned the world. This wholesome humility was health-giving. It was food for contemplation and brought about a sanctifying state of mind. Beside her late associates, certain people loomed high.

"Learning and testing are all right"—so the thought ran, often on the lilt of a tune—"if they don't *get* you. I guess Granddad is right—the world is right—everything is right if we leave God in! God, a real, working God, saves the day."

And then one glorious morning, feeling reinforced and secure, Verity took a basket of food and started for the yellow house. But she wandered a little from the direct path and made her way to the churchyard. She had evaded it heretofore—it brought back poignant memories.

"I'll just take a look at the grave of the Unknown Woman," she said.

CHAPTER XXV

IT WAS a rare blue day, with dashes of sunlight and shadow. The air was soft and warm, as it often is near the sea when farther inland the temperature is lower. It was a day to lure one to the open; it was full of promise, and Jean Fancher had responded to the call.

She had missed Ezra wofully; had tried to recall his words as she sat in the gloaming of the two days since she had seen him. When doubt rose, she defended Ezra. The poor shrivelled soul of Jean Fancher stirred to that extent.

“He has *not* deserted me,” she had repeated over and over as the night fell. “He’s not that kind. Perhaps he is ill.” This made her tremble.

Ezra ill! Ezra dead! What would become of her if evil befell the old man? Was everyone to die and leave her? The desperate thought of old Ezra’s possible death drove Jean Fancher to almost superhuman exertion. She must find out, if possible, what had kept him away for two long days and two nerve-straining evenings.

To go to Ezra’s cottage was out of the question. The huddled huts were full of curious people, none the less curious because they were silent and calm visaged. And the children! Jean Fancher shrank from the children. Among them she seemed to be searching always for a little fair-haired, barelegged creature who had been rescued and saved, taken from her, and for whom she had sworn to fare afar in order to secure, for that little girl, safety.

But if Jean Fancher could not go to Ezra’s house, she could, with the aid of a cane, get to the graveyard. Why the old man should go there if he were unable to get to her, the woman did not question. She must move in some direction and so

she hobbled forth into the sunlight, like a poor, unhappy ghost escaping from its haunts.

It took a long while to reach the grave where there was the bench upon which to rest and think, and when Jean Fancher reached it she was so breathless and tired that, leaning back with closed eyes, she seemed like a ghastly corpse left unburied.

And as the woman sat so, Verity, with bowed head, advanced. She was thinking; thinking. How far, far in the past some things were—Anna Thomley and poor little ragged Verity. And yet still farther off—somewhere in the future, it seemed—there was the girl Verity, the girl that people had dressed and educated and placed here, there, anywhere, as necessity arose.

That girl, and the shabby child Verity, seemed equally detached from the strange emotions that now possessed the slow-moving creature seeking, with bowed head, the grave of the Unknown Woman.

It was wonderful, this sense of controlling the past and the future. Verity had never experienced it before. It was an element peculiarly her own—her own! Anna Thomley had not touched it; it had escaped even Barney. No one had harmed it or controlled it.

“I suppose,” thought the girl, “that it is my soul, the part of me that no one has a right to touch—or find!” This came vehemently. “It’s queer, this feeling. It’s like discovering something and knowing that I, I alone, govern it.”

Thought, light as the summer clouds, at this point touched the loved ones who, oddly enough, appeared at the ecstatic moment to be imploring her to remember them; not to cast them off. This made her smile. “I won’t, Barney dear, and Ted. I won’t cut you dead—only hands off! Hands off! I’m coming; I’m coming. You’ll hardly know me—something has happened that just had to happen. I—I can never turn back, dears, and some of the way, on ahead, I must go alone. I had to find that out, and I have!”

Borne on the wings of the spiritual experience, Verity

rested in thought on Coverly; on Barney travelling alone and bearing his secret burdens.

“We’re all on the road,” she mused, “all of us alone much of the time. I never understood before, but I do now.”

And in imagination the girl saw a broad highway over which she and her dear ones were travelling. Some paused to speak; some walked beside others for a stretch—Barney and Constance; then Constance and Vance. Presently—and it seemed thrillingly real—there were Verity and Lewis swinging along joyously.

“The idea!” gasped Verity, the on-looking Verity. “The idea!”

And still the vision persisted. Verity and Lewis swinging along. They were singing; they did not have to explain. Suddenly they parted and, still smiling, waved happily as if knowing the separation would be brief—no need even then of explanations—just going on; going on—— The girl in the graveyard shivered and came to the realization that she had been day-dreaming to rather an alarming extent.

But was she still mooning? There, before her, was a ghost.

“Oh!” she gasped.

Jean Fancher opened her eyes and seemed to shrivel as she raised her hand as though warding off a blow.

“Where did you come from?” she cried, and her scarred face turned blue-white; and her eyes closed again. Verity sprang forward, took possession of the trembling hands, and drew the woman toward her to prevent her falling from the seat.

“Oh, I am sorry,” she soothed. “I have frightened you. I’m staying with Ezra Taber—didn’t you know?”

“No. Please go away.” The closed eyes did not open.

“But you are ill. Let me help you back to the cottage. Let me send one of the women to you. Old Ezra is away.”

“No, no. I want nobody; nothing. I will be over this soon—just a bad turn—I did not—see you coming.”

“But I cannot leave you alone,” Verity said. Then Jean Fancher, losing control of herself, did an alarming, thing. She struggled to her feet, pulled her hands from the restrain-

ing grasp and, holding to the back of the wooden seat, cried hoarsely:

“If you do not go, do not leave me, I must go away, go away from the only shelter I have. Oh, leave me alone; please; please.”

The incoherence, the apparent fright, caused Verity to retreat.

“Of course I will go,” she said. “I do not want to cause you any trouble. Are you sure you can be left safely?”

“Yes, yes!”—desperately.

Unnerved and shocked, Verity retraced her steps.

“I’ll leave this basket at the cottage,” she said, and walked on. “The poor creature is mad,” she thought; “that’s why Granddad has said so little about her. I am sorry, and I’m afraid myself. She looked as if she were the Unknown Woman caught out of her grave.”

But there was little to frighten one, after all. The cool, sun-bright day was one for joy, not tragedy, and Verity was quite herself once the beach was reached and the shouting, dancing children ran to meet her.

“We’ll have a picnic,” she finally decided. “A clam-bake and all the beach welcome.”

The children shouted with joy and willing hands and ready feet did her bidding. It was late afternoon before Verity seriously thought of the woman of the yellow house again.

“I must find out if she got safely back; I’ll wait for darkness and then spy on her. If she does not see me, she will get no shock; if I do not see her, at close range, I will not lose my nerve. And I must know about her if I am to sleep comfortably.”

But when the yellow house was reached it was shuttered and dark, except as the raised eyebrows of light testified to the presence of the mistress.

“It’s going to be a dirty night,” Verity prophesied, sniffing in the dark. “I hate to leave any one sick and alone. But”—and she turned and went back to Ezra’s cabin—“one cannot force herself upon another—even a mad other.”

At ten o’clock the approaching storm, by deep, reverberat-

ing booms, announced its coming. The wind had a sinister sound. It seemed to be creeping in from the farthest quarters of the earth, gathering force and fury as it came. Verity turned in her bed, listened, got up, and went to the window. She was not sleeping comfortably, after all.

"In a black storm or fog," she thought, "no one could see the light in the yellow house. What could Granddad be thinking of? It's horribly dangerous leaving that sick woman alone."

Again Verity returned to her bed and, shutting her eyes, resorted to a trick that she had learned at school and which usually brought sleep.

"Now, then, *think* dark!" she whispered. "So! Now watch. Forms—light and shade—follow them—drive them off the dark. Dark; dark——"

But the magic did not work, and Verity once more arose and sought the window.

"She wouldn't fly a signal anyway," she mused. "I gave her an awful fright. I wonder why? I don't usually have that effect upon folks."

This was amusing. Then:

"Well, personalities do not count. I must act for Granddad. What would Granddad do?"

Presently Verity dressed.

"No harm in being ready!" A moment later she decided: "I'm going to make sure; and then I can sleep and forget it."

When it came to facing the storm Verity began to understand its menace. Of old she knew its breed. Like a mighty army it would slowly advance, sweeping all before it. There would be signals from ships beyond the bar—or on it! There would be high waves reaching the water line, and to-morrow the beach would be strewn with wreckage.

And while Verity pushed on, matching her puny strength against the gale, Jean Fancher was rallying her forces, combating blinding fear, spiritual and physical.

The sight of Verity had all but killed her.

In coming to Bluff End so many things had swayed her that

the one relating to Verity's connection with the old yellow house had seemed insignificant, until now, in the glaring hour of materialization, she realized that, under all, through all, the hope of Verity's return had been the motive power in all her actions. No longer could she deceive herself. If, in spite of all, Verity *should come!* If *she* did nothing and Fate brought Verity back, who could blame her?

That had rung like an echo through her lonely days—the echo of the hunger of her soul, if such a thing could be. And yet when the miracle had occurred it had all but killed her.

After all, what had her sacrifice amounted to? She had hung around where danger lurked, and this was the result! This was the end of the only unselfish thing she had ever done.

The soul that Ezra had awakened cried out against the wrong done to it. It seemed to stand aloof from the consciousness of the wretched woman. It was a ghastly, deathly feeling; one, indeed, to terrify.

She had betrayed her hope for peace and safety. What now?

Jean Fancher wept and shuddered; she grew, at one moment, defiant and bold; the next, cowardly and cringing.

“If they found out, what could they do?” So the lurid flame rose, flickered, and died.

“But—Verity!” The sweet fineness of the girl had cut like a knife. The sight of her in the railroad station had left but a superficial impression compared to the one in the graveyard. And she *had* come back to the old man who had served her; she had come to that lonely grave, her childish shrine. Even in her own sense of degradation, Jean Fancher was glad because Verity was not ungrateful; selfish.

“I—I mustn't touch her. I must not see her again. But where can I go—where *can* I go?”

The oncoming storm and physical fear shook her. She, who longed for death, abstractedly, clung to it at every turn, desperately, tenaciously.

“The house may be blown down, like the others”; she quivered; “the sparks from the chimney may set it afire—like the others.”

She shivered and shook.

She was still in her shabby day clothes; and she had built a fire on the ashy hearth. There was a little table drawn close to it with fragments of untasted food, and when Jean Fancher was not pacing the floor, she crouched on the cot, looking senselessly at the food. Under the cot was her trunk. She presently drew it forth and opened it.

There was comfort in inanimate things. She placed her poor belongings near her: a couple of gowns, a coat, underclothing, and—the package! The package she did not open, but she held it close, fondling it as she might a little child.

Then, again, she marshalled her forces to combat the physical fear that once more threatened control; she repeated, mechanically, old Ezra's words of cheer—how meaningless they sounded. Then she besought Ezra's God to come to her aid—how distant and hard He seemed.

"Don't leave me in the dark," she moaned. "Come close. Let me know that You are here. *Make me know it!*"

Ezra had told her to open the door and windows of her soul and let God in. She tried to, but she was helpless. She could not let God in! And God heeded her not.

"I'll set the light in the window!" But with that thought came another. Not Ezra, but Verity might respond!

And then it seemed as if God *did* heed. He seemed to be standing out there in the black night—standing between her and Verity. Holding them apart sternly, commandingly.

Her sacrifice, her one blessed offering, Ezra's God might accept that. So Jean Fancher did not move toward the window.

"Nearer waters! Nearer waters!" What was that about the nearer waters? The nearer waters had driven her back, always, on the rocks; but they must not drive her now! She must struggle to get away from shore.

"I dare not open the windows!" the trembling woman whispered, "but I'll unlock the door."

This she did, then went back to the cot and took up the package.

Presently she opened it and slowly drew forth the treasures as a lonely, punished child might, for comfort.

A baby dress, yellow and stained; a crooked little shoe that had once covered a small foot of a baby learning to walk. Some photographs: a baby face; faces of a few men, men who had helped instead of damning—at a pinch. Jean Fancher had kept them to balance her account with men. Lastly, more photographs and letters. There were photographs of foreign countries, places where happiness had held brief carnival. Photographs of a woman, fair, laughing, lovely; a woman doomed to slow death and degradation. Could she ever have looked like that? Jean Fancher gazed upon the pictures as if she, a stranger, were trying to understand how life could so doom. . . . Then a garden, and a child, and that same laughing woman—with a difference! That difference was what had haunted the life of the woman on the cot. It had damned her, saved her, carried her to heights, and dashed her to lowest depths, but always the difference was to grip her. It gripped her now; gripped her savagely.

Presently Jean Fancher began to sing—to ward off her increasing fear of the relentless, oncoming storm. . . .
“Till the storm of life—be past. . . .”

“While the nearer waters roll”;—and how they *were* rolling!

“I—cannot bear it!” The words were wrung from the blue lips. “I—I don’t care—I must get near someone, someone!”

She pushed her treasures aside. Some fell to the floor. She tried to get up. She would run out into the storm. Anything was better than to sit and wait for destruction. A terrific blast struck the house, the ashes flew about the room; the door burst open, and the light went out!

“God!” cried Jean Fancher, and fell back upon the couch. She lay like one dead—stiff, cold, grim-jawed.

And Verity, groping through the storm, found the door of the yellow house open. She went in, still feeling her way in the dark, but remembering; remembering. There were the stairs; here would be the door to the living room! Yes!—

madly whirling embers marked the hearth. So! And across the floor Verity stepped on tiptoe. She seemed afraid of waking something. Ghosts. How horribly afraid she used to be of ghosts long, long ago, and of those sad, demented ghosts of men and women who dwelt there long, long ago! They were the worst of all. Dead ghosts just walked and you could not *feel* them, but the live ghosts could sit and stare at you and *feel* for you; get you, laugh at you while they held you with strong, clutching fingers.

“Oh!” moaned Verity, just as the child of long ago had moaned.

Then the groping hands hit against the table; felt for, and found, the lamp.

Fortunately Verity had closed the outer door behind her. There was comparative calm within. She bent and took a splinter of wood from the hearth, lighted it at a glowing coal, and touched the wick of the lamp.

Then she looked around fearfully, agonizingly, and saw Jean Fancher on the couch.

Mechanically Verity did what she never afterward remembered. She listened for the heart beats and caught them. Faint, irregular, almost gone; then recurring. She chafed the cold, stiff hands; at length the fingers moved, the lips trembled. Then Verity went to the hearth and deliberately mended the fire; it must be made to burn steadily.

There was tea in a pot on the table—it still was warm. She poured a little in a cup, and held it to the lips of the woman on the couch.

Hours seemed to pass while the kindlings caught; then the logs brightened, and the room glowed, and the heat reached every corner, while the storm howled and beat against the house.

“Try to drink this.” Verity spoke aloud. She dared to, for she was in the presence of life, not death, and relief gave her strength.

“No.”

“You must, dear. And do not be afraid of me—really, I only want to help you.”

The close-shut lids flickered but did not lift—and then tears, hot, big tears, rolled down the scarred and livid face.

“Go away! For the love of—of God, go away!”

“No, I am going to stay.” This came firmly, as one speaks to a child who must be pacified as well as controlled. “See, Mrs. Fancher. I am going to make you comfortable.” Verity lifted the nerveless form, pulled at the pillows, shifted her burden, and placed it straight and orderly. “Now, then! Is that better?” she asked, fearing the woman was again losing consciousness.

“Yes.”

“Will you lie still while I heat some water—make fresh tea?”

“Yes.” Jean Fancher had abandoned herself to the inevitable. She was too weak either to suffer or to thrill with joy. She simply lay quiet and—drifted, she knew not where.

A half-hour later Verity stood triumphant over the couch. She had fed the sick woman, little by little, toast dipped in milk; had coaxed some hot tea through the purple lips.

“Now take a nap!” she had pleaded, “and I’ll tidy things up. The wind must have got inside.”

And while Jean Fancher lost consciousness—it was more than sleep—Verity moved about noiselessly. She brushed the ashes from the floor. She gathered the garments from the chair and placed them in the trunk. She picked up letters, scattered photographs, and then—something happened!

Verity was sitting on the floor when she became aware of her identity—sitting braced against the cot, a photograph in her hands and the even breathing of Jean Fancher in her ears.

Thought came slowly, disconnectedly. For some time, apparently, she had not been thinking, but merely looking; looking.

“So the—the photograph was here all the time,” she mused. “Mrs. Fancher has found it.”

Then the baby dress, the crooked shoe.

“Well, what of that?” But Verity could not make it

seem right even though she repeated several times, "What of that?" She felt as if she had been suddenly cast adrift amid a mass of wreckage. Some bits hit her, hurt her; others floated by, and though she reached out to them she could not grasp them. They eluded her. The little dress and shoe escaped her. "What of that?" she muttered.

The storm grew in fury. As if wind and rain and sleet were not enough, a flash of lightning, occasionally, drove like a blazing sword through the dark, and the thunder crashed and reverberated.

Then—it must have been near daybreak—Jean Fancher stirred, turned weakly toward the fire, and opened her eyes.

She saw Verity, saw what she held in her hands, and she groaned.

"Where did you find this?" The question sounded sane and natural enough, but it rang in the ears of Jean Fancher like blinding accusation.

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?" she groaned. "I did not mean, God knows, I did not mean——"

"What?" The word was weighted with alarm; with intangible, groping fear. "Mean what?"

"That—that you should ever know. They will not believe it, but *you* must; *you* must! I meant, as God hears me, to hold to what I swore."

"Lie quiet—you will be very ill again." Verity rose and took the fluttering hands in hers. "Listen—you and I are here alone. You must tell me what you mean. But not now. We must take no chances."

And the storm, that did so much damage on sea and land, served Verity and Jean Fancher well. It shut them apart from others for days. It delayed the Boston boat and kept Ezra away.

Verity nursed the sick woman, cooked and guarded the house; ate, slept, grew old, old, and listened. God! how she listened; almost died when the panting voice rehearsed the ghastly tragedy pertaining to Delmar and the trial. Once she had said to something Jean Fancher was saying:

“No one—you, they—any one—has the right to keep the truth from me. I am not afraid of truth!”

The words sounded strange and stupid to that listening part of Verity.

It took three days to tell the pitiful, devastating story; it took dark, stormy nights, while Jean Fancher slept, for Verity to understand, accept, straighten her young shoulders, and learn a mighty lesson.

Occasionally, when Jean Fancher rambled, Verity asked a question. She must *not* misunderstand. Some things were so unbelievable; others seemed as if she had always known about them.

“You mean that Barney—is *my father*?”

“Yes.”

“Barney? You must be mad! Think!”

Then someone laughed. The sound frightened Verity—could that be her laugh? It terrorized Jean Fancher.

“Oh, don’t!” she pleaded. “Don’t hate me. Oh! I could not bear that.”

“I do not hate you. It’s queer, but I have a—a belonging feeling that I never had before. It was that feeling that seemed queer, that made me laugh. You see, no one can keep your own away from you. It just comes back to you. Barney could not make me belong; but you and I belong. People cannot get ahead of God!”

Jean Fancher turned her face away, thus hiding the scarred cheek. In that position Verity, every sense tingling, could find, in the woman, the pretty creature of the summerhouse. It was like groping her way back in the dark, and then suddenly—seeing! Only now it seemed to be Verity in the creaky rocker and the woman was in her arms. It was as if time were turned upside down.

“I’ve ruined his life and yours!” moaned the stricken voice against Verity’s breast.

“No; no one can ruin another’s life if he refuses to have it ruined.”

“You mean that I have not ruined your life?” Jean Fancher gasped.

“No. Sometimes I think you have brought my life to me—the life that others tried to take from me. As if they could!”

There were hours when the sick woman could not hold to reality; her weakened brain refused to function.

“I—I am going out—on the tide,” she whispered. “Hold me! Hold me!”

“Yes, Mother!”—it had taken time and courage to say the word, but it recalled the darkening mind.

“What did you say?”

“I said that I would hold you, Momsey!” That was harder. The intimate touch all but unnerved the girl.

“Ducky-darling!” the words choked the weak voice. Then:

“Can—do you—remember how—we were to have a—little home—just big enough for two, ducky-darling?” Verity had forgot that, but it came back to her, dimly. “I—I tried to—to get the little house, but they would not—let me have it.”

“Who, Momsey?”

“Men. Men. Always—big houses for a time—then—nothing. And I only wanted, really, just you and the little house. There was never room in the big houses for you, ducky-darling.”

Weirdly Verity was thinking of how she had beaten off the boys with a broken oar; how she had fled from the mountains. She seemed to be beating a danger from the woman she held.

“Men; men!” moaned the quavering voice.

“We’ll have the little house together, Momsey, just you and I!”

Then Jean Fancher sobbed weakly and shook her head.

And during those storm-held days Verity read letters—they were hers; hers; she must know all that there was to be known. Often the wide, dark eyes of the sick woman were upon her as she read; watching, fearing.

Letters from Barney—one written at the time when everything had been snatched from him.

Go. I shall never divorce you. Take what is yours. Go!

“And I—I took you,” the faint voice choked, “because I loved you. I lied the blackest lie a woman can in order to—to keep you.”

“There, there, Momsey, it’s past now. We will have the little house——”

“But—he may find us! I was always afraid of him——”

“Who, Barney?”

“Yes. He was so good—I was afraid of his goodness. He was so—so still. I had to do something because—he wouldn’t. Oh!”

“Never mind, dearie. You will never be afraid again. You have me.”

“I—have—you!” the sobbing words fell into a moan. Then sleep came.

On the night of the third day Verity felt that she knew all that there was in the world to know.

She had done the plain tasks of nursing; she had called upon no one. As upon the day of her birth, so she and her mother fought it out alone.

She wanted Ezra more than she had ever wanted any one.

Ezra had saved her mother. Saved *her!* She would wait for Ezra.

Verity did not seriously consider that death hovered; she was more concerned with life. Life at its strangest, grim-mest, and fullest.

She grew very tender as the hours passed. She was strong, ready to defend the small, piteous thing that clung to her; nestled against her; who was Momsey at one moment, and then a little helpless child. Things *did* get so twisted, so confused.

“No one could blame or punish a child who did not know any better.” At one moment that thought swayed Verity.

“Of course not!”

“Oh, but your arms are so—wonderful!” The sick voice trailed plaintively.

“Lie close, Momsey dear, close.”

“Did—did God send you?”—vaguely.

“Yes.”

"I—left the door open—as that good old man told me to."

"And I came in, Momsey."

"But I did not put the light in the window!" This defiantly, as if protecting her rag of honour.

"You did not need to, dear. I was coming all the time!"

"Yes, all the time, and I did not know."

So they talked in snatches, talked irrationally, but terribly rationally, too.

"Do you—love—Barney?" This was asked wonderingly.

Verity started at the question.

"Oh, yes!" she replied. "He is—blessed. Always so alone—you see, he cannot give himself freely, because it isn't his way."

"I'm sorry I hurt him," Jean Fancher panted.

"I know you are, Momsey. We'll make it up to him."

"Not I, but you! You must make it up to him!"

On the third day the sun went down in a blaze of glory and the flattened sea, "too full for sound or foam," rose and fell at high tide.

Verity, with the scarred face held close to her breast, heard the whistle of the Boston boat, heard the clanging chains and cheery voices, but she did not move.

"Sing to me, ducky-darling."

"Yes, Momsey. What shall I sing?"

"Till the storms of—life——"

"All right, dearie.

"Safe into the haven guide——"

And then because Verity was close to the limit of endurance, she seemed to see the grave of the Unknown Woman open; saw someone she had never known, and yet knew so well, rise, pause and—

"Oh, receive my soul at last!"

"Ducky-darling, will God—understand?"

"Yes. He will understand, Momsey."

“You—are sure?”

“Very sure.”

Something heavy was dragging Verity down; she struggled; she fought it off—she was free!

She stood by the cot. She had gently laid her burden down even while she struggled.

How quiet, how lovely the sleeping face was on the pillow, with the ugly scar hidden!

“Momsey!”

There was no answer.

“Momsey!”

No movement.

“Oh! oh!” the cry rang out. It filled the yellow house.

But someone was coming at last—someone to—to help.

Ezra stood in the doorway. His old face was anxious, alarmed.

“Oh! Granddad, she—is dead, dead! She’s gone—oh! she’s gone to the haven——”

“Hold tight, little gal Verity, hold tight.”

Ezra strode heavily across the floor and caught Verity in his arms. The contact calmed her, cleared her brain.

“She is—my mother!” The words fell like shocks. “They all tried to—to keep me from her. You—you saved her. She is my mother.”

Ezra was never taken off-guard. He had in his time steered many a craft through dangerous seas; had helped lost creatures to find the way home. He commanded the situation now. He could wait for understanding. In the meantime, he ordered:

“Lass, go to my cabin; do not speak to a soul. I will fetch help later. Go!”

And in the quiet of the early gloaming Verity obeyed.

CHAPTER XXVI

IT WAS over, and the sandy soil was patted evenly down over Jean Fancher's little grave close—oh, so piteously close!—to that of the Unknown Woman.

“Seems like they two will kind of keep each other company,” old Ezra had comforted as he and Verity and a small group of people stood on that last day by the grave, “and when the call comes to them to rise and enter in, it may be that they will clasp hands and find the way together, remembering you, lass.”

Verity listened, her tearless eyes raised bravely to meet the effort the old man made in her behalf.

And then they went back and closed the yellow house.

“I'll have it boarded up to-morrow,” Ezra said.

“Yes, and make it strong, Granddad; strong to—to keep things in—and out!”

“There, there, lass, hold tight. It may be that, in time, sunshine and air may cleanse the place and happy folk may bless it.”

“Never, Granddad, never! It is haunted!”

Anna Thomley had been written to, had replied briefly that the woman's affairs were none of her concern and to have the house boarded up.

So Verity and old Ezra took command, and when the boards were nailed against intrusion, their task seemed done.

“And now, lass, come and rest.”

Side by side they turned their backs on the yellow house and set their faces toward Ezra's cabin, where God was.

For a week they dwelt there in peace. They did not mention the past or the future. They kept to the smallest space of the present that they could detach. It was not day by day to them, but hour by hour.

They performed the household tasks, they fished, and mended nets.

The letters that came were often disregarded.

"I cannot explain, Granddad," Verity said, "but they do not seem to be *my* letters. I—I cannot seem to understand them, nor why strangers are writing them to me."

"The feeling will pass, lass. God is waking you up gentle-like. When the light floods in, it will be no shock."

"Perhaps." This with a quiver. "I seem, Granddad, so real, this *I*. Sometimes I feel my arms, my face, and wonder why they feel different, feel like mine at last. You see, *knowing* about myself makes me so much realer, safer."

"And that, too, is God's doing, lass."

"Yes. Others muddled things so."

Verity was waking.

"Hushing things up, calling things by other names, doing things when all the time they *wanted* to do other things. Granddad!" Ezra looked up from the net in his trembling hands. "I think I begin to understand life. It's this way. You cannot be better, act better, so long as you keep *wanting* to do something else. You must *want to do* what you do, because the best of you knows it is right—or you might just as well let the other part of you—have its fling and get done with it!"

"Gosh-a'mighty." Ezra folded his hands helplessly.

"Meaning?" he asked, patiently. "Meaning?"

And now Verity was awake, vitally, glowingly.

"Oh! Granddad, I cannot make you see everything, for you do not know the people and the happenings that have been crowded into the time since I went away from here—went as little gal Verity."

"I—I might grip a bit of it," Ezra faltered. "I sense a lot, at times, by the help of God."

"Well, I mean this: when you are living one thing and holding in your mind, or in your soul, to another, you are not yourself and no one can treat you wisely, for they are not seeing the real you."

Ezra listened, looked vague, and sent a swift prayer to Heaven for help.

“Barney should either have held my mother against her poor little weak self, or he should have let her go—go free and for ever. Because he did not, everything was twisted. He grew silent—oh, he can be so terribly still! And then folks could not get near him. He wanted—oh, Granddad, he wanted to love, be happy, but he kept *acting* another part. So he hurt others and twisted their lives. When, when—I knew my mother, Granddad, something very wonderful happened. All my life I shall love to remember it. Whatever she had done or been, she had always been herself, and I could get near something *real*. She—she told me that she had been afraid of Barney’s goodness. Well, I’m not much afraid of anything, but I understood. I never could get near to Barney in the belonging way, because he was not showing his real self and he did not *seem* real.”

Out of all this old Ezra snatched at drifting particles and held them close.

“His real self,” he muttered. “Them be sacred words of leading, lass. Your task lies near at hand. Find the real self of that lonely, reaching man. He belongs to you. For the sake of her who drifted far, it is your bounden duty to find the real man of him—and comfort it!”

Verity stared.

“You mean,” she whispered, “that I must go back where I never belonged; where I was only taken because it seemed the best way—and where they will be ashamed of me now that I have found out?”

“I do that, lass! What else? What claims have you elsewhere?”

“I—I am going to make my own life. I do not want to disturb theirs—their safe, guarded lives. I mean to have *my* life. Mine!”

“Not till you’ve done your duty, lass, as God will show you how to do it. I ain’t seeking to point your way, and whatever line you take I’ll be as close to you as the Lord allows, but it seems to me that you have something to tell; something

to give to them what did the best they knowed by you, and when that's done the next step will be plain. It don't pay to look to the top of the long climb, lass. One step, you know."

For two days longer Ezra and Verity fished and did the household tasks. On the third day, while they sat in the witching light of the driftwood fire on the clean-swept hearth, Verity said quietly:

"I'm going back, Granddad—and see what will happen."

"That's the lass! See what will happen and be guided by it. Just get yourself, your little wanting, demanding self, out of sight, and then see what will happen."

"Barney is on his way home, Granddad. I had a letter to-day—it seemed to be a letter to *me*; the me that is real. The letter was forwarded by Ted Lewis. Ted's quite wonderful, Granddad, in one way: life never knocks him out—he never dives under; he keeps on top. He knows something big has happened here, but he hasn't asked a question."

"That sort often is powerful swimmers for a long stretch," Ezra commented. "Keeping on top is a grand thing."

Verity smiled wanly.

"Yes," she whispered as if to herself, "for the long stretch one *has* to keep on top."

It was just two weeks after Jean Fancher's death that Verity made her decision about going back and awaiting the coming of Austen, who had cabled to Lewis a short, blunt message.

Nothing accomplished. Home on the *Cedric*.

"The king of France and ten thousand men," irrelevantly chanted Lewis as he beat his razor on the strop, "marched up the hill and down again."

Lewis was in an almost ribald state of mind. He had not asked any questions, but he had kept up rather strenuous thinking.

"It's all too devilish asinine for me," he concluded, and raised a steady hand to his task.

And while Verity, unannounced, travelled to New York and while Austen tossed on the high seas and realized as he never had before how ineffectual he was, at the best, Constance lived through her days, outwardly more blithe than usual, but deeply reflecting upon the abstract state in which she found herself.

Certain obvious facts could be counted upon, and to those she held strenuously.

Vance was gaining in strength and vision day by day.

One could afford to be gloriously happy over that.

His delicate consideration amounted to high art—but what did it mean?

Beginning at the decision about the south bedchamber—what did it mean? Over the widening gap Warren's smile and fine attentions took on at times a menacing interpretation.

“Even if he found out that he had done a mad thing—marrying me—he would never let me know. But, oh! I wish he would not try so hard. It is humiliating.”

Then—and it was to her credit—Constance regarded Warren's position rather than her own.

“But to hold to the decent, kindly course would mean—*what*, to him? Accepting from the woman he no longer loves—everything! Oh, what shall I do? Every door is locked.”

And Warren, smiling, courteous in his solitude, flung out to himself: “This damned thing must end.”

But *how*? That was the rub.

And, strange, as it might seem, the dramatic in Warren rose to the surface. The thrill of adventure, at times, overcame him.

He would begin life better equipped than he had ever been. A beggar, to be sure, but a beggar so well nourished, so unafraid, that he could tackle any obstacle now with hope of success. He owed that to Constance and her dream and his! They had that in common. If now they could only clasp hands over the beautiful dead thing and be *friends*, what might not happen?

"It will be a damnable, rotten mess, if we don't," he thought.

And then a real inspiration came to Warren that stiffened into definite form as the time passed.

"We *will* be friends!" He took that as a starting point. "She and I *have* had this dream together. She bargained for two years. I outstayed the bargain, that is all. There's no earthly reason, if we use common sense, why we should hate each other. We might make rather a splendid thing of this experience, if we deal with it like human beings, not damned fools. According to rule, in order to set her free, we must act like asses; but instead, suppose we got together and spoke God's simple truth without bitterness and then parted, friends. Friends who had made a mistake, but friends nevertheless?"

Walking the trails in the blessed sunlight, walking uprightly, undauntedly, Warren threshed his problem, and then it was that his big idea caught and gripped him.

He would write the experience! Not in verse, but in plain prose that any one might follow.

Here was a new brand of love between man and woman. A love that could accept over obstacles, and relinquish, when Fate decreed, over other obstacles. A love that, outliving passion, could merge into friendship. Man's honour; woman's honour backed by fearless truth.

But above all it was the rending asunder of the immediate tie that confronted Warren. The story halted at that break. Once free, he would go back to that Italy of his; go to that inn where the dream began, and there weave it into reality, a thing that could hold place in life.

So sure did Warren feel of his ability to succeed, once he put his hand to the task of hewing his own way through life, that he again contemplated, for the last time, approaching his aunt. But he recoiled; the mere thought dimmed his vision.

And then one day, lost in meditation, he found himself by Nancy Goodall's gate; heard the cheery old soul greet him as she might a looked-for guest.

“Well, now, dear suz! How things do turn out! I was just thinking of you, Mr. Vance, and wishing all sorts of good things for you and—lo and behold, here you be! Come in, come in.”

Warren followed the thin, bent form to the house and into the living room from which the dividing line of the Smiths and Goodalls had been obliterated. A general confusion of goods and chattels marked the place where once rigidity had held.

“Set, Mr. Vance! It does a body good to look on you and know that the day of miracles ain’t done with. That day when they had the operation, I set by Jonas and thought of how the dear Lord in Galilee made the blind man see.”

Warren’s lips twitched. Nancy got under his shield of protection. Her motherliness reached to the depths of his denied son-hood and troubled them.

Suddenly he felt a wave of remorse overcome him. He recalled the blow he had given Jonas Goodall. That blow had been the beginning of the fatal illness. This lonely old woman was being divinely kind to—to her husband’s murderer!

Of course this was absurd and had its roots in the state of mind that made the future lose its terrors.

And then Nancy did a remarkable and nerve-racking thing. She drew her little creaky rocker close to Warren’s chair and laid her thin, blue-veined hand upon his knee.

“I want to say something to you, Mr. Vance. I seem driven to the saying and it looks like the Lord headed you to the hearing. It’s about the wrong Jonas did that day, when——”

“Don’t!” Warren raised a warding hand. “Don’t, Mrs. Goodall.”

“It best be said, Mr. Vance. Smothered fire is dangerous. It may break out where least expected. I’m speaking now for Jonas. You can’t deny the dead. He was powerful sorry when it was too late—jest like a bad child that had done a wrong. If he’d had time he would have done his best to undo the wrong, but he didn’t get the chance.”

"He told you, Mrs. Goodall?"

"Yes. Jest like a naughty child—but sorry, oh! so sorry. I ain't one as pries much in what don't concern me, Mr. Vance, but I know something is bitter wrong up to Five Winds. I know that the folks in the village have wagging tongues, and I've spent many a night since I laid Jonas away, thinking and thinking as how you and Jonas might sorter get together and patch things up."

Warren simply stared. Nancy's nervous fingers clutched the cloth under her hand, and then she chokingly went on:

"I allas hold that getting at a safe distance and looking things over often works wonders. Suppose—oh, I don't know as I can say it—but suppose you come to Jonas, and Jonas being actually sorry, and you being open-minded, you'd let Jonas—help."

"Help? How help?" Warren felt his face flush, his weak eyes sting.

"Mercy! Mercy! How hard it is to get a simple thing over. I mean, lend you money—to get away and think things out!"

"Mrs. Goodall!"

"Well, couldn't you for my sake? For the sake of Jonas?"

"Certainly not!"

"Just borrow—not take!" Nancy was getting frantic.

"I—I do not understand what you are talking about, Mrs. Goodall."

"Don't say that—if you *do* know, Mr. Vance. Don't muddle things worse than they are muddled. You can afford to be honest with me. The soul of me cries out to help, and if you can be helped—oh! can't you see you oughter *be* helped?"

"So the affairs of Five Winds are common talk, not merely drunken folly!" thought Warren, and drew back.

"Bad comes out of stubborn resistance, Mr. Vance." Nancy was forging ahead in spite of inward misgiving. "I ain't going into the depths of things; I ain't going to leap at conclusions, but I *do* say, and hold to it, that if you jest packed your bag and—and took the bit in your teeth—no

matter *what* is the matter, I *know* that a lot of trouble would be saved. While you're here and close to things you can't, and Constance can't, see straight. The two of you should get apart, and then there wouldn't be any senseless waste. If you was my son and Jonas's, we'd bid you take a leave of absence while the Lord fixes what needs fixing without all this eternal muddling!" Nancy flung her hands wide. "There!" she panted, and waited.

"But I might never be able to repay you." Warren felt dizzy as he leaped over the hurdles.

"You will! You cannot prove yourself here, Mr. Vance; the clutch has got you as well as the rest, but you will be able to prove yourself a good, upstanding young man as can face the world, even Coverly, and never flinch. In that day, there'll be understanding. Oh! won't you do this for Jonas and me? It would be a mighty comfort to think that Jonas did one big kindly thing for a human critter."

"I follow you"—and so Warren was following. "I—I will see your—lawyer," he said.

"You mean, you will borrow the money, and so feel free and independent?"

"I may."

"Then let it be between us, Mr. Vance. What good can come in throwing more fodder to overfed folks?"

"I must think this over." Warren rose gropingly. There were times when he forgot that he could see. "I will let you know. But"—and here that strange twitching twisted the firm, fine lips—"you are a wonderful woman, Mrs. Goodall."

"Don't say that, son. I'm just a lonely left-over one as can't bear to drop from the ranks."

CHAPTER XXVII

NEW YORK looked cold and strange to Verity. A drippy, chilly rain was falling; the streets were shining and the lights looked golden in the silver mist.

"It is like trying to find someone—my old self," murmured the girl, beckoning a cab.

She had her key to Austen's apartment. She wanted to go to Lewis, but a sudden, sickening realization of the taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge made her wince.

"I can never again act as if I did not know, did not care," she thought. "I know—everything. No presuming, Verity——" She paused, not daring to voice her own name—Barney's name. "They would not have me as I was. They fixed me up and made a little niche for me and were deadly kind, but—no more niches! Here and hereafter, take *as is*, or leave alone."

And never had Verity felt so desperately isolated as she did at that moment.

"It's like sneaking into Barney's home when no one is looking." She paid the cabman at the door and went into the house.

Hallmen and telephone girl nodded in friendly fashion. The elevator boy grinned pleasantly.

How empty and still the apartment was! Noiselessly, Verity tiptoed through the hall. Apparently Sheila O'Neil had but recently left the kitchen—there were preparations for a meal on the table: vegetables set in shining glass dishes ready for the fire; an opened cook book—Sheila never trusted memory when a masterpiece was at stake—was spread on the table.

On, down the hall, Verity passed, scarcely breathing as

she went, like a little pale ghost in the familiar rooms, seeking—what? She knew not.

She paused by the library door, and her breath, for an instant, stopped. There sat Austen in his deep chair! His head was resting on the cushion; his hands lay spread on the tufted chair arms, relaxed, lifeless

How thin, frightfully thin, and pale he looked, and how strangely young to have endured all that Verity now knew that he had endured. All that she had learned lay always close in her thought.

Her quick sympathies were aroused; her young strength met his need, and she recalled the words of her mother: "I am sorry I hurt him!"

He had been so cruelly hurt; he had borne it in his own way because he was he!

Verity raised an arm and braced herself against the door jamb. She looked weary, and felt desperately alone. Something in her reached forth to Austen; something of which she had never been aware before. It was compelling; it frightened her; it was an overpowering emotion that if responded to would hold her to Austen for ever; if denied, would drive her hopelessly from him. But what could she do?

Austen, as people often do, became suddenly aware of a presence in the room with him. Without moving, except to open his eyes, he looked at Verity.

Her attitude of detachment touched him; the yearning on her face startled him.

He did not motion her to come to him; he made no gesture toward her. Over the quivering silence he spoke as one might over wireless:

"My dear 'it is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, Barney." They smiled faintly.

"Verity, do not look at me like that. I want to—tell you everything; talk to you, as I promised to some day; tell you about—your father and mother. But I'm horribly tired—just home, you know."

"I—I know about everything, Barney." The lips twisted convulsively, and Verity leaned more heavily upon her lifted

arm. One cheek was a bit flushed; her colour was always peculiar; it drifted across her face like a rosy cloud.

“You *know!* Who told you? What have you heard?”

Austen made an effort to rise, but sank back as if drawn by weights.

“She—she—my mother went to Granddad Ezra—I mean she went to Bluff End—because she remembered about me. She did not expect to find me there. You see, I went—one has to when it is meant that he should. We just naturally came together. There isn’t much to tell. She—she was sorry she hurt you, she wanted you to know; wanted me—” the words broke on a sob, then the voice calmed—“wanted me to—to make it up to you if I—if I could, and, oh! Barney—*how* I want to!”

Suddenly the young yearning arms were outstretched passionately, appealingly, and still Austen sat like something carved from stone, but the depths of the self-made man were breaking, heaving. The real self of Austen was emerging as bare and helpless as upon that day when his life fell in ruin about him.

“She’s dead, Barney. I held her, and then we—we buried her by the Unknown Woman’s grave. You remember, don’t you, Barney, you—you found me there?”

The tears were streaming down Verity’s face. That craving that was reaching out to Austen was making its last quivering demand. And then Austen drew a long breath. His face twitched. His eyes overflowed, and he opened his arms wide.

“Dear little girl! Little Verity. *My* little girl!”

Verity was in Austen’s arms; they folded about her, crushing her, hurting her. She laughed convulsively.

“It’s all so—tremendous,” Austen faltered; “go over it slowly, Verity, slowly. She—your mother—told you about—me?”

And Verity went over it all, slowly and tenderly.

“Yes, Barney, dear; she told me about you, everything.”

“She told you about herself—about the—thing I had to do to her—not knowing? The—prison?”

A shudder ran over Verity's body.

"Yes, Barney. That was—awful—awful."

"It was!" A closer folding of the arms.

"And she told me about Ted, and her loneliness in—in the —" Verity dared not speak the hard word "prison." She hastened on: "—and when she went away! She tried to keep her vow; tried to—to save me—that is what she said—save me from her; my mother! Oh! Barney, she *did* belong, you know."

"Yes, I know, now. I tried, too, in my way. I was wrong, Verity."

"I—I think she did *not* belong to you, Barney, but she did to me."

"I turned my back on my burden." Austen groaned the words.

"Never mind, Barney. If I took it up, and did my best, then I have paid a little for what you did for me when you took me up."

"Don't, little girl, don't!"

The arms relaxed, but Verity clung, resting her head upon Austen's shoulder. The motion thrilled him.

"Will you ever be able to think of me as your father, child?"

"No, dear. You'll be just Barney to me. Just Barney to the end."

"Is that my punishment?"

"No, dear; your place—that you gave to me when you took me."

Verity was smoothing Austen's tired head. Her healing touch was curing the pain, the tense feverishness.

"I think, Barney"—the words ran into a slow tune—"that everything is going to be all right now. All right. No making-believe, no fear, nothing but going on; going on."

Austen's eyes closed, his head drooped sideways, resting against Verity's head.

At last he started up.

"What has happened?" he asked, bewildered.

"Nothing, Barney, nothing, and—everything." Verity stretched her cramped body. "Everything!"

“How rested I feel!” Austen got up. “I was desperately tired. Let us have dinner, Verity.”

Then Verity did and said a strange thing. She moved in front of Austen, barring his way.

“Barney, you are creeping away; hiding behind something that should not be there!”

“What do you mean?”

“Something that—that made my mother fear you; something that used to make me lonely. Don’t, Barney, don’t hide! No matter what happens, don’t hide!”

The muscles of Austen’s face twitched. He turned his eyes away, then wretchedly glanced back at Verity, permitting her to see the sadness and suffering that dimmed them.

“All right, Barney. We’ll fight it out together, dear. I’ve got you now. I mean to keep you!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL the winds of heaven swept over the hill, driving the clouds helter-skelter, tearing them to shreds, bending the trees and causing them to flap their branches like things maddened with fear.

Within Five Winds House it was quiet. Like the heart of the ocean, it remained unmoved by the tumult.

The clock on the landing ticked precisely and cheerfully—what was time to it? “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever more shall be . . . ” it seemed to chant.

The fire blazed ruddily on the shining hearth, and before it sat Austen in a deep chair. Close to him, her head pressed against him, was Constance Warren. They had been on the trails all day—the soil still clung to their boots; the burrs to their clothing.

They had been to Rocky Lonesome and grimly refrained from speaking of their night there once before. Instead they had planned for the mill, selected sites, and laughed a little, nervously, because everything seemed so strange, so unreal. It was like playing with the toys of others. Fear was mingled with the joy.

Under The Pilgrims, on the way down, they had built a little fire and cooked a noonday meal. Austen could do marvels on a handful of embers.

At sunset, by the stone wall at the beginning of the brook trail, they had listened to a bird's song, and when it died away and the west glowed ruddily Austen told his story; told it simply, sparing himself not at all, but mercifully casting over the dead a mantle that shielded all but the outlines of the pitiful, weak woman.

“You see,” he explained, “she at least had the courage of

her convictions. Verity sensed that, and clung to it. I had my ideals—I mistook them for principles—and so muddled my life and the lives of others. At the critical point I failed as all must who confuse ideals and principles.”

“I think, Barney,” Constance replied, looking off over the pleasant valleys and hills of her home place, “it is in our blood—yours and mine—the wrong inheritance of endurance. One should not endure unwisely. I’ve learned that. I often think of what that Mrs. Winslow of Verity’s school said. At first I rebelled against it, feared that she was not fit to have young things in her care. I have come to regard what she said as an inspiration.”

“I have forgot what it was.” Austen was letting the beauty of the dying day fill his thought.

“The difference between the very young and us, Barney, is—wings!”

Austen smiled. “Yes, I remember,” he said, and his eyes twinkled. “Roots for the very old; feet for us; wings for the young. And”—here Austen’s smile faded—“God keep us from clipping wings. That’s the danger. The older people always try to get a stranglehold on the younger. They’ll have more trouble with wings.”

A silence, and then Constance said that they must go to Lower Farm. Nancy was waiting for them. Still no word of Vance Warren! It was like the desperate attempt to ignore the lately dead in order to take up life.

“And there’ll be ham and eggs and waffles and honey.” Austen spoke quietly. “After all, there is something wonderful, restful, in knowing what to expect.”

“Perhaps.” Constance gave a little laugh. “But the last time I had supper with Aunt Nancy she had broiled ham and omelette. The surprise was thrilling. I kept remembering it for days.”

“Is Aunt Nancy sprouting wings?”

“Barney, I think she has always had them. It may be that we have overlooked them.”

After that happy, peaceful meal at Lower Farm, Austen and Constance walked to Five Winds in the silver-white

moonlight, the crazy gale beating them this way and that.

At last they were at the fireside in the quiet house, and the ticking of the clock presently became as the stroke on the anvil.

“As—it—was—in—the—beginning, is—now—and . . .”

Austen could bear it no longer.

“You sent a telegram bidding me to come, Constance, and—here I am.”

And there he was in a sense that he had not been all day.

“Yes, dear.” The head did not move. Both knew that they had the right to be there alone and close, but they did not quite realize how it had come about. “I wanted to tell you about Vance.”

“And I want to hear.”

“It’s all so ordinary and simple, Barney. The difference lies in his bravery and the effect. I suppose plain truth can always be depended upon at a crisis to tide one over.”

“Over what?”

“The inevitableness of things, Barney. It is perfectly natural that, with restored health and eyesight, Vance should look at life at a level angle.”

“Does that include brutal ingratitude?”

“Don’t, Barney! Let us be sensible. Suppose it did— isn’t that better than working at a problem to which there is no answer? Wings, dear, wings. You get higher, see farther, on wings!”

“Go on, Constance.”

“Well, we had a wonderful talk. I shall never forget it. We simply faced facts. We were a bit breathless, but we held our own. There were the years, Barney, nearly ten of them!”

“Rot!” Austen ejaculated.

“And my money. That was more fearsome than the years.”

“He had borne up under that for some time——”

“That only added to the weight, Barney. Then there

were the laws of the State. It is rather horrible, isn't it, dear, to think that we have to gratify the grim monster of the moral code by doing a low, mean thing before he will sanction the righting of a mistake? There was only one way less obnoxious than others, and Vance took it—he has deserted me!”

Austen shivered.

“Escaping with your money?” he asked.

“No, he borrowed it from old Uncle Jonas Goodall—that's what he has done, and quite legally, too, Barney.”

“He seems to have erected several legal structures by which he could make an ignoble exit.”

“Barney, dear, I wonder if you are looking at this thing from the foot angle or the wing one?” Constance lifted her head and looked at him pleadingly.

“I can only see one thing in all this, Constance. Shorn of its theatrical aspect, it is rather an ugly experience for you.”

“A deserted woman, eh, Barney? Is that the way you see it? I see it another way. I am a *free* woman. I wonder if you have ever been in a position where freedom on any terms would seem glorious?”

Austen shook his head.

“You're not a woman, Barney. I should not have asked you! Since the laws of my land left Vance small choice, why——”

“Constance”—and there was something akin to fear in Austen's eyes—“your freedom, does it mean so much to you that——”

“Again, Barney, being a man, you cannot understand. Do not try. What is freedom?”

“Well, what is it?”

“Choice, willing acceptance, giving where one's heart and soul yearn to give. *That*, to a woman, is freedom. Duty kills her freedom—the aching want to give; give—that means salvation, happiness. Oh! When shall we learn that mere duty, law, kills love between men and women?”

“I begin to see!” Austen gave a relieved sigh.

"But—how can one be sure, dear?"

"I—I do not know, Barney. Perhaps one can never be sure. That does not change truth. And I should never have known this much, except as I have lived and suffered."

"And this—this desertion—it does not hurt you, Constance?"

"No. It was the only way."

"My love, my dearest, I see you at last—free!"

"In time, Barney. There must be the sordid details to endure. The price of freedom. Sometimes"—and again Constance turned her eyes to the steady glowing fire—"sometimes I think it was all arranged—our little life stories, before we came—and that we are simply sent to live them. The lines are all written; we play our parts best when we can learn clearly the words and catch the cues."

"Is that a dangerous philosophy or a saving one, Constance?"

"I do not know."

"And you are not afraid?"

"No. I seem to have lost fear."

"And—Warren?" The bitterness had left Austen's tone. In a subtle way he felt that Warren held no part in his life or Constance's; that he never had. The realization was almost shocking, but it brought peace.

"He has gone to that little inn in Italy, where he and I fell under the spell. He will do brave and fine things, Barney. A man who could rise above tradition and prejudice, defy the scorn of the—misunderstanding people, will surely reach a high goal. He is going to—to write our story."

"You permitted that?" Austen looked aghast.

"It was my last gift to him—the only one he could accept. I do not know why the giving and taking should sanctify the whole thing, but it has, Barney."

"We've been a bit battered, my love"—this after a pulsing silence. "Do you feel battered, Constance?"

"I do not, Barney. I feel as if every muscle of my soul and body had been strengthened."

"I understand."

And then they talked of the time on beyond the sordid details that must be endured.

"We must find our places here among your people and mine, Constance. My mother's blood stirs in my veins. Your people, my people—our people."

"Yes, Barney, and you must help make better laws. Why, it seems like beginning the old story again. You and I will carry on—with a difference."

"Yes."

"And Verity, Barney—what are you going to do with that splendid creature?"

"Nothing!" This with an uneasy stirring.

"But she's so young, and that young Lewis—will he not hamper——"

Austen's lips grew stern.

"My dear, my dear," he said, "are we going to forget the difference in our carrying on? It seems to me that we have only one great duty to such as Verity and Ted: Leave the tracks open for them; clear the rubbish!"

"Oh, Barney, Barney, I had almost forgot! And now I can tell you one thing more—I was almost afraid to, but I am not afraid now. Often when you and I are together and our love draws us closer and closer, I will hear in a bird's song, in the voices of the trees—Vance! Sometimes at a radiant sunset hour or when the moon is white on the hill, I will seem to see him passing near; remember him as one does a beautiful experience of another life. He was so unreal and yet so wonderfully real. Barney, you do understand?"

"Yes, my beloved, I understand. To such as you and I, whose pasts have been hacked and hewed from rigid rock, there has come little enough romance, little enough poetry. Our inheritance is sterner stuff. Warren was romance to you, while I had—you; always you."

Constance drew back and looked long in Austen's eyes. Passion, love, purpose flamed in hers.

"You? You are 'the way, the truth, the light' that leads to life," she murmured. "Life, not dreams. You are"—

this almost fiercely—"you are my *man*. Together what may we *not* do, Barney, knowing—knowing, oh! my beloved—how bitterly we failed, apart?"

Barney drew her close, pressed his face to hers.

Thus was Warren justified!

It was significant, and perhaps marked the difference between feet and wings, that while Austen went to Constance's home to play his part in their Big Scene, Verity went to Lewis's apartment. She bribed the hallman to gain entrance. He was a new man. Aunt Jane's privilege had paved the way to the bachelor sanctuary. Lewis's plan of life was different, apparently, from most of his associates.

"A sister, perhaps?" the hallman asked, never doubting the propriety of Verity's request—there was that about the girl that gave confidence.

"Perhaps. Anyway, it's all right. I want to surprise him."

Scruff was deliriously complimentary in his greeting. Company meant more to him than tiring rules of etiquette.

When Lewis entered his rooms at six-thirty he found Verity curled up on the couch with Scruff included in the curl. The dog's brilliant eyes seemed to convey the idea that it was better to be happy than good and advised others to let it go at that!

"Verity!"

"Hello, Ted! Shall we go out to dinner or shall we"—the tone was dangerously pleading—"get a little snack here? I've been looking in the ice box. There's plenty——"

"My dear girl, of course!" Lewis was so happy that he became vague. "Where's Barney?"

"Gone up to Coverly—to—to"—a dimness rose to the lovely eyes—"mend his nets—his and Constance's."

"Oh!" Sudden glory flooded Lewis's understanding; "Warren has——?"

"Deserted Constance, like a gentleman! I have a long letter from Barney. They seem so young and helpless and—afraid even to be happy, poor blessed!—Ted!"

"Yes." Lewis was rushing about assembling food, china, and silver.

"While you bustle around I want to tell you something. Don't stop bustling—if you do, I'll crash through. I'm just learning to walk alone and I'm terribly topply."

Lewis bustled a bit more energetically. Only when Verity, in her story of Bluff End, rose to soul-stirring heights did he falter. Once he dropped a glass pitcher, muttered a curse, and proceeded to move about with greater skill.

"And that's that, Ted! And here am I—myself, at last. You and Barney wouldn't have me as I really was. You patched up a kind of girl you liked better. Well, I want you to feel quite—quite free to do what Vance Warren has done to Constance—desert me!"

Lewis deposited what he had in his hands with a definite thud on the table and strode over to the couch.

"Can't you see," he asked, his young eyes stern and sad, "that we tried to—to save you—because we loved you?"

"As if you could! You or any one else, save me; any one! But, oh, Ted, when I think what you did for—for my mother, I can forgive even that."

"Don't, Verry, don't."

"She told me every little thing—oh! life had hurt her so, she had done such wild things—but when the end came, you were so good! You stand alone, Ted!"

"Good God! Don't you think I know that?"

And Lewis looked *alone* in the most tragic, appealing sense.

"Ted, I'm coming! I'm coming! It is going to take time; I must find my way—but I'm coming!"

Verity's face was shining.

"Coming where, Verry?" Lewis dared not move.

"To you, Ted; to you. No senseless rubbish matters—try to get that over to your people—I have only Barney, but I *have* Barney, Ted!"

"Senseless rubbish!" Lewis breathed hard, then bent and gathered Verity, and incidentally Scruff, into his strong grasp.

"I did not know that life could be so wonderful!" he whispered.

"It *is* wonderful if you don't slink; if you're not afraid of truth."

"Verity! Verity!" breathed Lewis, and he never was more earnest.

Clinging together, they watched the sun go down behind the Jersey hills; they watched the path of gold across the river fade and fade. Then:

"Ted, I suppose the world will say ugly things about Vance Warren, but it would have said worse if he had not done the only thing left for him to do."

"The world can be beastly," Lewis granted.

"If you let it get its teeth in you, Ted. But I think Vance Warren can shake off the world. Do you mind, Ted, if always I remember him with a thrill?"

"No, I'd think less of you if you did not."

"Thanks, Ted. Sometimes in the dark I shall remember him. Feel him struggling, trying to feel his way among things that were not there, and some that were. I shall often, when I'm up against things, hear his laugh—his beautiful, brave, daring laugh."

"Don't cry, Verity!"

"Let me, Ted, just a little. I have just learned how to cry. It's such a luxury."

"You sweet little thing!"

A long silence.

"I'm all right now, Ted. All right. Let us get supper, and afterward let us go and walk; walk—and talk. There are to be years of preparation."

"Years! Good Lord, Verity—years?"

"I must round out Barney's plan for me—but I'll hurry. And you, Ted?"

"I? Why I'm going to be close beside you, wherever you may be."

"And I beside you, Ted. Side by side; heads above water for the long, long stretch."

"Verity, I read something the other day that sticks! 'To

suffer sets a keen edge on what remains. This is a great truth and has to be learned in the fire.' Isn't that ripping? Your little fire and Barney's and mine. I tell you, life's all right! But don't smother your fires—they are meant to light and warm the world."

THE END

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0001487883A

