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Little MAN

BY G. HERBERT SALLANS

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THE RYERSON FICTION AWARD
The All-Canada Prize Novel
1942

LITTLE MAN *G. Herbert Sallans*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and any resemblance to any living person is purely coincidental.

TO
MY WIFE

Little MAN



Chapter One

George Battle said to the man who stood as a darker shadow than the night:

"Will you please tell me exactly where to see it? I wouldn't want to miss." He laughed nervously. "My first time to the guns, you know."

"You can't miss it, kid," said the man in the dark. "Red star shell, bursting into a green-and-yellow cluster. The second you see it, run like the devil in every direction at once, and bawl 'SOS STAND-TO!' at the top of your voice."

"That's all there is to do, then? I hope I'll see it!"

"I hope you don't; I want some sleep," said the man in the dark, and he was gone. The night parted to let him pass, and folded soundlessly behind him.

George stared after him unseeing. So it was like that! No pomp and clatter about the changing of this guard! He thought, with an exultant shiver: "Here am I, at the Front at last!"

The night breeze lapped at him like a draft from a grave, and he telescoped his head into his greatcoat collar till his steel helmet met it all around.

He stretched his eyes to the ghostly outline of the trench on either side of him. That trench connected the eighteen-pounder guns of his field battery. It oppressed him suddenly, and he climbed out on its parapet, and began to tiptoe back and forth between number three and four guns. He could see the sombre profile of their pits, those square rooms cut into the ground, walled with sandbags and steel rails, roofed with corrugated iron and sandbags to stop the shell splinters and the dreary, soggy insistence of the French winter.

He began to think with awe: "I, Gunner George Arthur Battle, the only one awake in this whole battery ..." And then he anxiously corrected himself, with a gesture of apprehensive apology toward the signal pit. No! Over there, to his left and behind the guns, they never slept. Eddie Chambers was on duty just now, phone strapped to his head, connected by a thin wire to the "O pip" a mile ahead, on that scrawny ridge he would see in another hour, when the first wink of dawn broke the misty blackness. Even now, at ragged intervals, a Very light streaked up, shone white, and swam leisurely to earth again, and the ridge stood gaunt and threadbare against the light.

He began again. "But," he reminded himself, "I have got to be first if anything happens, if the S O S goes up ... Red, bursting into a green-and-yellow cluster. That's it. Red, bursting into a green-and- ..."

He glued his eyes to the uneasy, invisible horizon. Would they shoot up just one, or would there be many? Well, no use worrying about it. But his heart and brain were on fire.

He groped back into the shallow trench, trying to land lightly on the duck-walk with his field boots and their steel-armored heels. Bits of chalk and mud slithered down after him. He stood still, then, straining his ears for human sounds. His heart thumped, but he stifled his breath in a flurry of alarm. Those fellows sleeping in their "hogaboons"—the surface dugouts of corrugated iron and sandbags—what would they say to a clumsy recruit? He braced himself for the tumult that might explode from some curtained entrance. Most of all he feared the rushing, blustering voice of Red Dall, bunking there in the double hogaboon with Bill Dunn. What a man, that Charley Dall, a man to give you gooseflesh!

George had found them in the gunpit the evening before when he first came to the guns in that January of nineteen-sixteen.

"Hey, guys," Red had bellowed, "look what they brought up with the rations!" His voice always came out like a foghorn; you didn't know whether it was a guffaw or a blast of anger.

Then Dunn, with a grin that began around his mouth corners and wrinkled up back of his eyes, clear to his ears, would talk as if words were a bore and too much effort. But to George he was just this side of God.

Bill Dunn was the limber gunner. That meant number one of the crew, the man who sighted the gun and fired it, with a vicious pull at the steel handle by his knee. He sat on a steel seat just left of the gun breech cradle. When the gun was fired, the barrel leaped back beside him on its recoil springs, and edged into place slowly. Number two gunner yanked open the breech, an empty shell case was ejected, and the loader thrust in another shell.

Third man in the pit was Bombardier Sam Johnson. "Streak," they called him, and George was shocked at their lack of respect for an N.C.O. They called him Streak, not only for his long, dangling legs and dizzy speed of movement, but for the zip and colour of his profanity. He had the most unprintable vocabulary George had ever heard; the impartial ferocity of his oaths was beyond one's wildest dreams.

"How the blank-blank long you been at the bloody horselines?" was Sam's first kindly greeting to George. "How many so-and-so illegitimate gunners they got down there swingin' the lead? I been at these cock-eyed guns so long my hair's growin' through my tin hat. Next time I get to an estaminet I'll ..."

"Aw go an' boil your head!" Red fired it at him with such violence that George winced. "You and your bawling about the horselines. What the hell d'ja come to this man's war for—to groom mokes or to snipe Heinies? You give me a pain in the ..."

"And you!" roared Streak, in soldier idiom, with another volley of his incredible profanity which he suddenly broke off with: "Say, who's talkin' to the kid anyway? How long you been over?" he turned to George.

"Just two weeks today," said George with a grateful stage fright. "Came from Shorncliffe over to Le Havre. Channel was so rough I slid ..."

"Yeh! You slid on the floor, and all the guys were sick but you." It was Red Dall's roaring voice, as he sat balanced on the gun trail. "Hey, Dunn, pull down the gas curtain. I feel a draft."

"We weren't a draft," George defended, angrily, and was instantly appalled at his own nerve. "They broke up our battery and divided us among you ..."

"Among us lousy so-and-so's," Dunn snorted. "Swell way to treat papa's gift to the Empah, dumping you in with such lugs as Red ..."

One of Dunn's boots ripped swiftly under the gun trail, anticipating Red's lunge. Red's feet flew in the air and he tumbled into George's embarrassed arms. George scrambled out, and Red rolled back among the stacked shell cases.

And thus, George's baptism to the guns. He had found the men neither hostile nor friendly, neither cold nor cordial, but with a loud and embarrassing bluster among themselves that he was to appreciate later. Their appalling oaths, their blood-curdling names and their terrifying familiarity were the brotherhood of the gun pit. Their hell-roaring antics were animal spirits. Their profane and lofty condescension to him alternately flattered and abashed him. Yet here he was, accepted among them even if only for a brief hour until they were bored with him.

George finally asked, with fearsome awe, where he should report. "What the hell!" shouted Red, "you in the firing-line and not even reported? Man, they shoot 'em for that up here!"

At last they relented, and told him that Duffie would be along and not to worry about reporting. Duffie came, sure enough and soon enough, bawled them out collectively and luridly for eating all the chocolate and biscuits, picked up Streak's legs and threw them sideways and sat on the ammunition-box where they had been. George called him Sergeant and hoped that some time he would have the nerve to call him Duffie.

Dufferin McLean was short, wiry, bronzed, a man who might be tough on parade ground. But here at the guns he was one of the gang, trading stories with them, relapsing at times into sudden stern dignity that impressed no one save George.

He was, felt George, a man you could never get very close to, a man you would hold always in awe. He would like him, he felt, if a rookie dared feel so personal toward a sergeant. And this mingled feeling of awe and friendship he was to carry until, long afterward, he dug Duffie's shattered body out of the filthy mud at Passchendaele, and marvelled at the sheer tenacity of a man who refused to die even when his brains lay in a shapeless mass beside him on the stretcher.

Tonight, though, his real alarm came when Duffie reminded them their crew had to do double sentry-go, and that George's turn was from four to six in the morning. "And remember an S O S isn't just some pretty fireworks to look at. Heinie's jumpy, if that means anything to you, and itching to come over."

"Yeah!" Red jeered, and he might have been doing it deliberately to ease George's embarrassment at the stern lecture. "An' when it goes up, you gallop into Duffie's cootie gallery and kick him square in the ..."

But he never finished, for Duffie sprang on him like a cat, wrapped the end of a breech-cloth around his face and was out of the low door before Red emerged, spluttering and swearing.

Ah, what an evening it had been! George had gone to sleep at last, in his blankets, with his rubber sheet spread under him, fairly tingling with excitement. Hard to imagine this was war.

But here he was alone, now, in dread that he'd wakened someone, lighting a cigarette and shielding the glow with his hand. Still little life on the horizon. "Too damned quiet," he had heard someone say the evening before. A few star shells over No Man's Land. That was all.

He tiptoed along the trench and listened at each gun pit. Snores and grunts from the little dugouts. Thank God! He sneaked away, climbed the parapet again. He wished the dawn would come, and yet dreaded it. "That's the time Heinie loves to come over," they had said.

"Wish I could be like Streak," he thought. A rounder, Streak called himself, and casually had mentioned adventures from Milwaukee to Denver, from Frisco to Detroit. Yet George suspected Streak was only a few years older than himself. In England and Scotland, too, it seemed that Streak had been to fabulous places, to haunts that George pretended he had seen, though his heart told him he had not the slightest idea of them.

It was nice, though, to think of Bo Charlton being in the battery with him—Bo, endeared by college days and by their travel overseas and their training with the old battery in England. Bo had come to France first. Yet, as George trudged into the horselines with their incredible mud, who should come roaring to meet him but his pal. Here was a thing, he had thought, that made strong men cry.

He started guiltily and suddenly from his reverie, as if he'd found someone looking over his shoulder. He glued his eyes to the front. Was he imagining it, or was it more fitful than it had been? Very lights rose and fell, and by their light he saw the naked stubs and ghosts of trees that had died long since. In a sardonic prayer they thrust their gaunt and tortured limbs skyward.

How would an S O S come? Would there be warning? Would guns start to shoot somewhere first? Suppose he wasn't looking just where the S O S went up!

He glanced around apprehensively in the agony of his rising excitement. The gun pits lay still, their roof edges dimly visible against the blacker ground, like unreal shadows.—Shadows! He peered again, then up and down the trench and off toward the east. Sure enough, it wasn't so dark now. The dawn was coming. "And Heinie just loves to ..."

Four faint, muffled booms, two seconds apart, away off in the distance beyond the lonely ridge ahead—noises hardly more than a far-off drum. A faint rustling, slithering noise now in the sky like some ironic god whispering beyond the clouds. A weird, unearthly sound that could not be placed, that grew a moment or two, then rustled again into silence.

He stared up into the starless blankness above him. His hair rose. What was that! And then he guessed, or thought he did:

"I've heard my first shell!" Long-range guns—Heinie guns—miles and miles away, shooting at some target miles behind him. "These Heinies can hit you if they just got your address," so ran the vaudeville joke. Where would these shells fall? St. Pol? Maybe farther. He listened intently for more. But there were none. Just those four measured beats, and the uncanny slithering in the emptiness of the sky.

How he would describe this in his first letter to Pitch Black! Or would it be to her? Would it be, maybe, to the girl in England, the girl Bo had introduced him to by mail? The girl he'd pretended he was going to see and never did! Josephine Yorke. "I'm called Joy," she had written. But he felt in self-defence: What did she care about him, she in England where she could meet thousands if she wanted to? And probably had. Still—kind of a pity not to know her when he had the chance. Might never get it again. "School chum of my sister," Bo had said.

A sudden chatter bit the silence beyond the ridge, and four Very lights went up in quick succession. A machine-gun! It rattled away for a few moments, stopped, then started again. More lights! More machine-guns joined in. Swift as thought, the clatter of them broke out to right and left.

George's heart pounded till his ribs shook. He looked hurriedly at his watch. Five-forty-five. Then he was staring again in consternation. What if the S O S had gone while he was finding the time! Some sentry! But no, an S O S hung in the air

for some time ...

Sharp, distinctive cracks now, puncturing the rising, angry chatter of the machine-guns. Then an enormous cr-rump that sent a hollow backwash of sound racking through the morning. Machine-guns pelted away like mad. Lights rose in a shower.

White lights. Green lights. George Battle strained his eyes till they ached. What if he made a mistake! What if he had gone colour blind! How did infantrymen know when to shoot an S O S? Should he waken somebody anyway? Must be something wrong. "Don't be a fool, George! They know what they're doing. They're just ..."

His heart suddenly froze. Up it went, a red ball that shot high, hesitated an instant, burst into a dazzling cluster of breath-taking beauty. It was green! It was yellow, too! God in heaven, what a sight! He stood rooted in his tracks. He must run now, run like the devil in all directions and bawl S O S! His tongue stuck drily in his mouth!

"Hey, sentry! S O S! Stand-to! You asleep up there?" It was Chambers, at the mouth of the signal pit. He had got it by wire from the O Pip. Chambers rousing him—him, the sentry, on whom the battery depended! George's spell broke. With a sob he leaped into the trench, rushed to the nearest dugout entrance, Red's and Dunn's. His lips moved in soundless oaths at himself. He opened his mouth to yell.

"S O S!" he said, and his voice sounded matter of fact, apologetic, strained. He drew a deep breath and let it go again. This time it came out like a gunshot. In the darkness Red sprang up as if shot from a catapult, and bashed his head against the iron roof. As George fled to the next gun pit he heard a crimson blast from Red. But at last he had his voice, and each S O S shout gave him confidence.

Yells and orders rose all around him. Among them he heard Duffie's voice at the sergeants' pit. "S O S—Stand-to!" Everyone took it up. Everyone, in fact, seemed to waken with that roar on his lips. The whole battery came to life with a profane, explosive suddenness.

George came thrashing back along the trench toward C gun, and field boots pounded the duck-walk behind him. Gunners dived into the pits. In C, Red and Streak plunged in lightning haste to tear aside the camouflage screen from the mouth of the gun. Dunn was at the gun itself.

"Give us a hand here, kid," Red yelled. George gratefully rushed to the gun pit mouth, got tangled in the camouflage netting, stumbled around more in the way than of help.

Duffie was at the gun pit door now.

"Number three gun ready!" Dunn bawled.

Dunn sat in the firing-seat, Streak opposite him in number two seat, Red was at the ammunition shelves with a fuse wrench in his hands, a lamp facing him.

"Get some cotton in your ears, kid," he said.

"Range three-nine-hundred," Duffie yelled. Streak twirled the range wheel in a second, using a flashlight to see the figures.

"One-five degrees left!" Dunn traversed the gun to the angle with lightning speed, his eyes glued to the sights. The gun barrel halted its swing when the upright line in the sights cut through the lamp on the aiming post.

The noise up ahead was growing. Machine guns rat-tatted furiously all along the front. Heavy cr-rumps came more swiftly, as German guns and mortars laid down their barrage on front line and supports. The fat, heavy crumps were "Minnies," dropping from a high cruel arch over the boys ahead.

Duller booms and the staccato crackling of smaller explosions told of the infantry pumping their own mortar shells into the enemy. How fast they worked! The sky was a continual flare of lights now, and George flushed in shame at his fears of missing an S O S.

"High explosive!" yelled Duffie.

Red jammed a shell into the breech, Streak slammed the lock shut, Dunn yelled, "Ready!" Orders flew up and down the trench from the battery sergeant at the signal pit through his megaphone. The gun section sergeants picked them up and relayed them to the crews.

"Four rounds a minute! Sweep two degrees!" Duffie barked.

Bong! The flash of number one gun, and the ground shook. Then number two, closer. George held his breath. Duffie held his flashlight to his wrist watch.

"Number three gun, fire!" he yelled. And the shattering blast bit his words off in the air. A white sheet of flame leaped out ahead, the barrel flashed back as it vomited the fire and shell into the screaming dawn. The gun kicked and bounced, and the dust raised by the concussion flew up around them.

"Ready!" "Fire!" "Ready!" "Fire!" Every fifteen seconds Duffie barked, and the gun bit off his word. Each time the barrel leaped back as if it would tear loose; each time the gun bucked and reared and dug its trail shovel into the log, and the log held it so firmly that the gun wheels seemed to leave the ground. Dunn swept his two degrees right and left with the speed and precision of a machine. Streak whirled the range wheel at dazzling speed, though even a hair's difference meant yards in range.

The crisp, unexcited "Ready" fascinated George. Red roared as he sent each shell into the bore with a powerful thrust, addressed each shell to some Heinie, and blessed it with inexhaustible profanity that was hot and lurid as the red mop of hair that tumbled over his uncovered head.

Young gods they were, all! How sure of themselves! How contemptuous, how lordly superior as they joked and swore about the war and everyone in it including themselves! George was thankful to be with them. It would have been nice to have Bo in the same gun crew instead of in number one. But he felt privileged to be with these. Surely there were no finer gunners. Some day he, too, would show that he knew, that he was no ignoramus, even if he was a rookie. He would lay the gun. He would pull the firing handle. He ...

"Hey, move them damn shell cases, kid!" Red's terrifying thunder in his ears. "What the hell yuh think this is, a tea party? Come outa the trance!"

George sprang in fright. He ducked for empty brass cases on the floor, and as he did so Dunn fired again. The breech whizzed past his face and he stumbled and fell ingloriously backward. He scrambled frantically and comically out of the pile of rolling cases. Red's laughter rose in a high falsetto: "It's only your head, kid. You don't need it!"

Hot anger burned George's face, and he was glad of the dim light. He deserved the sarcasm. He bent over the shell cases and piled them furiously into the corner. His head rang, but not with injury. It was the demoniac crack each time as the field gun fired with such unbelievable, unbearable sharpness. It was, too, the stupid feeling that he had escaped a pulverized skull by an inch.

What a hellish din it was! Guns all about them. A battery to their left firing as if gone mad. Did their own sound like that! Big hollow booms from behind, where the howitzers lobbed their shells into the sky above.

George exulted: "What a battle! Wonder what's doing up ahead? Big push, I bet. What if we don't stop them ..." Twice Duffie had yelled to shorten range. They fired at 3,500 yards now. Four hundred yards all in a few minutes! Heinies coming over in mass formation—they did that. He'd heard about how they came. When would they reach the top of the ghostly, lonely ridge with its skeletons of trees? When ...

"SS-SS-SS ... Like a flying locomotive letting off steam right over his head. An indescribable blast of sound in the smallest fraction of a second, a shattering crash just behind them. Duffie ducked his head in the doorway, and George saw Red wince. Then came a thunderous rain of mud lumps on the gun pit roof.

"Holy old bald-headed!" said Streak. "Here's another—"

"Whoo-oo—ss-ss—bawm!" This time George heard it for a split second. An unearthly snore, like some cosmic lunatic tearing the sky apart. George ducked his head instinctively.

"Wh-what was that!"

"Five-nines, kid!" yelled Red, and shoved another shell in the bore. "Look out—" Again the snore and the smash of steam. This shell exploded ahead of the gun with a terrifying crash. Red had flopped half down; Dunn and Streak crouched behind the shrapnel shield on the gun. Duffie's voice again: "Fire!" And in defiance the living, smashing little gun spat again, as a terrier leaps at the throat of a wolfhound.

"Jumpin' Cripes! Has he got the range on us!" shouted Streak. "Give 'im hell, Bill! Holy—"

For a bewildered, shaken second George thought the gun had blown up on them. He saw the upward cascade of fire and earth just to the right of the gun pit mouth, found himself flattened as if by an earthquake, a ragged buzzing passed his ear. The aiming post was hidden a moment by the shower of falling earth and chalk, the gun pit roof rained dust on them, a stench filled his nose.

"Everybody all right?" Duffie's voice, and his flash lamp darted inquiringly around. "How's your sights, Bill?" Only then did George see a great jagged gash in the shrapnel shield. Red pointed with a wry, strained grin at the pit post beside him. There, sawn deep through the wood and imbedded in the sandbags, a jagged splinter of steel two inches thick and a foot long. Over Streak's head the tortured, twisted steel of the shield.

"Sights okay. Ready!"

"Fire!"

George's heart bounded in a great thump that stopped his breath. He was shaking like jelly. He was scared! Scared of what? More big shells came now, one after the other, right, left, front, back.

"God Almighty, has he got these beanblowers bracketed!" Red yelled. "Take that, you—" And he rammed a shell home so hard the bore rang with a hollow boom. Bang went the hot little gun again, and oil splashed back into their faces.

Suddenly Streak was lowering the barrel with the range wheel. Dunn was out of his seat in a flash, grabbed the long ramrod with the cloth around its end, stumbled over George who was in the way, yelled "Lookout!" He thrust the ramrod into the barrel, the three gunners worked with all their might, pulling and pushing it to and fro furiously till the rifling shone again.

Then out came the ramrod, was flung to one side. Up went the barrel, gun was traversed, Dunn at the sights, shell in the bore, breech slammed shut. "Ready!" "Fire!" It had all taken but a few seconds.

"C'mon, kid, spell off." Red brushed past George, half shoved him into the loader's place. And here he was at last, no formality, no orders, no instructions, save "Here, kid, load!" A gunner at last. He would show them now!

The barrel flashed back past him, eased into place again, open came the breech, out the empty shell case. Blindly George stabbed at the open breech bore with the sharp-nosed shell, crashed it against the breech block, tried again, got it half-way in, yanked it back. It was stuck! Sweat burst from his body, panic seized him. Shame blinded and shattered him. He tore a gash in his hand.

"Here!" With one dexterous wrench Red had the shell loose. "Let 'er go again!"

Tears flooded his eyes. Tears of anger and shame and humiliation. What a stupid ass they'd think him! Why didn't shells go in for him as they had at the artillery camp?

"Range thirty-six hundred. Two rounds a minute," Duffie's voice. Blessed sound! George's head cleared as the fire slackened. But the terror of the five-nines came more vividly. His heart tore at his ribs. In the dawn light over the jagged edge of the shield, he saw the gaping hole at the gun pit corner, where the shell had torn away the sandbags and left the roof rails naked and gaunt. Beyond that were other fresh shell holes. He shuddered. But an inner glow had begun to burn, and it persisted and grew. They were still letting him load!

"Cripes!" Streak's yell was swallowed in the snoring howl from the skies, in the thunder of the explosion, in the sharper blast near by. Duffie's head ducked again. And in a moment:

"Number two gun out of action. Number three gun, four rounds a minute, sweep three degrees!"

A harsh rain of oaths from Streak. "What the hell, ain't they got any other guns on this front!" He sprang toward the gun

trail. George, fussing with a shell that would not go home, felt himself suddenly and violently propelled backward.

"One side! Lemme at it!" His gloved hands seized the shell, rammed it in with a resounding bong. Streak's words tumbled out in a hail of profanity.

"See you got that bubble some place near centre and the range within a hundred yards, yah redheaded sheepstealer. Let 'er go—" The gun fired as he spoke.

Absorbed in admiration, George piled shell cases furiously, and stacked new shells for Streak. He would, he knew, never forget this.

They dropped back to thirty-eight hundred, then to their original range, reduced fire to one a minute, and presently came: "Cease fire!" The strafe was over. The five-nine battery had stopped shooting, as if disgusted with trying to hit so insignificant a target.

"Them Fritzie's might let a guy have a night's sleep before they start their monkey business," Streak grumbled.

"Gee, what happened, d'you suppose?" George breathed, trying to be neither too eager nor too indifferent.

"Just a raid," Dunn grunted. "They didn't get anything, or we'd be counter-attacking."

"Say, go tie up your hand, kid, or you'll have a case of galloping scabies," Red advised. George shrugged in bravado. "Oh, 'snothing," he estimated. "Guess I'll—"

"Go tie it up, you damned fool!" Red roared in sudden bluster, and George winced, not knowing whether the glint in his eye was deviltry or fury. But after a quick, alarmed look he bolted for his dugout. He pulled a first-aid bandage out of his haversack, doused iodine on the raw wound, wrapped it and was on his way back in a moment. He collided with Duffie at the gun pit door.

"Okay, stand down, you mugs," Duffie said. "Cover your gun pits—and make it fast!" They were all out the entrance in a flash, Dunn for the gun muzzle, which he covered with a canvas hood, and Streak and Red for the camouflage netting. George helped them as best he could, and stared down the hole the big shell had made so close to their gun. It was broad daylight now, and the faint song of an airplane came to his ears.

"Hey, come in, dope," someone yelled from the gun pit, and George sneaked in under the corner of the camouflage.

"Don'tcha see that plane up there!" Streak grumbled.

"Aw, dry up," Red reproved him without rancour. "What's gripin' you!"

Streak ignored him with lofty disdain, and asked Duffie: "How did B sub make out?"

"Langford got it," Duffie said shortly, and they knew how it hurt him to say it. Langford was the sergeant of number two, and Duffie's closest friend in the battery. "Smith's blown up—Blighty for him. Harrison got a plunk in the neck. Shell landed in the pit mouth. The gun went right through the roof."

A voice from the sergeants' pit: "Rum up!" The three bombardiers each grabbed a fuse cap from a shelf.

"C'mon, kid, and bring a dish, before these pot-bellied sergeants gaffle it all," Red shouted. But the taunt was lost on Duffie, who was already on the way. George followed them in the trench to where the quartermaster's assistant, Poky Jenkins, poured the rum from a stone jar labelled S.R.D. Red held out two fuse caps.

"I'll draw Langford's as well," he said, as one cap was being filled, and Jenkins poured before he looked up. Then light dawned on him. "Hey! you low-down—" But Red fled down the trench, shouting with laughter.

Jenkins muttered profanely under his breath and went on pouring. George got his and followed Red and Dunn and Streak to the gun pit. The others poured theirs into their mess tins and diluted it with water from their brown water bottles. George decided that, for effect, he should drink his neat. He tipped the fuse cap to his lips. Liquid fire rolled down his windpipe. He gasped, spluttered, and held desperately to what was left in the fuse cap, as he reeled about, coughing. They laughed at him in a gleeful lack of sympathy.

"G-God, that's strong," he finally moaned. Tears rained down his cheeks. He humbly poured the rest into his mess tin, diluted it and drained it, while Dunn and Streak called Red names for drawing the double ration. Drawing for a dead man had seemed cynical to George, but he was too loyal to feel shocked. If Red did it, it was all right.

He listened to their talk, laughed at their jokes even when the point escaped him, and asked questions. What had happened? Had Heinie taken any ground? Would many be killed?

They shrugged at his questions. Then Duffie happened along. "Come on, loosen up," Red bawled at him. "What was it—Fritz spot a new latrine or something?"

"Guess they wanted prisoners, but they didn't get any. Our boys left a few of them on the wire."

George thought of the lonely, naked ridge ahead and wondered what good it could do to send men out like that to hang in pieces on the fields of barbed wire. And he struggled with a thought. "I—guess I've a brother up there somewhere, wonder if he was in the front line this morning?"

"Just a minute, I'll phone up the general and find out," Red began, and stopped. "Humph!" he grunted with sympathy. "That's a hell of a place to send your brother. What possessed him to go in the P.B.I.? Doesn't he know anything?"

"He was one of the first to enlist," George said stoutly.

"Well, he shoulda joined the beanblowers," said Red.

There was a bluff heartlessness about it that George realized was only a pose. But he had a sharp fear in his heart. What if good old Hal did stop one? "I'd be the only one left of us except Jean, and she's married."

The gunners drifted off to their dugouts, to lie on their blankets fully dressed, drowsy with the rum and breakfast. George still sat on the gun pit steps, in a delirium of misery, anxiety and happiness.

His thoughts, too, went to an estaminet, to the Coq d'Or a mile from the horselines, where he'd found the luscious and seductive Andree. Baffling and preposterous creature she was, with those beckoning eyes of hers, those legs that kept their shape in spite of the wooden shoes. You had to admit it, he argued passionately to himself, these French women had something. A yard or two of black dress, a wisp of white for trimming—He thought of Andree with yearning.

He'd gone from the horselines with some spare gunners and drivers, and the saddler and bugler, to drink *vin blanc*, and Andree after her fashion had winked at him.

Then something had happened. George was rocking back in his chair, making harmony with the others at the table, when the door opened. A lean-faced young man came in, forage cap tilted rakishly across his handsome head, and friends with him. George's glass had gone down on the table with a crash, and he was on his feet and racing across the room.

"Hal!"

"George! Where'd you come from?"

Thus, two brothers in France. Two brothers with hardly a dozen words before they'd dragged their chairs around a common table, and Andree came with *beaucoup vin blanc* from the inexhaustible cellar of the estaminet. In the courage that Hal's presence had brought him, George had put his arm around Andree as she poured the wine, just in fun, and had found her frighteningly warm and yielding. To cover his blushes at this sudden discovery, he had exaggerated:

"My new gal, Hal!"

It was only a boast, but having said it he felt an obligation to make it real. He'd tried his French with her and, to his delight, she understood him. He had asked her, in his pain-staking way, if he might come to see her. And then there was a sudden occasion when it was not arranged but simply happened, with all the hot-blooded impulse of their age, his own shyness and the sophistication of Andree's calling.

The other soldiers made rude remarks, and Andree, estaminet born and trained, met them with a snappy retort. But George liked to think that sometimes the quick flashes from the corners of her eyes had a special meaning for him. And what a laugh she had! A rich, throaty laugh with music in it.

Some day, he thought, wouldn't it be something if he and Andree were to be married. When he got leave he would come to this little village and walk along the red flagstones and trade the time of day across the courtyard, with its eternal manure pile, with M. Papa in his barn. He would taunt Mama as she muttered over the soup and the brown bread and the red wine. And then he and Andree, they would be out in M. Papa's orchard under his apple trees and—

George stirred in his reverie. Andree? Andree or Joy? Joy, an exquisite creature of his dreams whom he hadn't yet dared visit. Well, on leave he would go and see her, but maybe he could go and see Andree first, and then to each of them he could feel like a man with a romance. Andree—Joy. Well, Andree was closer. He would go again when he was given his first relief from the guns.

Yet he and Hal had been there, Hal of the P.B.I., Hal the lean and rugged-faced veteran who'd been a boy when he left for the war. Hal, who'd gone singing down the long road with his friends. How casual it was, two brothers here in France at the Coq d'Or. Scant words together, and then to the business at hand.

"See you here again," they said. "Tomorrow night," George made Hal promise. And George had gone back, but Hal was not there, for Hal's battalion had gone into the line. Hal was up there somewhere in front while this strafe was on. Well, they would meet again. He refused to think that the line troops might go somewhere else when they came out. He patted the card case in his pocket. A little picture of Andree lay there. Perhaps he alone of all the soldiers had a picture of Andree. He had a queer, quick thought of Pitch Black, far in Canada. And then the heavy weight of the morning bore on him and he dozed on the gun pit steps.



Chapter Two

The little grey Austin service car stopped at the gate of the forest of the dead. A good-looking, bronzed young airman of twenty, unwound his folded legs out of it, emerged head last and straightened up, his blue forage cap at a rakish angle.

The gate stood away from the tall tree-lined Arras Road that swept to the north. Amid the watchful multitude of white crosses he strode cautiously, with his sketch map open in his hands. He was appalled at the countless numbers of them, each a gleaming sentry in the neat graveyard. Here lay the flower of regiments. Here were the hopes and dreams of mothers and fathers, and their prayers as well, from those dim years that were gone beyond recall. Here thousands upon thousands of young men like himself lay in their unwaking sleep under endless rows of white crosses among the poppy fields. These were the boisterous young of another generation, an earlier and maybe simpler generation than his—the singing, grousing, noble company of those who were there when his Dad and Uncle Hal were boys.

Carefully he followed the chart, and came at last and stood, as he had known he would stand, before the grave among all the graves, the little rectangle of earth where the name-plate read:

SERGEANT HAROLD JOHN BATTLE. KILLED IN
Action, December Sixth, 1916.

An overwhelming gust of pity swept him where he stood. A mere twenty-three—and had he lived that gap from war to war he would now be forty-six. A foot slogger up there in the filthy mud. Great tales his Dad had told him of this debonair young god from the temple of his memory. But what a small place now, where he finally lay for all eternity under the timeless vigil of a brother's hero worship. The young man stood sobered and abashed before the miniature mausoleum of sod, out here in a far and lonely field amid the imploring silence of the dead.

It was there, in the estaminet near this place, that Dad remembered, the estaminet where Uncle Hal had left him and gone singing off into the night, full of wine and full of the devil. Perhaps it was his last night in any estaminet anywhere before the strafe when he died. You could see now why Dad's memories were long, and why they clustered around that buoyant brother who had gone singing, singing, singing down the long road that had no end.

That was how they had gone, these gallant hosts of the past. It was the way they wanted to go if go they must, on the red flagstones of the estaminet and off toward the star-shelled horizon where the road led into the duck-walks, and the duck-walks led into the valley of the shadow of death.

There, too, had been Dad, little better off in the muddy trenches around his gun pit, fumbling with the shells that were to fire right over Uncle Hal's head up there in the front line. Dad at the guns, Dad shooting at the Huns while the Huns were shooting down his brother Hal.

"God rest you, Uncle," said the young flier reverently. "I'll tell Dad I saw you again, over here. I'll tell him you haven't changed, that you're the same young good-looking kid he knew."

Words came into his mind, a stray wisp of verse flying on the breeze that rustled through the leafless forest of crosses:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn—

A great company gathered swiftly about him then, and voices filled the air. Whispers they were that rose from the earth and grew in volume till they became a chorus and a tumult. Voices of young men like those he had left in the scramble shack, wise ahead of their years, men who got the wind up but were never dismayed, and took the war in their stride. Pals of Dad and Uncle Hal, all come back now through the open door of the years to tell him about the war that *was* a war.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them—

He wished now that he had wrenched no secrets from his Dad. There was only that one, a grinning confession that he had once thought he'd lost his heart in an estaminet. The Coq d'Or, on the Arras Road, Dad said, and told him how to get

there. Well, thought young Hal, he had gone and found a Coq d'Or, and found, too, a faded, dumpy woman of middle age, with only the tell-tale flash of her eyes to hint of her bygone glory. He'd had no heart to speak to her. There were many Coq d'Or estaminets, many dumpy women with faded faces who had been sensuous little French girls when Dad and Uncle Hal were there.

What of it! Here, where he stood, lay the real memory that Dad had left in France, here beneath the avalanche of blood and death. It was a short time they'd had to live their adventure. Life must have been hard in those days. He flushed at his impulsive condescension to that last, lost generation for their brief enjoyment, their little amours. How futile they had been!

Here lie more than memories, he thought, his eyes on the ground where the unblinking vigil of the dead was kept. Here lie the ideals they fought for—assaulted, ravished and forgotten. And now the rebirth of them has come again. They, too, will be mauled and beaten, and lie under the white crosses.

What could have been more natural if Dad had really stopped by the road to be with a French girl? There was little enough fun to be had. He of all the soldiers might—just might—have been the one she wanted to draw to her, that girl of the first Great War in the drab little estaminet with its manure pile outside the door. And what French sweetheart at the French front had she forgotten when she behaved after the manner in which she felt?

But maybe it had not happened at all. Perhaps a little petting, a little wistful, wishful thinking that somehow grew its own halo, and borrowed from time and a tricky conscience a status in devilry that never belonged. Yes, that was it, or Dad would never have told Mother. And yet told her he had, about the French girl called Andree by the Arras Road.

Fathers did that, Hal reflected. Fathers impelled by pride for a bygone day; sometimes they dug into the musty storehouses of their youth and brought out the little peccadilloes they found there, just as they found and polished again their medals and their regimental badges. It was more than a mere nostalgic impulse toward the romance of other days. It was a re-asserting of primordial things, a going back from the days when love had become complacent, coaxed and spoon-fed, to the days when it came unbidden and imperative.

That was it; that was always it! Young men borrowed their self-appraisal from the years of maturity to come; older men borrowed vanity from the insatiated yearnings that had gone.

And then this Andree—perhaps she, too, had clung to her morsel of romance and enshrined it for a while after the last war. Dad had gone away with the guns, and there was the end of it.

"Now suppose he did have an adventure like that—and I'd be surprised if he didn't. I'll probably have one myself. When his leave came, what a struggle! Should it be the little estaminet girl or Blighty? And Blighty won, of course, because the estaminet was a busman's holiday.

"We owe Dad a debt, Alma and I. Suppose he'd chosen this French girl—let's call her Andree. Married her and brought her home after the war, and then she turned out to be this shapeless woman I saw today. But no, he kept his head. He went to London, the lucky old dog, and met his Joy. My beautiful mother."

He roused himself in self-reproach at his thoughts.

SERGEANT HAROLD JOHN BATTLE. KILLED IN ACTION.

He bent and touched the cold, ageless epitaph with his hands. "They named me after you," he murmured, then stood erect and saluted.

He turned to go, and as he went he felt the tug of them on his sleeve, and heard the whispers of a multitude of them. The vast escort, the legion of the dead, divided to let him pass and fell in silently behind him. They formed a ghostly guard of honour to the gate of their hallowed lawn, their unseen hands at the salute, the soundless clamour of their voices dying away in the distance as he, too, went on down the long road that had no end.

Chapter Three

The first sensible memory to stay with George Battle fluttered out of the dawn of the century. It was the vision of his mother looking at him from the other side of a room that was full of seats with tall wooden backs. A fellow doesn't remember much at three, after all. Yet George had reason to remember this one, for he had the important idea that he had been traded to another woman who now held him on her lap.

"Your mama said I could take you home to live with me," said the woman with unreasonably good humour. But her smile never registered on George's mind. He scrambled up rebelliously on her lap and stared in a panic across the room at his mother for a denial of this preposterous trickery. He saw her face there, with other faces, but the rest were blurred, and only one face mattered.

It was a short and violent episode for George, and all the surrounding circumstances were for ever lost to him. Even the reunion a few moments later at the door of the little church departed in the mists of forgetfulness. Even family scenes a hundred times more weighty were dismissed from his baby mind as trifling beside this one blinding, volcanic thought that he had lost his mother.

How he got back to her, he never knew. Whether his sister Jean and his brother Harold even noticed it, he had no means of knowing, for neither could remember it in the years that followed. Nor, strange to say, could his father. But it stayed in George's mind as one of the ineradicable pictures of his childhood. In all his after years, when he felt his instinctive dread of running out of things, he thought it might trace back to this one terrifying moment.

Thus do the jokes of children's years in passing leave their scars.

Slightly less vivid in George's mind was their ride in the family sleigh over the pitch holes that filled the road, and of standing, his hand in his sister's, in the snow with people all around him while they put something in the ground, out of George's sight. His father was there, too, and though it was very cold he had his head bare, and so did other men. Everybody cried quite a bit, except George. Not in the noisy, vocal way he believed crying should be done, but with handkerchiefs dabbing at their faces, and no sounds coming from them at all.

And then some women came and hugged George and smothered his face in their coats. A strange thing to do, but George put up with it as best he could.

His lithe memory jumped to the next vivid spot. Somehow they were home again; they all knelt down on the bare wooden floor, and Daddy was praying. George shuffled on his tender knees and tried to keep still. He put his face in his hands and shut his eyes so tight that little white specks showed in front of them.

At one place, when his Daddy had said, "Thy will be done—" his voice strangled and he stopped so long that George thought that was all, and started to get up. But he scrambled down again when his Daddy's voice resumed: "—on earth as it is in heaven."

When Daddy had said "Amen" they stood up, and George asked for Mama. Daddy said that Mama had gone to live with God. It was a mystery to George, for he had no idea what kind of a house God lived in. And so his mind gradually closed over the thought for the near years, until it should be needed again.

Then it seemed they had been on a long journey, and George and his brother Harold were in a little house with his Aunt Mary and his grandmother. There were woods all around them, and Aunt Mary had a big friendly brown dog called Toby. She also said he was a collie. Grandma, complicating matters, added that he was a mongrel. But a dog had to be one thing or the other with George, so Toby he stayed.

Life in the woods was an adventure. Where they had been they had known nothing bigger than an apple tree. Yet here was everything! Here were little paths leading into impenetrable jungle growth. Above them the oaks and maples towered far into the sky and made a hollow roar when the wind blew.

Vastly important was the big stump at the corner in the woods road which George used as a pulpit when he and Harold held church there. Memorable, too, were those shadows where they housed in their imagination many a bear and fierce lion and even an elephant.

There, through the long summer days, they played, and George in his fourth year filled out his strong body and his sturdy legs. His hair grew long and flaxen, and Harry and John Wilson, who owned the woods and the little house, and the adjoining farm where they lived as well, pretended they thought him a little girl. To a young man of four that could be serious, and it wore his patience down until one day Grandma made Harry set George up on a high stool and snip off the curls. George stepped down a maturer and wiser man.

He learned much about the Bible from Aunt Mary and Grandma. George liked best the story of Daniel in the lions' den, although he was hazy about the lions, and he gathered that the den was about the same as Harry's roothouse. George preferred playing the part of Daniel, who seemed a stout fellow. So in the seasons when there were no potatoes or turnips in the roothouse, he and Harold made it a den, and had Toby for a lion. Toby had practically no use for the rôle, especially the part that called for his incarceration in the roothouse. When the bad king, played by Harold, would march the fearless Daniel to the den, the odds were about ten to one that the fierce lion would be out of the den in a fraction of the time it took Daniel to get in.

Fall came, and Harold went off to school a half mile away, carrying his school bag stuffed with books and with sandwiches Aunt Mary made for him. It was then that George began in earnest to make use of the pulpit. The stump, about three feet high, faced a small clearing, and had a level, sawn top. He would purloin Grandma's Bible and hymn book, and take them out and lay them on top of the stump. He could just nicely see over. Then the choir would sing. Harold had appointed himself choir leader at their forest church, not so much because he wanted to lead the choir, as because that was the only job left. George was already preacher by prior right, since he had conceived the church, and even supplied the collection plate, a blackened pie plate which Aunt Mary could use no more. And after the choir would come the sermon.

"The Lord said on to Moses, go and see why the bush is burning. Moses went down and met a fierce lion and hitmotized him. (The word lost its appeal for George when he found it was "hypnotized.") Verily I say on to you, the lion was pretty scairt."

"The choir will now sing Jesus Lover of My Soul and Brother Billings will take up the awfring."

Chapter Four

George went, when he was seven, with Harold, who was ten, and his sister Jean, who was fourteen, to the noisiest place he had ever seen in his life. It was the lumber mill where Daddy worked.

Gone now were the woods and the little house in the clearing with Aunt Mary at her eternal sewing and Grandma at her knitting. Gone, too, was Grandma, to the little cemetery behind the church, and Aunt Mary had decided to go away out West and be with Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie.

At last Daddy had a house ready for them where he worked in an eastern shipyard town. George had no thought then of his Daddy's lonely life when he had farmed his children out to relatives and set out with his bare hands to make life anew. Now his motherless family were starting to keep house on their own, and Jean was head of the home while Daddy was away on his long days at the mill, for which he received the magnificent sum of \$1.50 a day.

George and Harold went wild with delight at their new place, for it had a wonderful orchard of apple, plum, pear, cherry and peach trees and plenty of berry bushes. It was a godsend for little country boys trying to get acquainted with smart town boys. Every day in the apple season they went to school with their blouses filled clear round their waists with apples. An apple was a cheap price to pay for some strange boy's favours.

George's main trouble at school, and by irony his greatest ambition of the moment, was keeping long slate pencils. One by one he dropped his slate pencils on the floor, where they broke into short stubs. Five slate pencils cost a cent, and cents were not rolling around loose, so he used the stubs. But the pupils around him all seemed to have beautiful long pencils with their red-and-white striped paper, and delicious long points. As he scratched over his slate he felt that every boy and girl in the schoolroom was watching him with pity and scorn. Thus a long slate pencil, and others to take its place when it was broken, became the symbol of achievement, the supreme and outer fringe of perfection in George's expanding intellectual universe.

He discovered that he could trade apples for them. It usually took six apples for a slate pencil. So while the apples lasted he had his supply. But one day the fruit pickers came and the apples went. George was thrown on his own slim resources, with little trading experience to help him. Joe Zeigler (called Zeke by the schoolyard gang) traded him off his feet.

"Hey, kid, I'll trade you one," he told George when he heard him timidly bargaining with a classmate. "What yuh got to trade?"

When the deal was through, George got a new slate pencil in exchange for his eraser and his lead pencil. Zeke threw in a short lead pencil stub for good measure. George was thrilled and happy. He had satisfied his insidious craving for the time being. There lay his new slate pencil, long and lovely in its white-and-yellow stripes.

His Daddy found out about the deal and handled the situation with a severity that George considered was out of all proportion.

"A lead pencil costs two cents and a rubber eraser costs one cent, and you trade them both for a slate pencil that you get five for a cent," he snorted. "Come over here."

George went in dismay. His Daddy bent him over his knee and hit him smartly five times with his hand. The hand stung George's behind, but the humiliation of it, in front of Jean and Harold, hurt his soul a lot more. He went noisily into his bedroom and cried into his pillow. His burning resentment burst out in muttered threats against his Daddy, against Jean and even against Harold. But as it died away there came a deeper and sterner resolve, a smouldering anger that was to stay. It was anger against Zeke, who had let him in for this; Zeke, who had bullied him since he came to school.

He thought of himself hitting Zeke in the face as hard as he could. For a young man of his age that ought to be pretty hard. Zeke was bigger, but in this hour of vicarious vengeance George put away such trifles. Some time he would lay for Zeke and pound him to jelly. The thought of Zeke grovelling in the dirt at his feet and begging for mercy was sweet and ravishing. He soon forgot to feel angry at his family; he had found a focus for his venom that involved no immediate action—or risk. The sweet, abiding thought of revenge raised George's stature. His chest was bigger. He felt that he had grown older and more important. He was a man with a mission—to lick the livin' daylights out of Zeke, by crickety.

He'd tell him a thing or two, he would.

"Now, les' see: 'Zeke you consarned bully—' No, you hadda play with them a bit. 'Say, lissen here, smart aleck—!' Ah, that was getting at it! 'Say, lissen here, I don't want to pick a fight, but you think you're mighty smart—'"

He rolled on the grass in glee at the thought. Wouldn't Zeke be mad! The phrase ravished him, and he repeated it over and over again. "Now, lissen here—"

At last he had squeezed all the fun out of it. At last he had wrung it down to the stern essentials, and he felt his fists closing as he said it. He felt the iron in him as the words formed.

"At's how Zeke's gonna yell," he vowed, unaware he was talking at the top of his voice.

"Who's Zeke, and how's he going to yell, and what for?" Jean demanded. "What are you talking about, anyway?"

"Oh, nawthin'," said George. "Jiss nawthin'."

That was Saturday, and even Sunday School and church on Sunday did not erase from his mind the vision of what was to happen on Monday. Often did he rehearse his speech. It lingered there even as they went through the Catechism.

By Monday, the fury of his vengeance had cooled off a bit in spite of himself. He had, in fact, moments of doubt about the feasibility of the whole business. He shook them off sternly, but they returned. Zeke was a tough fighter, they'd told him.

"Eee-yo! Eee-yo!" A classmate hailed in the universal yodel of those times, as George trudged to school Monday morning.

"H'lo, Fuzzy," said George without enthusiasm. "I'm gonna lick Zeke till he can't see."

There! It was out. No backing down now. George watched closely to see the effect. After all, if he was gonna fight, he might as well get all the glory he could before the fight started.

The effect was electric. "Yippee!" yelled Fuzzy. "George is gonna lick the tar outa Zeke!"

"I gotta devilish temper," said George, pursuing his temporary advantage. The phrase had made a terrific impression on him when he read it in one of Jean's books. Fuzzy seemed to miss the dreadful import of it.

"Ray. George's got a devilish temper. Haw-haw!"

George looked at him in cold and pitying resentment. Fuzzy bore the scorn lightly.

The news of the fight spread like wildfire, thanks to Fuzzy's stentorian broadcasts all the way down the street. By the time they reached the schoolyard George had a small crowd of admirers. He noted with doubtful satisfaction that many of them were from Zeke's gang. Now they were cheering George and egging him on.

The school bell had rung and they were on their way through the hall to their classroom before George saw Zeke. Knowing there were dozens of eager eyes on him for this first salutation, George thumbed his nose, though a bit dubiously. Then he made a fierce face. Zeke promptly raised him two, and displayed such a gift for face making that George felt worsted. He countered with a significant tap on his own nose with his fist. He thumped himself unintentionally hard and fetched a couple of small tears, which enraged him. A sibilant chorus of whispers flew around, and he knew all the kids were nudging one another. It impelled him almost to the reckless stage, though at any moment Miss Bell, their sharp-nosed and sharper-tongued teacher, might see him and send him to stand in the corner.

Classes that day were confused. The first recess found classmates divided. "Are you gonna fight him now?" some wanted to know.

"Naw," said others, "don't be a ninny! He can't go back into school all bloodied. Yuh gotta wait till school's out."

Zeke showed a disconcerting eagerness for the fight himself. He responded with a bit too much alacrity to all George's gestures across the schoolroom, and the kids tittered with him, George felt, as much as they did at him. But the time came at last. They were standing at their seats.

"Class dismissed!" They went scrambling for their caps in the cloakroom. They went down the stairs. They were in the play yard. George thought hard: "Now, lissen, smart aleck—"

"Yuh can't fight in the yard," the kids told him. "C'mon down to the empty lot with the fence all around. That's a swell place to fight."

Zeke was nowhere to be seen. Something suspiciously like a thrill raced through George's veins. He told himself he wasn't glad, but as mad as anything. "Zeke's a fraidy cat," he yelled as they ran across the yard. "Zeke's a fraidy cat!" And the farther they ran without seeing Zeke the louder he yelled it.

The other boys raced with him and took up the cry frantically. They filled the air with taunts for Zeke. They cleared the yard and rounded the high post of the board fence that fronted the empty lot.

"Zeke's a fraidy cat!" George puffed. "Zeke's—"

And then suddenly the boys all stopped with suspicious unanimity, and they pointed significantly behind the big post. Out stepped Zeke, his face in an ugly sneer, and his fists doubled.

"Now, kid," said Zeke and called George a dirty name. "You wanta fight? I'm waitin' on yuh. Make faces at me, will yuh! Awright, go ahead and put up your fists!"

George looked into Zeke's eyes and saw they were green and ugly. Zeke's hands in front of his face looked hard and gnarled and the pores were dirty and mean looking. The supreme moment had come. The audience was clamouring:

"Hit 'im right on the nose! Knock his eye out! Paste him!"

George began, a last pre-war statement. "Say, lissen here, smart aleck," he said, and the courageous strength of his voice pleasantly surprised him. "I jiss wanta say that I don't wanta pick a fight, but—"

A thunderclap of laughter burst all around him. It even drowned the sneering and humiliating guffaw from Zeke himself. The kids left him as suddenly as they had rallied around him. They raced off down the street yelling at the top of their voices, and Zeke ran with them.

"But—but—Hey, kids, I ain't finished!" George yelled in desperation. He might as well have yelled inside the sawmill. "I meant I ain't a fightin' man, but—" Puff, puff "I'd lick Zeke 'cause he's a—c-consarned bully. Hey, you gotta come back—You g-gotta!"

But he was talking to himself, for the show was over. It was a flop, the boys had decided, and they had left for more promising fun. George stopped in indecision, started to run after them again, gave it up in despair, and sat down on the curb in a white anger that soon turned to black gloom. His heroic hour was over. They thought he was a coward. They'd laugh at him every time they saw him now, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

"You think you're smart," he flung at his tormentor next day.

"Haw, haw! Don't wanna fight, don't wanna fight!" Zeke guffawed with what seemed to George very coarse humour.

"I didn't say I didn't wanna fight," George blazed.

"Yah did, yah did, yah did!"

"Well, if I did I didn't mean it. I meant—"

"Fraidy cat. Yer jiss a fraidy cat—"

"Who's what?"

They were turning the last block corner to school. Zeke stopped short. George's heart leaped, for there was Harold with his school bag. Harold marched nonchalantly up to Zeke, who was his size, despite a year or two in ages. "Who's a fraidy cat?" he asked, and swung with his free hand—a good-natured, pawing, condescending, open-handed swipe that swept Zeke's cap off into the gutter. Zeke dived for it.

"I was jiss foolin'," he bawled, and ducked behind a tree till he saw Harold was not interested, then he tore off to school. George watched him in glee tingled with regret.

"It's a good job I didn't hafta hit him," he said manfully. "I was gonna use my closed fist."

His revenge had not come exactly as he would have designed it, but it was sweet, for the boys took pains to tell Zeke who Harold was. At dismiss-time Zeke came to George with new-found respect.

"I'll give yuh one o' my marbles," he said, and dug into his pants pocket. "Want that one?" He selected one that rivalled the rainbow.

"But that's an alley," George objected.

"Aw, take it," said Zeke. "I got lots."

Thus came the rapprochement under Harold's unsuspecting protection. George had gained, by means he hardly understood, an advantage that he had thought to gain with his bare fists, but he never quite lost the feeling that, somehow or other, he had been thrust into a false rôle.

Zeke proudly escorted him home.

"Stan' back!" he warned the curious crowd who followed in anticipation of a fight around the empty lot corner. "I'll lick any kid that lays a finger on 'im."

At George's gate Zeke suddenly said, "Well, s'long," and fled with a speed that puzzled George, till he saw Harold in the yard.

Chapter Five

"How," asked Daddy, "would you all like to go out West?"

It took some time for it to dawn on them. Away out west where Aunt Mary lived with Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie?

The thought of Aunt Mary brought the memory of Grandma, and the idle wonder again, whether she now lived in the same house as Mama had gone to, since they both lived with God. It would, George estimated, be much bigger than the little plastered house they lived in here, with the parlour floor on a different level to the kitchen, as if it had been added as an afterthought.

"The p'airies! We're goin' to the p'airies! Yippee!" George turned a handspring in the room. "What are the p'airies like, Daddy?"

"Not the p'airies, Georgie. The prairies," Jean corrected. But it had no effect on George. Adventure beckoned him.

The prairies, he was told, were so wide and flat that you could see for miles through the crystal clear air, a vast change from the stingy, rocky hills where Daddy had wrested a living for his brood before they had lost their home and had come to this bayside town and a still leaner living.

George learned of the great esteem in which his modest, stern, hard-working father was held. The people of his church made up a big hamper for them, filled with food of all sorts. And the night they presented the hamper they also gave him other gifts, and they made speeches so long and so dull that George went to sleep in the middle of them, and learned next day that there were books for Jean and Harold and him.

Finally somehow the great day arrived, and they were in the railway coach with its long rows of cushioned seats, and George's dreams had come true at last. They were in a train! He eyed the car step and door with its fascinating frost-covered rail with a fearful longing. How he would love to stand out there when the train puffed away, and wave at them all. But they were to sit in the double seats that faced each other, and Daddy said to make themselves comfortable because they would be three days and nights in seats just like that.

Outside in the cold winter air a voice rang out: "Board!" The seat gave a lurch under him. The lights of the station began to move past; there was a slight vibration under them. George held his breath for one unbelieving moment, then jumped for the window.

The wheels on the rails set up a merry rhythmic song that soon became almost part of George, it sounded so natural. Then Daddy said they'd better have supper out of the hamper, and they spread out the big box on their knees.

"Where will we all sleep?" George asked. He wasn't at all sorry to learn they would sleep right in their seats. He had a secret feeling that if he left these friendly cushions he might wake up to find himself in bed in their little house.

Harold took George to the toilet at the end of the car, with the lofty condescension of an oldtimer who had spent his life on trains. George was entranced with the toilet, for when you pushed down a handle the noise of the wheels came roaring up, and they seemed to sing a song: "Over the bunk—over the bunk—over the bunk." Harold had almost to drag him out, after the two of them had tried saying it over with the wheels.

For once they had no family prayers, but Daddy read his Bible to himself for a while, his lips moving.

It was in the piping days of the great trek westward, back in the infant years of the century, and people thought nothing of sitting up in day coaches for the long trip to the promised land. And in this unending parade went the Battle family.

For long incredible days they ground along through the everlasting pine trees, and past the lonely little stations where people with fur caps and mackinaws stood round. Sometimes, if the snow had blown off the roof, you could see the name of the station painted there.

There was a man in the seat opposite them, whom people called Jake. The twinkle in his eye fascinated George. He had an endless repertoire of jokes. Some of them were fairly venerable, but George laughed at them till his sides ached.

"What are we stopped for now?" Harold would ask Jake, knowing what the answer would be. And Jake would say: "A

cow on the track." Next stop Jake would wink at Harold and say, "By crackey, they caught up to that cow again."

Three times daily they brought out the great hamper with its munificence. It seemed bottomless, and even when they all ate their fill they seemed hardly to make a dent in it.

"You folks goin' to China?" Jake would ask, eyeing the hamper.

Two mornings of wakening, and George stared out at an amazing white tableland such as he had never seen or dreamed of. For miles and miles beyond their train window it sprawled, as level as a floor. Trees were sparse here, gone were the pines, gone the rocks and the lake. The air was clear as crystal, and in the far distance little farm houses stood out, dwarfed against the gigantic horizon that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

This at last was the p'airies toward which he yearned with all the fierceness of his nature. Here was their new world. For hours they travelled through it, yet always it seemed the same, a still and limitless vastness.

As the sun fell on that day they saw lights rising suddenly around them out of the white plains, blinking in the winter's loneliness; lights and more lights; buildings, forests of telegraph poles beyond all counting. Presently they rattled over open switches, past other trains, and crawled into the yards of the bawling, infant queen city of the West.

"Winnipeg!" The conductor yelled it as if it were a personal accomplishment. Strident, violent, vulgar young metropolis of a primitive empire. Meeting-place of Poles, Russian Galicians, Ukrainians, Germans, cheerful Swedes with their eternal disdain for the Norwegians, and Norwegians with an equal disdain for the Swedes. Scotsmen, Englishmen, Irishmen. Indians from the north, Yankees from the south, hired men from the little fruit farms of Annapolis Valley down by the Atlantic. Country boys from the rocky farms of eastern Ontario, railroad men from everywhere, labour union organizers from Chicago, corn raisers from Iowa, Negroes from the deep South. They were all there.

Rounders and bounders, crooks and politicians. School teachers just out of college with their text-books, their ideals and their sex inhibitions all wrapped together in their imitation leather bags. Preachers who would go out in the stark settlements and propagate the word of God at two hundred dollars a year plus the parish hospitality. Store clerks and stooges and stumblebums who had broken from the known way, and would get a homestead site for ten dollars and then buy a pre-emption for another handful of small change and grow rich. Men with money who would sink it in some far-away gamble and come up broke. Lucky men whose farms would be chosen for townsites, who would become famous names in the country from coast to coast, and whose daughters would be the favourite brides or the swank matrons of the society columns in a later day. They had all come here into this human spillway of the great West.

It was the age of *Do*. Not a man or woman in those days would have dreamed that, in a single generation, the blight of make-believe would drop on their new homes; that the son of the man who had ripped out his own living would roar for the state to support him. It was nation-building in the raw. The noisy and mighty days when nobody was afraid; the pioneer days when every man had a job or was good for nothing and admitted it.

They were the lush days when an agitator, no matter what his creed, was lumped enthusiastically and indiscriminately with a vague and nebulous outer fringe known as the I.W.W., and which most simple sons of the soil honestly thought meant I Won't Work.

They were the days when the only meaning the word relief had was when you bedded down the horses and oxen for the night, and stretched yourself out on a feather bed, if you owned one; or a straw bed if you didn't, to sleep until the alarm clock went off in the morning. Aye, that was relief!

Communities brought their Bibles and their prayers with them from the back concessions in the East, to invoke the Divine favour for the green shoots. Six days they worked, come rain or snow or fine weather. On the seventh they hitched up horses to their buggies with the rattling steel tires, and drove stiffly off to church in the little corner buildings that had once been painted white, that never, never had their windows opened, so as to keep their stale, musty and sanctified air intact from week to week.

There went the country preacher, who usually preached in three different churches miles apart, once each in morning, afternoon and evening. There went the godly to worship and the godless to gossip. Men unhitched their horses from their democrats, buggies, carts and even wagons and led them into the church sheds. In summer, for variety, the horses stood at hitching posts and lazily switched away the flies while their masters stood in clusters in their Sunday suits and their

celluloid collars and dickies, and traded the week's news.

Then in the hard little pews they sat to listen or stood to join their voices in the robust impudence of the Wesleyan hymns. There they prayed for the golden wheat that had gone down into the ground, for the fat seed that was even now swelling boisterously and sending out tender shoots; for the green blankets that later painted the bare fields under the full ardour of summer. From the birth to the bearing of the season, and in turn there were these three prayers:

"O God, send down the rain from heaven."

"O God, who rulest the storms, send not the hail to our crops."

"O God, who hast mercifully sent the sun and the rain to warm and water our growing wheat, cause also the blight of frost to be kept away."

Aloud they prayed for their souls and for the intangible graces. But in their hearts they prayed in this manner for their wheat.

And toward the eve of the harvest the walls rang with the triumphant Sunday School song:

Bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing,
Bringing in the sheaves.

Hymn books were closed and laid into their racks, and the little organ was still. The women adjusted their veils, and the men reached under the wooden seats for their hats while the preacher intoned the devout but taken-for-granted benediction:

"And now may the grace of God be with us all. Amen."

The Battle family bundled off their friendly train at last in distant Saskatchewan. Jake saw them to the platform, then climbed hastily back, for the train barely paused at this tiny place. "G'bye!" Jake yelled. "See you in church!"

George waved a brave hand, with tears in his eyes, and a fierce lonely longing in his heart to be back on the train. He felt helpless and bewildered on the snow-covered platform.

Then all at once a friendly voice thundered his name, and George looked up into a bearded, grinning face, atop an enormous frame that towered above Daddy.

"This is your Uncle Jim," Daddy said. George felt no more helpless and alone, for Uncle Jim Black was a fabled and famous character in his vivid imagination. Long had he worshipped him, even though he had never seen him. Uncle Jim was a romantic figure who strode through George's dreams in league boots, and now that he was here he fulfilled all George's ideals and visions of him.

"Hello there, old preacher!" said Uncle Jim. He laughed thunderously and threw back his piebald wombat overcoat from his gigantic frame. Uncle Jim had leather leggings that came to his knees, wore enormous overshoes on his feet, and stuffed into his leggings were overalls with a healthy stain of horse stable and grease all down the front of them. Above that he wore a coat of an old Sunday suit, and under the coat a sweater with a long row of buttons and an enormous rolled collar. He wore a heavy leather cap with fur-lined ear-pieces that came down around his head and had tie-strings to fasten under his chin, only they weren't tied. To George he was a man from Mars, a giant of Gulliver days, a man about whom everything was big.

"And how d'you like the wild and woolly west?" Uncle Jim asked George in a thunderclap of a voice, a great, guffawing voice that rang out to the skies, and made you think that Uncle Jim had a perpetual joke on somebody. He had a face that broke into a million wrinkles, and opened a cavernous gap in the centre of it when he laughed. George worshipped him instantly. Everyone did who knew him.

Uncle Jim bent his giant's frame and swished four or five bags into his arms. "Come on and we'll get in the sleigh and head for home," he bellowed, and strode off down the platform, with the Battle family straggling after him.

At the end of the platform a team of horses waited, hitched to a bobsleigh on which stood a long green box marked "Bain Wagon." Uncle Jim slung the bags up, and told them all to climb in. There were buffalo robes and blankets in the box and the floor of it was lined with wheat straw. A seat ran along part of one side, and across the front was another seat on folding springs.

Uncle Jim took the reins, whirled the horses around, and with a great jangling of bells they trotted down the street of the village and out into the country. Daddy sat on the spring seat with Uncle Jim, and Harold perched precariously but proudly between them. Jean sat on the side seat with robes wrapped around her. George stood by the side of the box, disdainingly a seat. The horses' bells kept up a merry Jingle that added to his delirium of joy.

The long, white horizon, serene and patient, unfolded silently before them as they jogged toward it, and rolled stiffly away behind them. So, too, the hopes of a million men were held high, beckoning against the endless sky, holding wide the golden doors of the years into a new way of life.

Chapter Six

They came at last to a farm cluster that was greater than the others. The inevitable barbed wire was there, but the fence had an imposing gateway, and the wire was held by five-inch poles, a contrast to the scraggly poplars of other fences.

The house was long and deep green and homey and comfortable looking, as it snuggled down behind the big snowdrifts, with the smoke curling from one of its chimneys. Beyond it was a group of barns, with the high, fresh manure pile near by bespeaking much livestock housed within. Between house and barns was an acre or two of yard, half filled with a collection of farm machinery, including a steam engine and threshing machine, all pulled together with little pretence at order. The steam engine faced one of the barns, and on fine days in winter Uncle Jim steamed it up, strung a belt from its fly-wheel to grain choppers within the building, and ground wheat and oats and barley for his horses and cattle and pigs.

Beyond the main barn stood one of the many straw stacks that dotted the farms, ringed around under a snow cap with a streak of yellow where the horses and cattle chewed at the straw or lay down contentedly in it to sleep.

A team of horses hauled a bobsleigh carrying a huge rack filled with straw across the field toward the barn, and atop the straw George could see two men sprawling. Everything about this place breathed home and happiness and plenty.

"Is this where we're gonna live, Daddy?" he asked, half in fear and half in delight as Uncle Jim turned his horses into the gateway. Daddy laughed. "Oh, we'll see about that later," he said mysteriously. And Uncle Jim grinned and said: "Guess we'll put you up here for the night, anyway, Georgie."

A great dog, part collie and part spaniel, came bounding out with a clamour of barking and excitement at sound of the sleigh bells. The front door of the house was flung open and out of it burst two boys, one of them George's size and the other smaller. They raced up the snowbanks and over to the sleigh as the horses stopped. At the door then appeared two faces, one of them blessedly familiar—Aunt Mary! The two women shaded their eyes against the long slanting rays of the sun.

"Aunt Mary!" Jean shrieked, and the two women waved. The other woman, they knew without asking, was Aunt Sadie.

From one of the stables came a hired man to unhitch the horses. The two little boys stood with friendly smiles for the newcomers as Uncle Jim jumped over the side of the sleigh box and hung the reins on a peg. Daddy descended with more dignity. Harold jumped over the side of the box as Uncle Jim did, and George scrambled out to imitate him, but tripped and fell face first in the snow. Jean got herself gingerly out at the back of the box, where Uncle Jim let down the door.

"Lo," said the larger one. The other shrank behind his brother's sleeve. Uncle Jim bellowed with good nature: "Well, Harry and Billy, that's your cousin George from the east. Tell him welcome to the wild and woolly west."

"I gotta pony," said Harry, the older. "Wouldja like to see it?"

"Gee, yes," said George.

"C'mon, then," and Harry set off at a dead run, with Billy after him, protesting breathlessly: "I gotta calf all my own, I have." Behind them George struggled stiffly and awkwardly through the deep snow, his legs not yet working freely.

"Hyar!" yelled Uncle Jim. "That's no way to welcome a cousin. Take George into the house and get him warm first."

"We'll be back in a minute, Paw," Harry shouted, and raced on to the stables.

His heart thumping, George went with Harry and Billy down the passageway between the rows of stalls. Horses stood in some, and George expected flying heels to kick him into eternity any moment. At the very end of the barn they came to a smaller stall with a lattice door in front, and here a small, shaggy black head was thrust toward them, with bright eyes peering intently, and incredibly small ears pointed.

Harry pulled the lattice door open and pushed in beside the little black pony. "C'mon in, George—" and then, as George hesitated shyly: "Aw, he won't hurt yuh!" And Harry unceremoniously yanked the quivering George in beside him. "His name's Blackie." He ran his hands through Blackie's mane and forelock, and Blackie's inquisitive, toy-sized muzzle sniffed at George's sweater and coat collar and cheek, and blew his nose with a "shdv-dv-dv" sound when George pulled back.

"I'm gonna ride him to school this spring," said Harry proudly. "Are you gonna have a pony, too? Can you ride?"

"I—don't know. No, I guess I can't," George admitted, feeling very inferior. "I bin on a horse, though."

"Aw, it's easy," Harry assured him. "Gee whillikens, didja have fun on the train? I'd like to go on a train. You can see them from here. C'mon and I'll show you." And the impulsive Harry pulled George headlong out of the stall, closed the door on Blackie, and rushed for the yard again, with Billy panting after them.

"I bin on a train," Billy said.

"Yeh, you been on a train—like fun you have!" Harry jeered.

"I have too!" Billy insisted stoutly.

"Fer about six stations, is all. Howdja like to be on a train for about six days and six nights, eh? Howdja like that?"

"I bin on a train, anyways," said Billy doggedly.

At the barn door Harry pointed over the distant fields. A thin line of black smoke stood out there, miles away and, sure enough, as Harry said, you could see a black engine crawling along with an endless string of red freight cars behind it.

"That's five miles away, mindja," said Harry.

George breathed in awe at what he felt must be something of importance. "Gee," said George, "five miles! Jist think!"

"I'd like to see your calf, too," said George to Billy.

"So would Billy," snorted Harry in great glee. "He's jiss waitin' to see it his self."

George looked mystified.

"I have so gotta calf," said Billy, "and its name is gonna be Sooner."

Harry shouted with amusement, and turned a somersault in the snow. "Yeh, the sooner the better."

"I—don't unnerstand," said George, completely baffled.

"Aw, it ain't even born yet," Harry explained condescendingly. "Y'see, Spotty's gonna have a calf in April, and it's gonna be Billy's when it comes."

"Well, you hadda wait for Blackie, din'cha? Now din'cha?" Billy demanded, not the slightest perturbed at Harry's noisy but affectionate teasing. He tugged at George's sleeve. "C'mon an' I'll show you."

They trudged around the barn to another door, and this was a separate stable. The door stood partly open, and here the smell was even more composite and compelling than in the horse stable.

"Careful where you step," said Harry generously, eyeing George's clean felt boots and rubbers.

Cows stood in small stalls, or munched hay leisurely, or lay and chewed their cud. "Here's Spotty!" said Billy. Spotty lay calmly, her legs folded under her, brown and white side and belly stretched languidly and eloquently over the straw-littered floor. Billy pointed to Spotty's generous sides and to her swelling udder. "Thass where Sooner's gonna come from," he said, and the fire of proprietorship glowed in his eyes.

"Race yuh to the house," Harry shouted, and was off. He plunged through the snowdrifts to the kitchen, and burst through the door like a stampede. Harry, in fact, didn't come anywhere; he suddenly exploded in a geyser of sound and reality right where you were.

They all sat in the kitchen around the range. Jean was prowling restlessly, looking at pictures on the walls, and the week-old newspapers on the ironing board, or stroking the brown fur of the cat as it stretched in luxury beside the stove. The range was a marvel in itself, with huge heating ovens half-way up the pipe, on which were piled steaming leather mitts of the men and boys, put there to dry.

Aunt Sadie came up to George, bent down and put her arms around him. "So this is Georgie," she said, and kissed him. "What a fine big man he is."

George submitted with stiff but good grace. He liked Aunt Sadie instantly.

"Harry and Billy, come and meet your Uncle Charley, and Jean and Harold," said Aunt Sadie.

"Lo," said Harry with friendly respect for all, and Billy screwed up his face and made to say something, but grinned instead.

"Soon be as big as his dad!" Uncle Jim laughed in a way that George knew was on his side, and pretended to grunt ferociously as he raised George on to one of his overalled knees. "I should say he would! No hollow legs about this man. He's solid meat."

George liked Uncle Jim instantly and tremendously. Everyone did, and for the same reason that George did. Because he was as broad in his mind and his heart as he was in the shoulders of him. A hearty man was Jim Black, six-feet-four and built in proportion, a man who instinctively led and commanded, a man born to succeed because he had never had any conception of failure. A loud-voiced, kindly, rough-and-tumble nobleman, scrupulously honest, merciless if he had to be, with a compassion as vast as the outdoors he loved.

In the eighties he left his family in the east, after his sister had been married to Charley Battle. He took the little money he had and came to the plains, a giant of a youth who brushed difficulties away as if they never existed. He stormed over the inviting tablelands of the early settlements, pushed on beyond the known places of the boldest, and drove on westward with unerring instinct until he found a spot which others had shunned because it was forested with the indomitable poplar of the West. There he planted himself squarely in the lush lands near the railroad right-of-way. Uncle Jim had an eye for utility as well as for beauty. A creek ran through his farm from end to end, gave him running water, the rare luxury of a dam, and a welcome break in the flatness of the plains.

Bluff upon bluff of trees grew where he paused, and each one of them marked a pond, or slough as they were called in disparagement, a fertile breeding-place for mosquitoes—but to Uncle Jim's practised eye the tell-tale marks of a good land. He strode from corner stake to corner stake of the land surveyor's marks, picked out his first quarter section, and earmarked several more that stood in the title of the railway, to augment his holdings.

"Here," said Jim Black, "I'll build my home." And when the community grew there was he in the centre of it, near the school, near the church, his home fronting on the best-travelled road. He was a power in the land, perpetual reeve of the municipality, chairman of the school board. His farm was a complete industry from the seed bed in the soil to the anvil in the blacksmith shop and the pegs in the smoke-house where he cured his own meat. No other farmer had nearly the completeness and self-sufficiency that Jim Black built around himself.

"He'll over-reach," people used to say. "He'll get in so deep that he'll never get out. He's land-poor right now."

But Jim Black sent his four- and six-horse teams up and down the great fields, with his unheard-of variety of machinery after them—plows, discs, cultivators, harrows, modern seed drills, and where he got the money to pay for them his neighbours knew, but swore in jealousy that they didn't. Aye, well they knew. It was in the golden wheat that he threshed with his own machines from his hundreds of acres, and hauled to the tall red elevators that followed him into the wilds. It was in the herds of cattle that he found time to raise for milk and beef, in the great pens of pigs and in the yards of chickens that he and Aunt Sadie kept. It was, most of all, in the tremendous heart of him, in his simple and mighty integrity that made his word a bond and his nod a pledge.

He was generous to such a fault that everyone said no man in his senses could afford it. He gave, they said, too much money to the church, paid out too much in wages to the great gang of hired men that he had perpetually around him, lent too much money to relatives who came impecuniously but gratefully from the east to share in the new El Dorado of the farmer, and he was never known to ask for repayment. He was always buying, always sharing, always giving. But Jim Black was always a safe jump ahead of the bailiff; always had money, always got his wheat to the market for the best prices. His fame spread and his house expanded.

Uncle Jim's overalls were hard, impregnated with grease and oil, and his sweater with its great roll collar was little less so. His hands were hard as iron, his face had a short stubble on it always. George thought this mammoth uncle the

epitome of all the rugged heroes of his dreams.

"Where's your cousin Harold?" Uncle Jim asked Harry, and Harry said: "Pitch took him in the parlour."

"Pitch?" George echoed, and thought of ponies. "Who's Pitch?"

Aunt Sadie turned from the stove. "He means Margaret, dear." And to Harry: "You mustn't call her Pitch in front of others, Harry. You know she doesn't like it."

"Aw, gee," Harry began, but intercepted a wink from Uncle Jim, a solemn, stern wink, and was silent. In truth, Pitch had been one of Uncle Jim's inventions. Margaret had been born with hair and eyes so incredibly black, and with such a dark though temporary down on her chubby body, that Uncle Jim had roared, with a burst of delighted laughter: "Why, the little beggar's as black as pitch!"

And Pitch Black she had remained, despite all family edicts and prohibitions against it.

Suddenly, now, she appeared, leading Harold by an unwilling hand. Harold grinned with embarrassment, and pulled his hand away when they came into the room, but Pitch imperiously seized it again.

"Margaret, this is your cousin Georgie," said Uncle Jim, bouncing George on one knee and setting him with mighty hands to his feet on the floor. "Come and kiss him—if you can catch him. He doesn't like kissing girls; he's just like his uncle."

George saw her coming toward him, her long raven-black hair in ringlets, her glowing molten eyes so black they looked unnatural, her cheeks of a perfection that escaped his inexperienced eyes, and a mouth that smiled widely. She was his own age in years, but seemed far ahead of him in her childish sophistication. She was, thought George in a panic, the loveliest little girl that ever was. He thought of all the girls he had known at school, and they were dumpy and plain by comparison. This deduction stammered through his mind in blushing confusion, and not in any semblance of order.

Pitch came to him unhesitatingly, with no shyness, but with all the confidence and candour of her feminine years which equalled his in numbers and therefore surpassed them by far. George balanced on his heels, looked frantically left and right, saw no avenue of escape, grinned foolishly, and choked on words. In one more second it happened. Pitch put soft little arms around George's neck and kissed him with vigour. Ringlets of her hair brushed his cheek, soft as the spring breezes in the woods where he had held his church.

"Hello, Geo'ge," she whispered caressingly. She slid her hands down and took George's, stood back a little, looked into his eyes seriously, calmly, appraisingly, appeared satisfied and drew a long happy sigh.

George was bedevilled by such behaviour. He found voice at last. "Gee," he said. And in the deep dark wells of her eyes, he saw the tiny twin images of his own face.

"Guess she's gonna marry you, awright, Geordie," said Billy. His face had been working, a sure sign that he had something important.

A shout of laughter greeted this. Pitch dropped George's hands and whirled on her impertinent younger brother. "Billy! That's an *aw*-ful thing to say!"

"Well," Billy defended, "you saidja would if you liked him, now dincha?"

George's face flamed as if on fire. There was a tumult like a thunderstorm in his head. Pitch took George in tow firmly and without consulting his wishes. From then on he was to know that she would have her way at all times.

"She's been taking singing lessons from the school teacher," Aunt Sadie said when they had gone. "He boards here, and says she has a voice."

Modesty forbade Aunt Sadie to say more, but she could have added without suspicion of a mother's boasting that her child's voice was phenomenal, amazed all who heard it, and was far ahead of her tender years. Also phenomenal was her imperious will and her gift of imposing it on people—and George, had he been gifted to read the future, might have taken a fatalistic comfort in that at least.

Chapter Seven

George brushed one side of King, and Harold brushed the other. King was the Indian pony that came by magic into their lives. Mostly black, but with grey speckles like a pepper-and-salt suit of the times, was King. Fleet-footed, Roman-nosed as the Indians who raised his forebears, straight-necked, stout-hearted little scrub, he was five years old. Uncle Jim produced him from somewhere, out of a herd that came back from distant, wooded, winter-grazing grounds. King had the gift belonging only to native horses; he could run at full gallop across the prairies and never step in a hidden badger hole. Some instinct as old as time guided him, and he could jump sideways even in the air to avoid them.

King, according to Harry, was a brother of Blackie, but Uncle Jim told Daddy confidentially that the parentage of both of them was one of life's unknown things. Indian ponies don't have parents, they just happen, he said. So far as white people knew, there had always been Indian ponies. Nitchies, the farmers called them, and gave them no pedigree or social status.

"Guess the boys'll want a pony, Charley," Uncle Jim had said. "Just tell them you got him somewhere—" And then, when Daddy started to protest: "Oh, well, if you feel that way about it, just gimme a cheque on the Snow Bank." And he made the spring air dance with his laughter.

George had the brush, Harold the curry comb. King's hair was long and matted like the prairie wool. He had need of a thick coat in that climate, for the thermometer dipped down sometimes to forty below zero. But these hardy animals of the plains roamed in herds, pawed their way through the crusted snow into the softer mass beneath, down to the grass that lay packed and preserved within it. That was their winter diet. For water they ate snow. A tough breed was King.

"You can't kill a western horse," Uncle Jim said.

George and Harold had King tied to a door post on the sunny side of the log and sod stable. Daddy was busy with other horses, clipping their long wool off them, for the spring was here and the sun streamed down bright and warm. The snow was peeling away from the fields, and patches of bare ground were everywhere.

Thirty yards from the stable stood the house, also of logs, its chinks filled with rough home-made plaster, a solemn house of four rooms, two downstairs, two up, with a chimney stuck through the centre of the roof. Daddy said you could spit through the walls, but though George had gone around to the back and spent an exhausting half-hour, he secured no evidence that Daddy was right.

They were living in their new home on Uncle Jim's "West Half," four miles from Uncle Jim's place. It was a farm of three hundred and twenty acres adjoining other lands of Uncle Jim's, one he had bought from a German who'd given up the idea of the soil and gone into the nearest town to build houses for a living. Daddy had rented the farm. Uncle Jim furnished the place with implements, wagon, sleigh, hay rack, and supplied the horses to operate them.

"Pay me when you can, Charley. I'll take the payments out of the crops," he said, and grinned. A fabulous man was Uncle Jim. Charley Battle thus became a share cropper, in those beneficent days when it connoted no hardship but only an easy way to become a squire and a capitalist.

Over in the house was Aunt Mary. It was a memorable thrill to George and Harold when they learned she had agreed to come and live with them, for Jean's junior years fell short of the needs of a farm housekeeper. For too long she had been a child without a childhood, and now she was to have her release and enjoy the freedom of her age.

So here was Aunt Mary with them again. Aunt Mary with her sewing machine and her songs and her voice that wavered slightly off key. Aunt Mary who used to put drops in their eyes at night, then come in the morning with a wet cloth when they woke terrified to find they could not open the lids. Aunt Mary who made the hideous doses of epsom salts.

The same Aunt Mary. They whooped with joy when Daddy brought them from Uncle Jim's with the last load of the furnishings they would have. There was Aunt Mary at the door throwing water into the roadway from a wash basin. But to their amazement her voice greeted them harshly, an irritated note that was new and alien. She scolded them for tracking mud onto the bare board floors, for throwing their coats and caps on the floor, for racing through the house upstairs and down, "making a din that would drive a body mad."

George had an uncomprehending surprise, a disappointment that he could not fathom. This moment they had so counted

on, when they would enter their new house, not so nice as Uncle Jim's, but their own home, back with Aunt Mary just like down east. And now Aunt Mary didn't seem the same. There were sharp times ahead with Aunt Mary.

Grooming King, George's mouth worked as he thought with mingled terror and exhilaration of school. Tomorrow he and Harold must start, and they would drive King with the buckboard. Maybe Harold would let him drive for a while.

It was two miles to school. The kids there seemed big and rough and they played unmercifully, from what he had seen on his visits with Harry. Of course Harold could look after himself, for he was bigger, and the kids, boys and girls alike, respected Pitch, small as she was.

"I guess they're pretty scared of Uncle Jim," George thought. Harry upset that theory, for he rough-and-tumbled with all of them. Harry wasn't shy. He was young and small compared to Harold, but he never seemed to get hurt.

George already knew the teacher, who boarded at Uncle Jim's, but he had little respect for him—a man, he figured, doing a woman's work. A dandy, he sniffed, and when he came to your desk he smelled like talcum powder.

"Aw, he talks law-de-daw," snorted George, with make-shift bravery. What really bothered George was that Mr. Henderson taught Pitch singing and made her talk that silly way. Mr. Henderson did, too. He didn't sound his R's like everybody else did. For all his talcum and slurred R's, Mr. Henderson had an uncomfortable way of barking suddenly when some pupil didn't behave. And it was no satisfaction to think of him as a sissy, either, for Mr. Henderson made home runs at baseball in the Westview team workouts which had already started. And he had a reputation for out-skating the huskiest young farmers when they played hockey on the outdoor ice in winter.

Later that year, George rode King bareback—because they had no saddle. King's little backbone was mercifully padded with the muscle of his hardy breed. His back was rounded now, in the early summer, and so sleek was his hair, growing from the stubble of his spring clipping, that it shone in the sun under George's brushing.

The first time George trotted King a jolt went up his spine that made his teeth chatter. The horizon started going up and down crazily. King trotted serenely along the pasture fence. When he came to the corner near the barn he turned abruptly, as nitchies do. That is, he did not round a corner, he suddenly ceased going one way and by some reflex of his muscles, after the manner of jack-rabbits and without a pause, he went at right angles. It was a native trick with the Indian ponies of the prairies, an art which unfortunately has all but died out. When King turned the corner, therefore, George didn't. That is to say, George continued in a straight line, fell on his head, and stars flashed. King stopped and ate grass.

"Doggone yuh!" said George, and repeated the experiment.

It was painful, but he who learns to ride bareback learns the hard way. At supper-time Aunt Mary demanded crossly and nervously:

"What on earth's the matter with you!"

"Oh, nawthin', jiss nawthin'," said George.

Green heavy carpets grew swiftly over the fields, the fields that Daddy and a hired man had plowed and harrowed. The sleek sod was giving its energy now, seducing the young roots of the wheat into its depths, feeding with the salts and the iron and the lime of its store, chemicals that had gathered there for thousands of years while a wiser, happier race of people had roamed it, carrying their villages with them.

They were fabulous men to George, these farmers of the plains. They bore their nobility with a rustic good nature, and next to the idolatry he reserved for Uncle Jim, he held them all in awe. But they were not all good, for he found devils among them, too.

Johnny Wilbur, their next door neighbour to the west, pulled up at the Battles' door one day with a team of horses, both in

a lather of perspiration. The Battles had seen him coming down the road on the dead run. The off-horse was next to the house as they stopped, and George saw with horror that one of his shoulders was raw, that his whole side and rump were lined with welts. The horses trembled with tired muscles when Johnny stopped them.

"How's chances for a drink o' water? Thanks!" Johnny grabbed the tin dipper in the pail at the door, drank, dashed it back into the pail. He smelled high of liquor and tobacco, Daddy eyed the horses with a strained, narrow-eyed expression, a frozen toothy smile on his face.

"Well, guess I'll be goin'," yelled Johnny.

He swung himself into the wagon, grabbed the reins in one hand, the whip in the other, swung it wide in the air, and cracked it like a gunshot.

"Giddap, you—" yelled Johnny, using a filthy word.

"Hey, Snort, git int'l it, yah bastard!" he roared again, and brought the lash down over Snort's body with a searing cruel blow. Snort reared and plunged wildly into his collar.

George ran suddenly out into the road and shook tiny fists into the sky. "Yer a bastard yerself, you dirty know-nothin!" His vocabulary failed him in his childish rage, and the wagon raced away with its heavy load, and went bumping and rumbling down the trail.

"George, come back here!" Daddy's voice came in stern anger. "Don't you dare say those words. Come here."

White-hot and shaking, George came stumbling back. "He's a pig an' a sow," he sobbed. "He's a dirty sow an' I hope God kills him!"

Through a torrent of tears he saw Daddy pick up a switch from the ground, and reality burst on him in a white terror that banished even the agony of the horses.

"I didn't mean ut!" he cried, and started to run to the barn. "I didn't mean to say a bad word."

"Come back here, Georgie!"

"I won't—I won't—"

Strong hands caught him by the seat of the pants, whirled him on his stomach over Daddy's prayer-hardened knee; down came the pants. The sun beat on George's backside. Then swish, swish, swish, the hot stinging switch on his bare skin. George yowled, more frightened than hurt. Daddy set him down on his feet with a jolt.

"Now you come with me, young fellow," he said sternly. He left George no choice, but drew him by his arm to the kitchen door. "Give me that soap, Mary."

Dutifully Mary snatched up the washing soap from beside the washbasin outside the door. George held his hands before his mouth.

"No, no, don't!" he sobbed. "Do-ho-hon't. I didn'—Ugh!" The filthy, smelly, home-made, lye-ridden soap was crushed between his teeth. Daddy's eyes bored into him with their righteous flame of indignation.

"Now maybe that will wash the badness out of your mouth," said Daddy in an outraged voice.

"Ph-tha! Ph-tha!" George spat the slimy stuff out of his mouth in a panic of nausea and hatred. He scrambled to his feet and bolted blindly for the door.

"You'd better go to the stable where you belong," said Aunt Mary, with an alert eye on Daddy whose Puritanical rage she thought it well to applaud.

"I hate yuh!" he screamed in a shattered voice, and then he turned and rushed blindly for the barn.

In the red rage that burned him Daddy stood, an accusing figure, a scolding figure who in George's view thought more of his Bible teaching than of his own son. More dimly, Aunt Mary—smirking, afraid of Daddy, always taking Daddy's part,

always yapping, always cranky and singing her crazy songs at her sewing machine: "There's a good time coming and it's almost here, but it's been a long time on the—way" Harold—Here George's mind had a hurdle. Yes, even Harold, always getting the best of it. Why didn't they hit Harold with a switch, eh? Why didn't they stuff his mouth with their rotten soap? Because Harold worked on the farm and saved a hired man, thass why!

Well, he'd be mad at all of them. Even Harold, even Pitch. "I'll git on King and I'll ride away so far they'll never find me. They'll be sorry, d-damn them!"

That night at prayers Daddy prayed: "And grant Thy repentance to those who practise cruelty upon Thy creatures, bless and save them ..."

George shifted uneasily on his knees on the hard, slivery floor, and his lips moved. "Damn Johnny Wilbur, yah mean! Bless and save the horses—Oh, Lord, I didn't mean that, honest. Forgive him if you feel you must, Lord. But don't count on me. Nodda bit of it. I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna jiss as sure—"

"For ever and ever. Amen," said Daddy.

Aunt Mary took up her knitting where she'd laid it for prayers, and clicked away with maddening calm, her thoughts masked far behind her wrinkled, discontented face. Harold took the lantern and went out to the barn for a last look at his horses before going to bed.

George finally mustered up voice to say, "G'night."

"Good-night," said Daddy from behind his paper.

"Good-*night!*" snapped Aunt Mary.

Then George climbed the dark wooden staircase with a mind as black as his attic room. He lay awake till Harold came up and jumped in beside him, then he poured out his whole story in a torrent of passionate whispers.

Harold listened in a silence that might have been sympathy, and was more likely the blissful twilight of thought before a farm boy, up at five a.m., falls into the brief, deep abyss of sleep.

"Yeh," Harold agreed without excitement when George finished. "He's a stinkin' brute, but he's the best pitcher we got on the team. Go ta sleep."

The farmers chafed till the soil could be raked and tortured anew, till they could rush in the seed, then fidget and pray till the wheat sprouts came above the black ground once again.

Swifter still was man's cupidity. Nature, fast, loose and reckless as she was, moved too slowly. Men capitalized and borrowed against the future, made money while it was still in the shot blade of the wheat, spent the farmer's crop before the farmer grew it. Nobody had time to spare.

George, impatient also for his future, reached upward till his father got the habit of saying to people: "Getting as tall as his Daddy." At fifteen George was awkward, big-footed, rough-handed and tanned, dreaming of the day when people would call him "Slim" as they called a long-eared hired man at Uncle Jim's.

Chapter Eight

Daddy rode the binder, Harold and George stooked. The binder went round and round the field, cutting an eight-foot swath of wheat at a time. The stooker's job was to stand the sheaves of wheat heads up and together, eight or ten to a stock, so that the sun would complete their drying before the threshing.

The god of the harvest had smiled. To the men the god was wheat, golden, shimmering, endless streams of it, the stuff that men dreamed of and prayed for all year. It was the miraculous age of the West. Men who had grubbed for years broke suddenly from their homelands, followed the tide toward the sunset, tore up the ground and became capitalists in no time.

But wheat was only one symbol of those halcyon days. Expansion, inflation and speculation fever were everywhere. Get-rich-quick Wallingford became a symbol of the times. Real estate dealers were personifying him in the explosive, vulgar, mushroom cities of the prairies. Englishmen were coming in by the shipload, fired by the legends that spread across the Atlantic, the weird folk tales that told of men going to bed paupers and waking up millionaires.

A whole Empire had shaken off the placid pace of the nineteenth century. The United States, suddenly halted in its post-Civil War boom, struck a brief dam in the first decade of the twentieth century and then burst through. Canada, bounding along in full pursuit, reached its full momentum a few years behind. Over Europe the sky was clear save for a few clouds on the horizon, that were not yet dark or ominous.

From the Atlantic to the Pacific the flood tide of immigration was on. The trains ran full and clamorous. As they stopped at the stations people surged from them with a kind of frenzy. Promoters from the East, investors, racketeers, liars, builders, preachers, students, they poured across the welcoming plains. The Indians silently backed away into their reservations and watched with disillusioned eyes the white tide of land miners, loan sharks, boomers, gamblers, workers, clerks—all impatiently, frantically in the wake of the Great God Wheat.

A single railway line at the first went through to the Pacific coast. Two others were to follow it, laden with black engines and red freight cars. As fast as men debouched from sight of it the railroad followed with branch lines north and south, searching out their farms to serve them. Grain companies came with the railroads, rushing up their forests of tall red elevators along the sidings. Contractors, merchants, realtors, lawyers, doctors, politicians all spilled out of the gas-lighted coaches almost before they came to a full stop.

The concert of the big steel scraper, the hammer and the saw was unceasing. Towns sprang up like mirages out of the morning mist. Winnipeg, queen city of the plains, was the clearing house for this mighty surge. Its old trading posts in a decade were surrounded and engulfed in the rush of builders. The city sprawled along the Red and Assiniboine rivers and spilled out to the prairies beyond their banks.

A man came West and paid ten dollars to the land registry office, his full payment for a homestead, another ten dollars for an equal space as pre-emption, three hundred and twenty acres in all. He built his shack and installed his family. The railroad came, planted its townsite on his homestead. The land that had cost him twenty dollars was subdivided and sold for millions, its broad acres underlaid with sewers, its surface paved with streets.

The same story was told everywhere. Over toward the foothills of the Rockies a town sprang out of the long range grass amid the lanky ranches. Oil drillers came to tap the ground, and speculators followed them to set up a fantastic oil boom.

In those roaring cities of the West the real estate man was in every other doorway. Men bought lots for \$10,000, went next door, sold them for \$12,000, and woke up next morning to scratch their heads in frantic disgust because the same lots were being snapped up at \$20,000. Most of them hardly dared go to bed lest a bargain slip by that would make them rich for life.

Contractors raced to jerry-built city halls, rushed out with papers stuffed in their pockets, tore up long lines across open fields, laid sewer and water pipes. Others followed them with lumber, bricks, mortar, and threw houses together into which people moved before the plaster was dry.

Charley Battle's cousin, Hartley Mills, came out from the East. He shipped livestock, sold it, took the proceeds to Regina, raised five thousand dollars to a hundred thousand in a month, chugged madly in a monstrous automobile over

the hummocky trails to Charley's home, gave Charley a team of horses, gave Harold and George a horse apiece, Jean a piano, sold Charley two lots seven miles out of Regina, took a promissory note in payment, took the whole excited family half a mile down the road for a ride, discovered he had forgotten to fill the leaking radiator, dipped some water out of a slough with his new hat, rushed them all back to the house, tore off for town again at a mad rate of fifteen miles an hour, heedless of badger holes and sudden death, to telegraph a sale order for a downtown site where a department store would soon be built, and jumped on the train for Vancouver. He left the Battles breathless, the boys filled with a frantic longing to see more of him, to follow where he had gone, and to have clothes that smelled of cigars like he had.

George had a vivid memory of a panting, steaming, back-firing monster, covered with nickel from front to back, with the inevitable dummy buggy whip-holder in the dash, and a horn that sent the Battle horses into a panic.

There was an incident in Morocco about that time between England and Germany. George thought nothing of it, neither did anybody else. It started a tremor through the earth that was to reach the West years later and topple the wheat god's world. King Edward VII had taken the matter out of his ministers' hands, earned the disapproval of some and the applause of others, but the ominous tremor travelled on, and is travelling still.

Wilful and wayward, the first decade of the twentieth century rushed headlong on the wings of time and dreams.

Out on the Pacific coast the stately town of Victoria had grown with a disdainful lack of ballyhoo, preserving its English traditions, more English than England. It looked with quiet composure across the Gulf of Georgia at its more robust, more raucous sister city of Vancouver, that sprawled over the Burrard Peninsula where Captain George Vancouver a century before had sailed. Spanish galleons were offshore and there was an argument. George Vancouver, his guns bared and silent, persuaded the Spanish that they should withdraw in peace.

It was a hazy note in George's mind, gleaned from his history books. All he knew was that out there somewhere, beyond the prairie sunset, lay the western sea, the romance of the ships, the thrumming thrill of the iron horse that climbed the mountains and hauled Hartley Mills out of their lives.

The earth was swift and fecund, George knew also. The snow and the rains came in the prone plains, bathing a land that had been parched and burned in the centuries gone by, till the fertile soil forced its exuberant fruits into the sunlight. Spring came with an explosive and vulgar violence. The billowing oceans of snow receded, and, scarcely were they gone when crocuses and anemones were smiling in their banks of yellow and white, and the hibernating gophers were peeping over the headlands of spring.



Chapter Nine

George took Pitch to their first party, a barn dance to celebrate the opening of Alex Burroughs' new barn. When Aunt Sadie had demurred, Pitch had stamped her foot and stormed: "Oh, Mother, you're so old-fashioned. Can't you see these are new times?"

"The boys often drink there, dear," said Aunt Sadie mildly. "They take little flasks in their pockets and leave the girls upstairs while they sneak out behind the barn to drink."

"And what if they do!" Pitch argued impetuously. "George won't, and I'm sure I won't."

George called for her in Daddy's new buggy, with King hitched to it. They jogged along to the Burroughs' farm, and Pitch had some kind of perfume that wafted past George's nose in a tantalizing inconstancy. He could not help seeing these days that Pitch had changed, that her flat bosom was rounding, that some new quality had come into her voice which she had trained with her singing lessons, as only Pitch's determination could train. Her voice came to him as cool and sweet as the evening breeze. He wanted to reach over and touch her taffeta-clad knee that perched so demurely beside his own in the buggy. It would be only a friendly pat, he told himself. "Aw, she's only my cousin. Can't have any fun taking your cousin out." Conscience told him so, and thus he knew otherwise.

At the new barn Pitch waited while George unharnessed King and put him in a stall of the old barn. Around the door young men were huddled together, snickering and whispering to each other and laughing uproariously. The girls were by themselves, waiting for the boys who had brought them. Now and then some of the youths would nudge each other and disappear around the corner of the barn.

The dance was held in the loft of the barn. The new wood gave a tang to the air that mingled with the whisky breath of some of the young men. Among the girls George saw Hattie Wilbur, and among the young men sneaking around the corner, her brother Johnny.

A ladder nailed to the uprights of the barn wall led into the loft. Pitch went first. She went differently to the other girls, who giggled and motioned their escorts to stand aside and look away. Pitch had no such inhibitions. She simply put her hands on the ladder rungs and sprang up before George thought to help her. George had a sudden vision of white petticoats flouncing in his face, of stockinged legs a few inches from his startled eyes, stockings that reached into the mysterious white clouds of her petticoats and vanished.

For a strained moment he looked, then tore his eyes away and looked firmly around at the lantern-lighted barn. It was his first, startled admission inside a girl's skirts. The hot flush in his face told him he was as red as a tomato. He grasped a rung for support, swung himself up the ladder, and did not dare to look again, though he knew that momentarily even now Pitch's legs were poised above him as she stepped from the ladder to the floor through the open trapdoor. But if Pitch saw his blush she paid no attention. She grasped his arm impulsively when he joined her. "Georgie," she whispered excitedly, "they're going to dance. Let's!"

The official caller-off wiped his brow with his sleeve. The white-clad girls were on benches along one side of the barn. On the other stood the boys, telling jokes among each other, a noticeable few of them clean. At the end of the barn was the orchestra, a violinist and pianist. The piano had been hoisted in through the hay-door at the end.

"Take your partners for a two-step," shouted the caller-off.

There was a thunder of clumping and sliding on the boards as the boys headed for the girls. Two boys came for Pitch, but she waved them off. The orchestra plunged into "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

"Come on a' hear!" cried Pitch to George. Her eyes were aflame with a swift new excitement that scared and unnerved him. He put his timid right arm around her, shivering with a nameless emotion to find her body so soft, so yielding, so luscious under his shy fingers. The electric shock of it ran up his arm and through him.

Ahead of the dancers ran a young man with a can of powder which he spilled generously on the floor. He did his work too well. George's heels were worn at the outside. As he and Pitch turned at the corner, George's left foot went from under him. In a second of dismay he found his balance gone, felt Pitch's arm suddenly tighten against his back, lumbered against her, his face brushing hers and his lips touching her cheek.

"Oh, gosh," he said. He recovered hastily, bit his lip, looked into Pitch's eyes in an agony of apology, saw there a world of amusement, woman's age-old amusement at her man. He heard Pitch's unrestrained laughter. In it was a throaty ring of more maturity than Pitch had, a note that no cousin had a right to have, that set his heart beating with a tumultuous, unbearable mixture of surprise and embarrassment.

But he had no time for that. He replaced his hand sternly on the small of her back and danced with decorous and angry care.

"That old Methodist foot again, Georgie?" giggled Pitch in his ear, her voice a dumbfounding riddle of delight and malice.

"Yeh—ah, I guess so," said George miserably.

The squeeze of her fingers on his reassured him only partly. At fifteen he was no psychologist.

When the dance was over he unceremoniously left her on a bench with other girls, and hastily retreated to the friendly smart-aleck atmosphere of the young farmers on the other side.

"Partners for a square dance!" barked the caller-off, whose self-assurance George envied hopelessly and bitterly.

The rush was on again, boys brushed past George in their haste to find partners. George followed them more gingerly, unable at once to find anyone he dared ask. One by one the girls were whisked off with heavy-booted partners. George saw, in despair, only older women left and was about to give up when Hattie's voice stopped him.

"Oh, Geordie!" Hattie, with a flower in her hair, her dress neck lower and more daring than the other girls wore, was already coming toward him, and there was no escape even if he wanted it.

Dumbly he took her arm and she trotted him off to where three other couples waited to make a foursome. As they went George saw with a flash of unreasonable resentment that Johnny Wilbur had Pitch, and was guffawing noisily and offensively at her.

The music started, and the caller-off barked.

"First couple up to the right—an' balance all ..."

George felt Hattie tugging him, found they were the first couple, and, sharply remindful of his stumble, went ahead with her gingerly, feeling every step and keeping the pressure off his treacherous heels. Then the caller-off again:

"Swing your partners all!"

George swung Hattie with a violence he hadn't intended. They spun around dizzily, and Hattie shrieked with delight. One of her knees went between George's to balance her. George squeezed it guiltily, but in sheer self-protection lest he go headlong to the floor. As if to reassure him, Hattie's knees closed on his in return.

"Whee!" squeaked Hattie, her face close to George's. "That was fun, Geordie. Oh, you kid, can't you swing!"

She was too good looking, too suggestive and too close for George's comfort. She had the Wilbur look in her eyes, too, that made George think of a smart aleck. But tonight there was a new light of excitement he had not heeded before. Hattie's eyes were deeper in colour than he'd thought. And nicer, too. They looked daring and disturbing against the copper background of her hair.

"Oh, I'm not so good; it was you did it all," George allowed, with more generosity than flattery. The knee technique bothered him. Not objectionable, but unnecessary, he thought. Other girls he swung with did it as he did, at arm's length, bodies not touching. But Hattie went to dances in town; maybe that was where she learned it. Took dancing lessons as well. Hattie said she was going to dance on the stage some day, but the day hadn't arrived yet. George had no doubt she would go when she made up her mind to it. He had a hearty respect for girls who made up their minds. They usually got their way.

The square dance grew more hilarious as the sets proceeded and young blood warmed. Beads of perspiration rolled down young men's faces, including George's. You'd have to be made of stone to dance squares the way Dick Burroughs

called them off without getting a thrill. He had a speed, a constant acceleration of movements that whirled the dancers onward without rest or desire for it. He called two sets to a square, and made them longer than the usual, and much faster.

George marvelled at girls, how they could dance like that and never perspire, at least, not in their faces. Pitch's nose, for example, did not even get shiny. Hattie's became frankly oily in the heat and excitement. And yet girls did perspire, for he could feel the dampness on their backs through the thin dresses they wore. Stella Doolittle, for instance, made him aware of her condition every time it was his turn to swing her in their set.

"That girl is simply high," Pitch used to say.

"She smells," George said to himself. But he couldn't say it to anyone else, not even Pitch. It wasn't the sort of thing you could say or even think about a girl.

Grand right an' left to your partners all,
An' swing that partner away to the wall!

George was swinging with Stella when the order came. He let go of her suddenly, she cried "Yeep!" he caught her hand impatiently, slid his arm through hers, weaved through the girls as they came toward him, a grin on his face, his mouth dry, came to Hattie, and swung.

"Oh, you kiddo!" Hattie greeted him. "Jehosopha, I'm thirsty, and hot. Let's go down to the pump and get a cool drink."

George agreed willingly. The barn air was stifling. He went down the ladder first, waited politely, looking away till Hattie came down almost even with him, and then reached for her hand.

She grasped it, then for some reason released it, half-twisted her body, gave a small shriek and tumbled into his arms. Yet George knew mighty well he'd seen her foot firmly on the ladder rung. Hattie, from slightly above, billowed down over him bosom first into his face. Instinctively his arms went around her, and she slid down in them with her left arm tight around his neck.

"Oh, how stupid of me! I'm sorry, Geordie!"

"Liar," thought George, vexed because she had mussed his hair and probably soiled his clean collar. Aloud: "Gee, do you always come down a ladder that way?"

Her laugh was too high-pitched, too excited. "Race you to the pump," she cried, and hand in hand they ran across the dark yard. A tin cup hung on a chain. George gallantly pumped it full for her.

She sipped, held it up to his lips. "Loving cup?" George drank shyly. A situation was shaping up that baffled him. He knew he was clumsy on retorts of the kind Hattie expected, yet he felt silly if he tried to say the inane things the other boys said to make the girls laugh.

"Wouldn't it be fun to dance out here, on the grass!" said Hattie. "Oh, waltz me around again, Willie, around, around, around!" George went ruefully along with her. She threw back her head, and her face was pale and luminous in the moonlight. "Oh, the fresh air! Let's walk toward the breeze."

"But the—" George began uneasily, and stopped. Facing the breeze meant walking away from the barn, past the corner of the Burroughs haystack that would shut off the view of the barn entrance and the friendly lights. The pleasant tang of the new hay assaulted them.

"Oh, isn't it dee-vine!" whispered Hattie.

"It's timothy," said George soberly. "Alex always grows his own. No prairie wool for him."

"Goodie! That means no spears." Hattie's laugh had a dangerous sound in it. "Here's his ladder. Let's climb up on top and sit down where the breeze can get at us. No, not me first; we'll go together."

They set foot on the rungs, and George found he had to put his arm around her. He did so politely, and pinioned her other arm against her side. She carelessly slid her arm out and let his hand clasp her waist, which was too pliant and too

lightly clothed for his comfort. At the top they sat on the broad hay roof, their feet dangling over its sloping side. No one could see them here. A nameless, gnawing excitement bothered George. They sat close, perhaps too close. He had an uneasy flash about Pitch, but dismissed it. Pitch was busy, anyway.

Among girls like Pitch, Hattie would not be beautiful, yet in the moonlight her face looked romantic. "Isn't it fun being here just by ourselves!" she purred. And there was something catlike, too, in the way she snuggled close, so imperceptibly that George felt he was crowding her instead. He edged politely away.

"Don't be so shy, silly boy," she scolded. "Besides, I might fall."

"But I thought you wanted to cool off. I was just—"

"Oh, I'm nice and cool, in fact—Br-rr!" She giggled softly. "I guess the breeze is fresher than we thought."

"I'll put my coat around you," George started to remove it.

"Oh, no, no! Just—" And again he wondered if he had jostled her. Tricky stuff to sit on, hay was.

"You can put your arms around me if you like," said Hattie.

George put one obediently over her shoulder, and held the muscle rigid so his hand wouldn't be too heavy on her. In some way her shoulder seemed to melt into the contour of her body, her hand was pressing his against the softness of her bosom. Hattie sighed, laid her head back again, and looked intently up into George's face.

"What are you thinking about, Geordie?" He wished she wouldn't call him Geordie, like some darn kid.

"Oh, just about the dance. Swell piano player, isn't he?"

"You're not in a hurry to go back, are you?"

"Oh, no, of course not. Nice out here."

"I'm afraid I'll hate to leave it."

George started. "Leave it? Where you going?"

"I'm going to Winnipeg. I'm going to be a dancer."

"Oh, when?"

"Some time soon," said Hattie, who hadn't the slightest idea.

"I'm going there myself, I guess."

"What are you going to do, Geordie?"

"Oh, to college, I guess. Soon's I get enough money."

"Oh, won't that be dee-vine! What are you going to study to be?"

"I don't know. An author, I guess—I mean—" George stammered in confusion, but she took him up eagerly.

"You mean, write books?"

"Oh, I've written a few things," said George, in deprecatory tones. He hadn't meant to reveal this to anyone. It was a secret he hugged to himself.

Hattie clasped him convulsively. "Won't it be great!" she whispered. "You a great author and me a famous dancer. Will you come and see me?"

"Why, yes, I guess so. But say, let's—"

"That's a bargain?" Her voice had suddenly become earnest. He looked down at her in surprise. Her eyes were deep,

risky pools. "We could be bohemian, and have all sorts of fun!"

"Yes, couldn't we!" What, in God's name, he wondered, did bohemian mean?

"A kiss—to bind the bargain?"

"Why, I guess—" He aimed for her cheek, somehow met her lips instead, and her arm around his neck had a fierce, sudden strength. Her lips were warm, incredibly soft, and parted, and not as he had ever known a girl's lips. An instinctive flash of warning from his Methodist training made him pull away swiftly. But he pulled Hattie with him, and felt himself skidding with her into space, thrashing at the hay with his free arm. The two of them scrambled, but came away with their hands clutching timothy straws, and slid feet first down the side of the stack.

George had a momentary, appalling sight of Hattie's legs with her skirt pulled high, of white lace-trimmed pantalets. Their feet struck the ground with a thud together, and they tumbled forward on their knees.

"Hattie! Lord, you hurt?"

Hattie shrieked with laughter, and sprang up. "Oh, Geordie, you were so funny!"

"You were funny yourself," he said grumpily, dusting off his knees and hoping his Sunday suit wasn't ruined.

"Come on, George, let's go back!" With incredible speed she flew around the haystack, and George followed.

"Don't—don't tell them about the—stories," he panted.

"All right, I promise," Hattie gasped in turn. "And don't you tell them about—anything else!"

"Silly thing to say," George thought. "There *wasn't* anything else."

"Partners for a waltz!" yelled Dick Burroughs, and pounced on Hattie. "Hey, come on there, where you been?"

The boys stampeded across the floor again. The two-piece orchestra struck up:

Come away with me, Lucille,
In my merry Oldsmobile,
Down the road of life we'll fly—

George found himself a partner, but had little to say to her, and was glad of her silence in return, for it gave him a chance to think.

Automobile songs were the vogue then, and after the waltz came a one-step with "Get Out and Get Under." George one-stepped badly, so stood out the dance and hummed the song over to himself.

Sandwiches and cake and pots of tea were served by the Burroughs at midnight. George sought out Pitch, who gave him a brief scornful look, allowed him to sit awkwardly on the floor near her feet, and kept up a brittle conversation with girls and other young men around her. She seemed to enjoy them more than she did him, George thought sourly. Well, let her! See if he cared.

But Pitch did not relent easily and, two hours afterward, when the orchestra played the "Home, Sweet Home" waltz, he danced silently with her. After it was over he let her hand fall, and stood helplessly without voice while she said good-night to other girls.

"Well, I guess I'll go and get the horse," he said.

"By all means do, if that's what you call him," said Pitch frostily. "Or would you like me to go and get him?"

George departed in a black cloud of resentment, hitched King into the shafts, drove around to the lighted door, and waited in surly silence while Pitch climbed in and waved at others amid a chorus of "Good-night," "See you in church," "Don't take any wooden money," and similar farewells.

"G'night all," said George gruffly, slapped King's rump with the reins, clacked at him, and they rattled down the

driveway.

Pitch sat silent till George could stand it no longer.

"Great night, isn't it?" he said.

"You seemed to think so."

"What d'you mean?"

"Just what I said. I hope you enjoyed it."

"Yes, great dance. I didn't have many with you, though."

"I was there all the time." Pitch emphasized the "all."

"So was I," said George miserably. "Why d'you say that?"

Pitch's lips were set in a thin straight line. "I really don't know. I'm sure it's of no interest to you."

"Well, it is." George turned suddenly to her. "Say, what's ailing you, anyway?"

"Nothing, I assure you. I have never felt better," said Pitch, who had never felt worse.

"Well, spill it, then! Holy old—"

"You don't need to swear. That's what people like Hattie do."

"I don't know what you mean," said George, who thought he did.

"Very well," Pitch's voice was as sharp as Harold's new razor with sudden resolve. "What were you doing outside with that hussy?"

"Nothing."

"You took a long time doing it."

"Say, I don't have to take that—" George began roughly, then stopped himself, flapped the reins on King's back again. King jogged along unimpressed.

"You can take it or leave it, I suppose," Pitch sounded bored. In fact, too bored.

"Well, put this in your pipe and smoke it," George blurted out, stung by her sarcasm, "I didn't ask her out. We went to get a drink at the pump."

"Do go on! And I suppose you fell down the well."

"No, we didn't fall down the damn well, you know damn well we didn't."

A muffled, explosive sound came from Pitch's tight mouth.

"Maybe the pump needed priming, then," she said.

"It didn't either," George fumbled desperately. He was no match for her rapier thrusts. "We just stood out to get cool."

"Stood out three dances," purred Pitch, with acid in every word.

"Well, we walked a little." George waited. No response. "Hattie wanted to take a little walk to feel the breeze."

Pitch was caught off guard. "Oh, she did, did she? She just wanted to—walk, did she? And where did you walk to?"

"Oh, around the corner and back."

"Around whose corner? Our place or your place? You were long enough."

"We didn't go around any corner—at least—Oh, the devil, you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I don't. I'm waiting to find out, if you can remember."

"Well, around the haystack corner," George flung out defiantly.

"So you had to stop and lean against the haystack for a rest," Pitch finished relentlessly. "It's all so clear."

"We didn't lean against any haystack."

"I see. You just stood still, and the haystack leaned up against you?" Pitch's voice grew fainter.

"It never did, either." George was too obsessed with his misery to guess how funny he sounded. "We climbed on top of it."

"Isn't that just too sweet! You bring me to a dance, and then you climb haystacks with Hattie. Was the dancing good up there?"

"We didn't dance at all. We just sat there for about a minute."

"I see. You just—*sat*—there." Pitch paused to let it sink in. "So while you were *sitting* there a straw came up and stuck in your coat collar and broke itself off."

George's hand shot around behind his collar, in alarm.

"Don't trouble yourself," Pitch said frigidly. "I pulled it out, before quite everybody saw it. It's a funny thing, though, about this hay of Alex Burroughs'. A whole head of timothy crawled up Hattie's back while she—*sat*—there, and tangled itself in her hair."

A great light burst on George. "Oh, I know what you're driving at," he shouted. "Ha ha!" He doubled over in the buggy seat. "Ho ho ho!" He gasped at the memory. "The hay gave way while we were sit—while we were up there just getting ready to come down and—Ho ho ho! We slid right to the ground. Funniest thing you ever saw."

"Ha ha!" said Pitch mirthlessly. "I'm laughing so hard I can't bear it."

George sobered. "Well, don't you believe me?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

George peered at her. Pitch's face was expressionless.

"Well, you can believe it or lump it. See if I care!" he fumed. "Go ahead and blame me if you like. I didn't invent the fool idea of climbing a haystack. Girls make me sick."

He got no answer. "It's all right for them—" (he was careful not to say "you," though he'd have liked to) "—to go wherever they like. But just let a man dare go out for a minute and what do you get?"

"I'll bite," said Pitch sweetly, "what *did* you get?"

"Bah!" George exploded, and drove on in silence, tortured, frustrated. Had he looked around quickly he would have seen Pitch's eyes turned sidewise, full of mischief, while her face pointed straight and stonily ahead.

They were at Uncle Jim's gate when Pitch's warm little hand found George's, gave it a quick squeeze, with the swift, astonishing strength that girls' fingers seemed to have for such business.

"Well—" George yielded grudgingly.

"Good-night, Georgie," said Pitch softly, when the buggy stopped. She ran without another word to her door.

"Good-night," said George and drove glumly off home. His mind was a torment of questions, anger, remorse, a vexatious feeling that he had missed the whole point of two bouts in an evening.

His lips moved in the darkness as King trotted along the road. The moon had gone now, the darkness suited his mood.

"Girls—make me sick—make liars out of you—make a fool out of you, too—why didn't I get that straw—?" He fell to brooding, putting two and two together, going carefully back over the Hattie episode. A stray thought drifted into his mind, started to drift out again, hovered, suddenly blazed up in a white light. That was it! It explained Pitch's cold fury, her sudden curiosity, Hattie's strange behaviour.

George straightened up in the seat, stared incredulously into the darkness at the dim shape of King, and suddenly thumped his knee.

"By the holy Judas!" he cried. "Why didn't I think of that before! Well, I'll be damned. Yes, I'll be double damned! Giddap, King!"

While George drove home, King Edward VII died six thousand miles away. And at the moment of his death George, unknown to himself, had a new King, a weather-beaten prince of the seas who had as hearty a vocabulary as any George himself had heard. The weather-beaten King whose course charted discoveries for George, important and illuminating, but maybe never so vital as the discovery he had made this night.

Another era had ended in the world's history, and another era in the life of George Battle.

Into her pillow Pitch Black laughed noiselessly, laughed until she found to her disgust that she was weeping.

Chapter Ten

"Therefore if any man can show just cause, why these two may not lawfully be joined in holy wedlock, let him speak now or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

George sat uneasily in the front pew of the little church. There were flowers on either side of the pulpit. To George's right sat Hal. To his left, at the aisle, was Daddy, looking suddenly haggard and old.

Jean getting married! Jean with her long white dress and the veil and the brave little bouquet of garden flowers. In another minute now she would be Mrs. Henderson, the same Henderson who had taught school here ever since they came. Plain Howard Henderson to them now, and he was going away at last to his native Kentucky, and taking Jean with him.

He looked sleek, complacent, sure of himself, a stocky little thoroughbred, his hair waved gracefully and brushed in back of his ears toward the reverse pompadour that men wore those days. The back of his neck glowed pink and fresh from the razor. Just above the weather line a thin white stripe showed where the barber had shaved him. He looked smart now, in his dark suit, a flower in his button hole, and he held his head high.

George eyed Jean with a new interest. Funny how a fellow would live with his sister all his life and never notice her. Why, he had hardly noticed even her romance, until it suddenly bloomed and ripened. Jean stood there slim and serene, but happy in her way, he conceded with lordly compassion.

Little Charlotte Warner was the flower girl. She walked so importantly up the aisle. Then came the Burroughs girl and the older Wilbur girl, Effie, as bridesmaids. Jean, then, her face radiant with a flashing smile which she bestowed on everyone with a conscious generosity. Jean holding to Daddy's arm.

And Daddy with his long-tailed black coat that he had brought from Ontario, the coat he wore to church on Sundays, the coat with the pocket in the tail where he put his handkerchief. Daddy with a wing collar high enough to choke an ostrich, with the few remaining hairs on his head spread thinly and pasted down against the bald spot.

"Who giveth this woman in marriage?"

"I, her father," Daddy had said. And his work was done. In three words, after twenty years, Daddy had given up Jean for ever, to a man who once used to hit George over the knuckles with his ruler. Daddy had turned and sat down silently beside George. Mr. Munson, the pastor, began to read from his little book.

George wondered how Daddy felt, sitting there. How he must have remembered the old days when he, too, stood up and declared his love before the world. Was Daddy thinking now of his sainted wife who lay with her fathers in a far field? Mother—Margaret was her name. The same as Pitch's. Pitch had been named after her, and they said Pitch looked like her.

Pitch sat up in the choir now, her hair astonishingly black above the dainty white she wore. In contrast to the usual high collar of that time, with its stiff supports coming up under each ear, Pitch's dress was low, cool, inviting, with a small V at the neck, gathered in a light, mysterious ruffle. Pitch's black eyes looked alertly over the church, alight with a strange power, as the stars are alight.

George wondered if they were on him. He tried to look away, lest she think he was staring, found he could not, then tried to look full at her, but felt his eyes wavering under that impersonal, friendly scrutiny that might not be for him at all.

"—To love, honour and obey—Till death do us part."

Aunt Sadie behind him blew her nose, a subdued blast. Aunt Anna blew hers with a hearty, honest explosion that skewed her hat over one ear. Then Jean, Howard and Daddy went with the preacher to the corner of the church beyond the pulpit to sign and witness the contract. The little organ in the opposite corner began playing. Swiftly Pitch stood up, the folds of her dress straightened themselves, and she was to George a sudden vision out of a white mist. He caught his breath. Pitch was smiling slightly, so astoundingly confident. His heart beat riotously as he thought of his own last miserable appearance at a school concert, how his whole frame shook with fright.

His eyes were glued to Pitch now in fascination. The little organ rose to full voice, then softened. Pitch's white-gloved

hands were joined lightly before her.

"I hear you calling me," Pitch began, in the quiet, matter-of-fact opening of that unforgettable song. It was as if she had simply said it to him. A pause, almost as if she expected him to answer. And then the song was rising in volume, and George understood dimly what Pitch's years of study, facing the ridicule of her ignorant young friends, including himself, had meant.

Her voice picked up the measure of her solo while the organist seemed merely straying on the keys. It rose with the ease of a bird into the higher notes. George's throat filled, and some sort of fogginess clouded his eyes at the beauty of it. Forgotten now Jean and Howard. Forgotten all but Pitch, a black-eyed, impish mite with a voice that sent chills of ecstasy into his heart.

"—You called me when the moon had gone to rest."

He thought writhingly of that night two years ago as the moon had slid down into the mocking horizon. Had she really called him that night when he went home in such misery? He shook the thought out of his mind in shame at his own conceit. Of course she hadn't. Glad enough to be rid of him, she'd been.

The song was ended. Pitch sat down with an easy grace, as if she floated down to rest in her chair, dainty, unafraid, a challenge even in silence. He wanted to applaud frantically, to yell 'Core as they always did at a concert.

Then a signal from Mr. Munson. The organ pealed reedily and bravely into Mendelssohn's triumphant chords. There was a vast rustle of silk as people stood up. Down the aisle came Jean and Howard now, two people who belonged to each other. George had a fleeting look at Howard. The fellow was actually handsome, smiling like that. Jean held his arm, and beamed on everyone. A great surge of affection filled George. Gad, a sister didn't have much fun after all. He forgot now the hundreds of little resentments he'd known, and thought of all the uncountable things Jean had done for him. He would have liked to rush out and hug her right in the aisle.

It was the effect of Pitch's song, maybe. He would tell her what a swell singer she was. But he would say, as they said on the stage: "Mamselle, you were beeyootiful."

They met briefly as she passed him. Pitch dazzled him with her smile, and said simply: "Hello, Georgie."

George would go late to college that fall. Threshing must come first, to provide the money. Harry was already a year ahead of him, for he had to stay another year on the farm. His father simply could not afford it. Even now it would be slim going, he felt, but he would make extra money with his stories. The manuscripts were there at home now. He thought often of them, with a yearning anxiety. One was still in the publisher's hands. He made up his mind not to think of it, talk about it or hope for it. If that brain child came back it would, he knew, badly strain his heart.

The magazine he had sent it to came to the house every month. It was a small magazine, but it was George's Valhalla. He read its stories, saw the names of its writers in italic letters at the tops of the pages, and projected himself into that coming rapture when his own should appear. He had already exhausted the thrill of writing for *The Westview Bugle*. It had earned him much fun, and also a lot of scolding over the rural telephone where everyone listened when you called your neighbour. The editor, of course, paid him no money for it.

It was the year of the big election, the most incredible election, Daddy had said, that was ever held. It was a fight between the low-tariff Liberals and the high-tariff Conservatives over Reciprocity with the United States. It got to such extreme absurdities as "No truck nor trade with the Yankees." The phrase was spawned by the demand of Eastern industrialists for tariffs high enough so that they could charge up a profit for themselves over competing American goods.

The tariff did not apply to wheat, which the farmer had to sell, but it did apply to all the implements and everything else which he had to buy. So for the occasion the Western prairies were strongly Liberal. So was Charley Battle. He showed George, in black and white, how the resulting increase in the Battle income for a year would more than pay George's expenses in college. George secretly agreed, but he took the high tariff side, with which he had no sympathy at all, for the sake of argument.

He backed down hastily, though, when he tried the same tactics with Pitch. "Don't you want to go to college?" she demanded scornfully.

"Of course. Who said I didn't?"

She sniffed. "If you don't show any more sense than that, you'll be just wasting your time in college. Now, if you were I, going to Toronto where they believe in that nonsense you're talking, I'd be able to tolerate you."

George laughed uncertainly. "And who's going to take you to Toronto? You'd be lost away down there. You ought to come to Winnipeg and let me take care of you."

She tilted her chin. "Oh, you'll have enough to do looking after Hattie."

"Hattie! Why? Is she going? What for?"

"Now I suppose you ask me to think you didn't know!"

"I didn't. What's she going there for?"

"She thinks she has a career in dancing, I suppose." Pitch frowned. "But why should I be telling you? She'll have you corralled one of these days. Maybe this time *she'll* force *you* to climb some haystack—and watch her dance."

"Ah, haystack your grandmother!"

"A grandmother'd have more sense. George, tell me, have you ever kissed Hattie since?"

"I never did—Now, say, you can't prove that on me."

"No need to," she said coolly. "You've proved it yourself. And don't worry about me. I'm only your cousin."

"You ought to be my grandmother," he objected. "You're good enough at lecturing, anyway."

"Hmph! If I were a grandmother I'd pick my grandsons."

"Well, I didn't pick you for a cousin, did I?"

"Neither did I have to be born your cousin."

"Well, why were you then? Answer me that!"

She toyed with an idea. "Oh, I don't know. If I'd been born just anybody, no relation—" she looked at him under long lashes, "you'd probably have met me and fallen in love with me, and then I wouldn't have had the heart to turn you down, you see?"

He laughed scornfully, a little louder than necessary to make it sound convincing. "Turn me down! I like that! And what if I didn't propose?"

She waved it off airily. "Then I probably would have, out of sympathy, because you're such a helpless little fellow."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she was ahead: "Of course now that isn't necessary," she sighed, and then flashed her best smile at him. George came short of appreciating it.

"But you said you were going to Toronto?"

"So I am, later on," Pitch was unabashed at being caught. "I'm going to Winnipeg this fall to stay with Aunt Kitty, and study with Professor Oleano. He's a very famous teacher."

"Oh!" George said.

His first story came in a magazine, at last. He was sitting in the kitchen, reading notes he'd made, when his father unfolded a magazine he was reading, chuckled, showed the magazine to Aunt Mary. "That's a cute little story, Mary."

Aunt Mary read it, sour-faced at first, then gave the magazine back to Daddy and agreed. "I've read worse," said Aunt Mary.

George pricked up his ears at the mention of a story. An author had to keep abreast of his contemporaries. As casually as

he could, he laid aside his notes, walked over to the door, looked out, stretched, contrived to see the page folded over in the magazine, sauntered back, picked up the magazine where Daddy had laid it, and pretended to turn the pages idly, but kept his thumb at the marked page.

Suddenly his eyes were focused on it. Swiftly he looked down the page. The story took just two even columns in the page. He was slightly surprised to find how short it was, for in longhand it had seemed much more than that. His name wasn't even on it, but down at the bottom, after a dash, were his initials, "G. B."

He clenched the magazine tightly, conquered the tendency of the page to swim before his eyes, and read it through every word. They had printed it exactly as he had written it! Yet now that his triumph had arrived he found it curiously difficult to be thrilled. Now if his full name had been there—

As it was, he had either to tell the family, and take the chance of their believing him, or else let the story go unheralded into obscurity. Daddy would take it matter-of-fact, as he took everything. Harold would take his nose out of his book long enough to say: "Good, I'll read it in a minute." Aunt Mary would sniff and say, that young men like George would be better occupied doing their chores than scribbling trash like that.

George hesitated, but resist he could not. The thing had to be done.

"Hmph, that's funny," he began. No one paid attention. A thing could be funny or just queer in the Battle family. George sidled over to Harold's shoulder. "Funny," he repeated, and then blurted out: "I wrote that!" And he held the magazine before Harold's face.

Harold looked up with faint interest, glanced at the magazine. "Good," he said, looked back at his book, suddenly realized what George had said, and snapped back: "Hey? What's that? *You* did!" Harold sat bolt upright. "Gimme that!" He spread the magazine on his knee, and ran over it rapidly. "Hey! Did you hear that? George wrote a story! Our George is an author! Dad! Aunt Mary! Listen!"

George flushed with embarrassment. "What's that!" Daddy was staring in amazement. "You wrote that? Did you hear that, Mary?" But Aunt Mary was already behind George's and Harold's shoulders, gulping down the print with eager eyes that shone in her faded face. In an incredibly short time, long before she could have read it, she whirled on George and threw her bony arms around his neck in the biggest hug he could remember since he was five years old in the forest shack.

"My little Georgie, a real author!" cried Aunt Mary, and he saw tears in her eyes, and he forgot and forgave the times she had scolded him.

Harold was on his feet stamping in excitement. "An author in the house! Say, I think I'll phone somebody. I'll phone everybody!"

It was all over the community by next day. George Battle had a story in *The Horizon* magazine. Some people said they always knew George was cut out for something. Others said you never knew where talent would spring up next; imagine one of Charley Battle's brats grown up and writing stories.

The notoriety was agony and sweetness to George. He wondered what Pitch thought of it, and if she was sorry now for all the smart things she had said to him. Now, he dreamed he would walk down the street and everyone would point at him, only now he would be an author, and not an actor.

"What did you think of it?" he finally got the nerve to ask Pitch when he was next alone with her.

"Of what, Georgie?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, nothing much," he said shortly. "Sorry I bothered you."

"It's no bother, I'm sure, but I'm no good at riddles."

"It's no riddle," he said roughly. "I just thought you might have taken the trouble to read it. But then you're so busy—"

"Oh, you mean that little story? Quite good. Just like those compositions you used to write in school. You really did write it, didn't you? A little amateurish, of course. But I suppose writing is just like singing, a lot of hard and not very interesting lessons. I think, though, that you have the makings of a writer, if you'll practise."

George knew her speech was too well phrased to have been involuntary. "Thanks! Well, I won't take any lessons from Professor Oily Annie if that's what you're hinting."

"Oleano, if you please," she flashed. "And don't worry, he's not interested in beginners. Of course I might prevail on him to take you in and train that *really* good voice of yours."

"Don't mention it," he grumphed. "When I want singing lessons I'll choose my own teacher. And as for writing—"

"Keep it up, Georgie," sweetly. "It's a great hobby. Of course, you have to have something else to do to *live* on, but it's fun, I imagine. I'm thinking of taking it up myself."

"You!" he jeered. "You couldn't write if you were paid for it."

"I wouldn't write without pay, like some people I know. Or did you get paid yet, Georgie?"

"No," he snapped, "I didn't. They'll send it along." But privately he wondered. "You'd be surprised," he added loftily, "to know what they are paying me for it."

So was he, when the cheque came in the mail next day. Four dollars. He lied to himself that it was more than he'd expected, and immediately mailed them the next manuscript, about the same characters. Long afterward they sent him a cheque for four dollars again, but it must have been conscience money, for he never did see the story in print. He never quite had the heart to write them and ask about it, lest they discover a mistake and demand their money back.

While he waited, Hattie had gone to Winnipeg, and the time had come for Pitch to go. George drove to the station with Harold to see her off. And then it was that she pretended to see and have words for everyone except George, until his face grew so dark and ominous that even she could bear it no more.

"George, you look as if you were going to a funeral!"

So he was, the funeral of his past. A new world was opening, a world he had dreamed about and written about but had never seen. He was glad she was going, he told himself vengefully. Nobody to fight with now, nobody to make him feel defeated and fill him with helpless rage as only Pitch could do. He would never forgive her, he knew.

And neither he did, until his time for college came at last. And then he realized, to his disgust, that his going was the more exciting because he would be near her. He was amazed to find that the thought of Pitch, at Aunt Kitty's, ranked only next to college in his dreams of the coming days.

He had vague ideas about Aunt Kitty, who was a city person of some eminence. Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie belonged to the kind of a family where aunts were well within the inner circle of the far-flung blood empires, and even great-aunts and forty-second cousins clung tenaciously though precariously to the outer reaches of relationship with all its privileges. Of such was Pitch's world, and he would see her there, he told himself, only when he got around to it. He forgave her when he settled in the train. He forgot her when he shyly faced the college registrar, for once through that ordeal he grew suddenly in mental stature and self-esteem. And only less exciting was the dean of the dormitory, who seemed to be wanted, and to have the gift of being, everywhere at once.

"Well, Battle, come along," said the dean, and told him that he could share a room with one Ed Carson, whom they found at his breakfast in his shirt sleeves.

Ed had a cheap card table set up in the middle of the room, and seemed to take little pleasure out of the prospect of George. He set a loaf of bread on the table, a dish of butter beside it, a small pail of honey beside that. On an electric plate atop a separate stand stood a kettle, sizzling happily. On the dresser, its spout pointed toward the mirror, was Ed's teapot. Ed took the kettle, lifted the lid of the teapot, poured steaming water into it, replaced the lid, eyed it appreciatively, cut two slices from the loaf, buttered them and put honey on them, made a sandwich an inch and a half thick, took a half-moon bite out of it, set it back on a plate, stirred the teapot decisively, rattled out a cup and saucer from the bottom of his bookcase, took sugar out of a paper bag and put it in the cup, poured the tea, dug in under the bureau and brought out a pint bottle of milk, poured some in the tea, stirred the lot together, drank and smacked his lips.

George looked on in dawning disillusionment. Was *this* college, that he had dreamed about? There was a dry, crisp, humorless, hopeless precision about Ed's doings that fascinated him with its deadly horror.

"This is the way I have my breakfast," said Ed, as if there were some peculiar virtue about it.

"Yes," said George. "It looks nice."

Ed grunted, swallowed a quarter of the sandwich, propped a book in front of him, munched with full chops that reminded George of a gopher putting away its winter supply. "Lecture's in ten minutes. Have to hurry."

"Guess I'll hang up my clothes," George said.

"Lots of room on the other end of the closet. You don't need to disturb mine," Ed suggested.

George set about with dull bewilderment. The room felt stuffy with the same stale, locked-up stuffiness that had hung about the Westview church. An unaired, costive and depressing smell. His heart still drummed at the adventures ahead of him, but the very familiarity and reality of this room atmosphere was unreal. It should be different. Where were the college students he had dreamed and read about, who sang risqué songs and were always yelling rah, rah, filling the sky with boisterous voices? What had they to do with this complacent, toothy, over-aged, uninteresting creature called Ed Carson, who cluttered his bedroom with his breakfast?

His roommate!

George lighted a cigarette and finished unpacking. Ed Carson eyed the cigarette glumly, glanced significantly at the window, gulped down the last of his tea, stacked his dishes, took them out and returned with them clean, put them away with a ghastly neatness on the shelf under his books, put the tea, sugar, bread and butter away, folded the small table and propped it in the clothes closet, smacked his tongue three times on the roof of his mouth, picked up heavy, dull-looking books, went out without a further word.

Ed's bed was next to the window, George's was at the other end of the room near the hall door. George puffed on his cigarette, felt a measure of bravado, wondered if the dormitory dean would be mad to find him smoking, sought a place to put ashes, found none, tugged at the window till he finally got it open, spilled his ashes on the floor in the process, found a piece of paper and scooped them up, threw paper and all out the window, then ducked back in alarm. Then he threw the cigarette after them, put the window down, walked out into the hall, wondered why he was tiptoeing, set his heels down firmly, strode to the end of the hall and through a door onto the fire escape.

There before him were the rows on rows of housetops. The city! George gripped the iron railing, and leaned far out to breathe deeply and delightedly. Here at last! From the halls below came an endless scurrying of feet and clatter of voices. He peeped down the fire escapes. Two below him, one above. Beyond that the blue sky. To his right another college building. He heard a stealthy sound on the fire escape above him, the sound of smothered laughter; his eyes shot upward, and he shrank back from scrutiny. But the intruder had gone, and he leaned out again to watch the city, his city!

Pitch's city, too. What kind of house did she live in? He could think of hanging-lamps with chandeliers, a piano, carpets, walls covered with pictures, aunt and uncle walking around quickly and stiffly on legs that did not seem to bend. Why couldn't your mind imagine people with legs that bend? How would he go and see Pitch—ring the bell, and—

Splosh! He reeled from a terrifying shock. He had fallen into water—no, water had fallen over him. A crash on his head it came, a sleezy, cold thing that rolled down over his ears, his neck and shoulders. There was a short, stifled cackle above. Through the grating he saw a foot being withdrawn, then heard scurrying in the hall above. A burst of falsetto laughter burst out and fell in a cascade over him. In sudden panic he dived for his room. Stealthily he closed the door, turned the key, wrung the wet clothes from him, felt his long woollens dubiously and decided they, too, must come off. He pulled on clean underwear, eyed his second-best suit sadly and drew it on. Then for a while he stood silently, helplessly, staring at his gloomy face in the mirror. "What a rube I look!" he thought.

He tried to look furious. He had to turn his profile a bit, and then he thought maybe his cheeks were getting a little shape to them, a touch of boniness like those friends of Harry's, with their lean, intelligent-looking faces. How could he ever get to look like that? He examined his suit and conceded that it was threadbare and out of date. Thank God, no lectures for him till tomorrow. His other suit would be dry by then.

He explored the hallways, the washroom, obeyed a sign which said, "Pull the chain." His hair stood on end at the commotion it caused, then he turned in sudden fright and bolted for the door. He peered apprehensively down the hall. All clear! Tiptoeing at first, he broke into a panicky run, counting the doors as he went, and too confused to see the

numbers. At last his door, fifth from the fire escape. In a frenzy of relief, he ducked in.

A handsome, brown-eyed young man lay on the bed, reading. "Hello!" he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm George—my name is—But, say—" George's eyes found the room's details and he stopped in confusion. "B-but I—this isn't my—"

The young man grinned. "Who're you looking for?"

"M-my room," George stammered. "I guess—"

"What number?"

"Mine's—ours is number 24A."

"Well, this is 24B. Yours is the other end of the hall."

"Oh—I'm s-sorry!" George tripped over the mat, recovered himself and felt for the door.

"Hey, what's your hurry?"

"I've got to—get back."

"Lectures?"

"Yes—that is, no, not just now, but—"

The young man sat up, held out his hand. "I'm Bo Charlton," he said. "Real name's Fred, but it's not working."

George took the hand hesitantly, fearful to trust his own senses, suspicious of some new college prank. This young fellow both charmed and alarmed. He spoke with a faint English accent, mingled with college rah-rah and other pleasant elements. The voice of a man who had been about.

"Name's Battle," George said soberly. "George Battle."

"Glad to know you, George. You the new theolog?"

"Theolog?" George looked blank.

"Sure, you're with Ed Carson, aren't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Just sleuthing. What you taking?"

"Oh, arts course," George said as if deprecating it.

"First year?" George nodded, and Bo eyed him thoughtfully. "And you rooming with a theolog! Well, you may live it down."

Light dawned on George. "Oh, he's all right," he said generously. "Eats in his room."

"Sure, they all do," said Bo. "They go through college on a hundred dollars flat to the term. Damfi know how they manage. But how in blazes did you come to get in there?"

"I don't know," George confessed.

"Well, get out of it as soon as you can," Bo advised. "You'll go nuts with Ed. Those fellows pick their teeth."

"Guess I can stand it," said George cheerfully.

"It's your own funeral," Bo shrugged. Then: "Tell you what, why don't you move in here?"

"But how can I? I mean—it's very nice of you—"

"Nice! Don't jump to conclusions. My roommate's a prune. Tom Benson. One of those damned intellectuals, quotes Schopenhauer, sleeps in a nightgown, worse than a theolog. Let's wish him and Ed off on each other."

They talked some more about it, and George finally walked back to his room in a whirl, flattered, excited, bewildered that a young man who seemed to him the very epitome of his college ideal should want him, a shy and uninteresting stranger, to room with him. George knew he had no small talk, none of the store of smart stories and witty remarks that Bo had always on tap. And a science senior at that!

Yet there it was. The miracle had come to him. Bo the sophisticated, versatile, resourceful. George the bashful freshman, feeling that his hair wasn't cut right, his collar didn't fit, his country tan was a traitor to him, that his pocket money would never let him mix with others, that the ways of the life he was entering were strange and embarrassing, that he was proficient in no games, no specialty at all.

They found that it was one thing to talk of wishing Benson off on Carson, another to do it. Benson and Carson disliked each other. George found that out by cautiously mentioning Benson to Ed, whose lip curled with a disdain that made George dislike him intensely. Why couldn't the man be reasonable? He envied Bo his easy nonchalance with Benson. But Bo didn't talk about the plan again for a whole day, so George feared he was cooling on it. He gave cautious voice to his anxiety.

"Hell, don't worry. Things'll turn up. They always do," was Bo's cheerful answer. "You can always make yourself so obnoxious they'll be glad to move, you know."

"But you can't live with a man and make a nuisance of yourself."

"Oh, can't you? Now, if I were to drop a large bag of water in through your transom, aiming at you, and were to hit our friend Carson, what would he think?"

"But you can't do that! What would the dean say!"

"I'll bite. What would he say?"

So George and Bo went out to buy paper bags. George had a foolish feeling as they entered a dairy lunch. What a place to buy paper bags! But he was deliriously happy, for he had a friend.

"Squinty, a nickel's worth of those," ordered Bo.

Squinty behind the counter complied with an understanding smile that told of a steady traffic in contraband.

"What! Only five? Price of paper gone up? Come on, come through with the usual six. I'm paying cash."

"Say, if you got cash to buy paper bags you got cash to pay your bills," roared Squinty, with a great and affectionate pretence of fury.

"What you think of a cheap skate like that!" Squinty demanded of George. "A dollar-fifty he's on the cuff already for meals."

"You'll get your cheque every month," said Bo airily.

They divided the bags evenly. George seized a chance that evening when Carson was out, sneaked down the hall to listen at Bo's door, heard voices, saw that Bo had left the transom invitingly open. He dived into the washroom with the paper bag doubled under his coat, looked around, saw no one, turned the tap into the bag, crept hastily back to Bo's door and gently heaved the bag through the transom. It burst with a hollow splosh, and voices arose in a roar. But George was down the hall in a flash to his own door, his heart pounding.

Behind him he heard Bo's profane shout. "There go those damned theologs again! Always throwing paper around." Bo seemed to be having trouble to get the door open.

But there was another voice beside Bo's, a strange one, unlike Benson's piping, thin tones. Footsteps rattled in the hall now. George left his door partly open, grabbed a book, flopped on the bed and propped up his feet. He was not a second too soon, for in burst Bo himself, mopping the water from his forehead and the front of his pants. A scant foot behind him

came the dormitory dean.

"Where's that roughneck, Carson?" Bo demanded. "Lemme at him!"

George looked up with a calm that his thumping heart threatened to betray. "Carson? Oh, yes! He just went out."

"The hell he did!" Bo snorted, and tore open the clothes closet door. Then he dropped on his knees to look under the bed. George sat up politely.

"Why do you think it was Carson?" asked the dean severely.

"Because I heard him say he'd drown Benson if he ever got a chance," growled Bo from under the bed, and leaned back on his knees. "I ought to bum your room for just living with a guy like that," he told George savagely, with such realism that George winced.

"Come on," said the dean. "The way to settle with practical jokers like that is to put them together. Are you sure they *don't* like each other?"

"They're simply poison," said Bo. "And it looks as if I'm the goat for their damn jokes on each other."

"Well, you won't be," said the dean grimly. "Have Battle move in with you and we'll put Benson in here."

He turned back to George from the door. "I'm glad to see you like Horace," he said drily. "It's an ambitious start. I only wish Charlton were half as interested." He was gone, and George looked in amused dismay at Carson's book which he held in his hand.

Later, Bo came back and George said: "Gosh, I'm sorry I hit you. I meant—"

"You so-and-so," said Bo. "You *would* pick the dean for your first practice throw. You're learning fast. Keep this up and you'll be on the way back to the farm in no time."

"But you said—"

Bo laughed suddenly, and rolled on the bed. "My God!" he roared. "In plain decency to the dean I've got to *pretend* I'm mad, haven't I? But, boy, didn't it work!"

Chapter Eleven

"Is Pitch—I mean, is Miss Margaret Black in?" George stood at the door with an uneasy crawling in his bones. He had dressed with care; his pants were pressed as Bo had shown him, by laying them flat under the mattress. His coat he had taken to a tailor—it was cheaper than having a whole suit pressed. He knew his overcoat looked obsolete beside the smart tweed ulsters that other college boys wore.

The maid who answered the door held it open politely, and asked him to please come in.

"Very cold night, Miss—" George began, and realized you should not say that to a maid. They would to a hired girl on the farm, but not, he judged, in a swank place like Aunt Kitty's.

"Will you please let me have your coat and hat?"

George took them off and gave them to her with the hope that her pretty nose would not turn up at them. It did not.

"This way, please," she held an inner door open. George marched in bravely. "Miss Black will be right in," she said, smiled pleasantly, George grinned back, and she was gone.

George stood and looked at a picture he knew to be Aunt Kitty, on the wall over the piano. The rug felt soft under his feet, and he hoped his shoes were clean. He felt his pants did not hang right the way he stood, that his coat was wrinkled at the lower button, so he crossed one foot over the other, unbuttoned the coat, put his hands in his pockets, hastily took them out again, and impatiently wished Pitch would come.

Her picture was on the piano, a new and saucy picture with her hair done a different way than he knew.

She came in. George gasped at the change in her. This was Pitch with the black hair and eyes he remembered, but the hairdresser had changed her, rouge made her cheeks look theatrical, her lips were a shade too red, her dress was longer. He started toward her, took her hand obediently, made as if to kiss her, found not quite the response in her eyes that invited a kiss, saw her black eyes sweep down over his clothes and shoes, and felt that everything was wrong with them. Pitch had that kind of look when she cared to turn it on; it made you feel she could see even what kind of underwear you had. George's promptly itched. Her momentary scrutiny gave him a chill. He did not kiss her.

"And here you are, my big rah-rah college boy," Pitch smiled.

"Glad to see you, Pitch," said George. "How's the music going?"

Pitch waved airily. "Hard work, and boring, awfully boring. Scales and ah's and practice, practice, practice. It makes me sick."

"But, you're not going to be always at that," George encouraged.

Pitch sniffed. "I hope not! And now, what have you been doing—seeing city life, I suppose."

George shuffled and decided not to lie.

"No, not really. But I saw some picture shows. I think I like the Keystone Cops best."

"Oh?" she raised her eyebrows. "Starting in to study real hard, I see."

"Stop that, now," George hit back sharply, and Pitch laughed, a rich, musical, trained laugh. "I didn't come here to be lectured. Besides, I had all my studies over."

"Of course! Who am I to lecture you? Won't you sit down?" Pitch flung herself into a chair and crossed her legs with a touch of swagger that no putting on airs would ever take from her.

"Tell me about yourself," commanded Pitch. "What is your room like in college? Do you have nice profs? How many lecture periods?"

George told her dutifully. Pitch listened with slack attention till he mentioned Bo. "Oh, I thought you roomed alone. Just fancy, sleeping in a room with another man."

This was a bit thick, George thought, for a girl raised on a farm. "Well, you don't have to fancy. But we don't sleep together. We have different beds."

"I hope your roommate's nice. You must bring him some time."

"None better than Bo Charlton," said George stoutly, and decided he would take her at her word.

"How did you come to meet him? Or did they just put you there?"

"I got in with a bag of water," George grinned, bursting to tell her of his pranks and what a devil he was.

"A bag of water? What do you mean?"

George told her, breaking into laughter. Pitch listened with a patient smile. "So that's college life," she said when he'd finished. "That's why Uncle Charley mortgaged the farm, so you could come here and learn to throw water in paper bags."

George sobered suddenly. An angry red flush spread over his ears and face. "That's a mean thing to say," he flared. "Dad didn't mortgage any farm, and you know it. And it's only fun, anyway. I suppose you never did anything funny, either?"

"Not if—that's it," Pitch nagged, forcing sternness into her eyes that wanted to flirt with George under their sombre lashes. "Do tell me more!"

"We won't talk about it," said George, angry and frustrated, after he'd looked forward so to seeing her. "A fellow's got to live like the others, hasn't he? He can't be a hermit, can he? Who advised me to come here, anyway?"

"I haven't any idea, unless it was Hattie."

"It was you, and you know it."

"I?" Pitch widened her eyes. "And why should I advise anything? I merely saw you were dying to come and assumed you had arranged it already. I do hope you enjoy it. Don't let me stand in your way."

"Don't worry, you won't!" George stared hard and sullenly into the carpet. Impulse told him to get up, take his hat and coat and go. Show her! Why did he have to fight with her? Why see her at all?

"A nickel for your thoughts," Pitch said in a low coaxing voice, and he caught the ghost of a smile on her face.

"Don't throw your money away," he sulked.

Pitch rose swiftly, came over to him, sat down on the arm of his chair and patted his head. "Our little college boy is in a bad mood tonight," she cooed in a baby voice that made George writhe. "Don't mind my teasing. Honestly, I'm terribly glad to see you."

"Even if I am a rube from the farm," he persisted. "You know darned well how to make me mad, and you—you just go and do it." Her fingers stroked his neck, and he hated to admit it but it made a thrill run down his spine.

"My same little Georgie! Just too adorable—But, please, Georgie, don't let them cut your hair that way, now you're a college man."

"What way?" He sprang resentfully to the defence again.

"Now, don't go getting angry again. It's not your fault, you're not the barber. He just clipped it too close around here—" She ran her fingers around his ears and temples. "Like a convict, and he shouldn't shave your neck like that—" her fingers traced the line. "Men don't shave their necks here, and I want you to be in style—"

"Whose neck is it, anyway? I can have my hair cut any way I like."

"All right, have it your own way," stiffly. Then she thawed: "It looks nice, mind you, but it could look a lot nicer. You must let it grow here—and here—and here. You have such cute hair, Georgie."

"Well," grudgingly, "yours isn't so dusty." Then a resurgence of his resentment. "Well, go on with your lecture. I suppose

there's something wrong with my collar, and you don't like my suit."

"Frankly there is, and I don't." Pitch was not perturbed. She smoothed his collar down, straightened his tie. "Hal always has his ties tied so nicely when he dresses up."

"Mine's good enough for me. And as for my suit—"

She laughed quickly, a high, amused and affectionate laugh, and sprang up. "I'll fix that in two jiffies with an iron. Wait a moment till I put it on. If you *will* go bathing in paper bags you'll need some looking after, I can see that."

He waited in dull anger while she was out, inventing things to say when she returned. But he didn't say them. She came dancing in, humming provocatively, and seized him by the hand.

"Come, let's stop this silly quarrelling. Come and sing to me." She pulled George to his feet and over to the piano. He went reluctantly and stood beside her while she plopped like a tomboy on the piano bench, whacked open a sheet of music and played the opening bar.

"Oh, I heard that," he said. "'Just a little love, a little kiss.' A fellow at the Orpheum sang it."

Pitch's fingers rested prettily on the keys, and she looked up at him with a ravishing smile. "So you really are studying, I see. Right off to the Orpheum to hear a vaudeville man sing!"

"Well, no, not exactly. There was Valeska Suratt—"

"Hmph! I might have known it—studying figures, eh?"

"I did not. She had a dress on." And he recalled with a thrill the sheer fabric the great dancer had worn. He withheld this thought from Pitch.

"Well, just for that, you can take me to Bernhardt when she comes next month."

"Sure," he began heartily, and stopped in caution. Twice times a dollar-fifty was three dollars. He thought of the change in his pocket, of the time till Dad would likely think to send him some more.

"We'll sit in the gods," said Pitch, as if reading his thoughts. "Come, now, and sing."

"But I don't know it."

"Nonsense, you just said you heard it. Just follow the notes, the words are nothing much."

"You know darned well I can't read music; you're just trying to make me feel cheap."

"Sing with me, then—"

Her voice picked up the song. George joined in obediently, but hesitantly, and Pitch motioned him impatiently to sing up. He gained confidence, and suddenly she left him to carry the air and raced off into an improvised staccato. Never had he heard her voice in full range and such flexibility.

He stumbled in his astonishment, forgot to sing, stared at her in fascination till she pounded a chord for him to go on. He picked up the air again bravely and sang through to the end with her. Pitch ended with what seemed to George like a sudden leap of two octaves or more, and their two voices with the piano ended with an operatic flourish.

Pitch threw back her head, laughed, suddenly sprang up and pecked his cheek.

"There's your little kiss!" she cried.

"That was great!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Which was?" she challenged.

"Both the kiss and the song," he said gallantly.

"George, you bad boy, you have a divine voice!" she scolded. "You must have it trained."

His enthusiasm sagged. "Say, is there anything else you don't like about me! First it's my hair, and then my suit, and now it's my—"

"Yes," her voice had a sudden dangerous note, "there's one thing I don't like, your bad temper. You ought to have it amputated. Now give me your coat and trousers; the iron's hot."

"But—" he stared in amazement. "What, here!"

"No, silly. You can wait in my bedroom. Aunt Kitty'd have a catfit if she found you here in your underwear. Say, that's not a bad idea! I could lend you a blanket—"

"Oh, no, you don't! Not with me you don't!"

Pitch sighed as if giving up an attractive prospect.

"All right, bashful, come on, and you can throw your clothes out through the door to me."

As he trudged home that night he alternately revelled in the thrill of her mischief and fumed at her fault-finding. But he studied himself overtly in the mirror in his room, examining his haircut, till Bo popped in the door and asked him what the heck was he looking for—a cockroach? He hung up his freshly pressed clothes with reverent care, for Pitch's hands had worked on them.

He had seen a barber shop near the college, and next day he went with a firm resolve to spend thirty-five cents which he knew he could not spare. Equally well did he know that the barber could not make his hair grow, but at least he might trim it differently and get away from the convict strip, as Pitch called it.

George walked past the barber shop in perplexity. How did a fellow with a haircut already, go in and ask for another one? You'd have to be nonchalant, but how would you broach the subject? The barber might be offended at being asked to take on a second-hand job. Well—

There were three barbers in the shop, all idle. All sprang to their feet and stood behind their chairs. A Negro shoe-shine came and took George's hat and coat and hung them up. George said thank you to him, wondered if he should tip him, realized he couldn't and get a haircut as well. He felt three pairs of barbers' eyes on him, accusing, challenging. Two of those fellows would be mad when he sat down.

George marched importantly to the chair next the window. He got one hurried glance at the barber, a lean-faced, aquiline-nosed fellow, who looked very sophisticated and superior. George climbed into the chair as casually as he could under the triple scrutiny. The place was full of mirrors, and he could see his own reflection, that of the barber he had chosen, and of the two disappointed barbers as well. He did not dare look at them, so he stared at the floor and pretended to be preoccupied. Presently to his great relief they left their chair positions and sat down next the wall.

"What will it be today, sir?" his barber asked him. George felt the subtle flattery of it to his youthful beard, and just as if he visited barber shops every day.

"Hair trim," said George briefly.

"Yes, sir," with alacrity—too much alacrity—and a white apron was whipped around in front of George's face and tucked into his collar.

Why didn't the barber ask him something? About how he wanted it? How else could you trim short hair, than to trim it still shorter? But Pitch had said it was too short now! Well, why the devil had he come here anyway? Letting Pitch herd him into a barber shop.

"It's not too long on top," he murmured, trying to be matter-of-fact, "but it's too short on the sides."

"I understand, sir," said the barber, his shears going snip, snip. The comb went high up on his head. George cringed, waiting for the shears to follow. They didn't.

"What it needs is—well, more gradual—"

"Yes, sir." Not so much as a pause in the shears. "Neck line high enough, sir?"

"No—I mean yes—No, don't shave it!"

"No, sir."

"But be sure and don't cut it any shorter," George finished weakly.

"I won't indeed, sir."

He made a point of seeing Pitch again next day. "I got a—sort of—haircut," he announced.

"It's very nice, Georgie," she said sweetly. "But it's still too short."

"Well, for heaven's sakes, d'you suppose hair grows on trees!" he burst out in exasperation. "Give me time, can't you?"

And then Aunt Kitty came into the room, and was so nice and so totally unlike what he had expected her to be, that she saved the day for George. But he went home with resentment still in his heart against Pitch, and swore to himself he would never go to see her again.

He didn't either, until she asked him to come a week later. And again every week. At last came the night when he took Pitch to sit in the gods and see the divine Sarah, and Pitch sobbed into her handkerchief till George was embarrassed for them and whispered: "Whisht, can't you?"

Pitch grasped his hand and held it. He was glad the theatre was dark so people wouldn't see them, and he sat in thralldom till the curtain fell. "Oh, Georgie, she's w-wonderful!" Pitch whispered passionately in his ear.

"Ah, just a lot of words," George humphed, with a lump like a goose egg in his own throat and tears in his eyes. Some day, he thought, he would write words like that, and the great Bernhardt would bring their tragedy to life on the stage.



Chapter Twelve

A year later George Battle was still writing. Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie came to the city to live for the winter, and this year was the year, of all the rest, when they should not have come. This year, too, Bo Charlton would graduate and go out of George's life, perhaps, and he would lose the best friend he had ever known outside of his brother Hal.

But he would write great stories, like the immortal tragedies Bernhardt made so vivid. He must never admit what his father had said, that he would be better off back on the farm. It would be silly, he argued to himself, when his father could hire a man to take his place for a whole year for the price of a single manuscript. Dad ought to realize that. Hal had realized it, and gone into business in farm machinery and done well, far better, George said, than he would ever have done on the farm.

Bo Charlton had solved the typewriter problem for George, as he seemed to solve every other problem. "I have an old machine I never use," Bo said. "Fellow gave it to me in payment on a loan. We'll keep it here in the room, and you use it. I'd have no use for it otherwise."

"But I couldn't do that," George objected. "That'd be just like you giving me a typewriter—and you could sell it and get the money."

"Nuts," said Bo. "I'd get nothing for it. You use it, and if you want to buy it later you can pay me when you sell your stories."

George had used it thankfully, if guiltily, never sure whether Bo told the truth or had gone out and bought it. Bo's success, his source of funds, George had come to take for granted. Bo's parents were both dead. They had left money for Bo and his sister Barbara—he called her Bubby—who had stayed in London. Bo himself had wandered out to New York as a youth, drifted to the Pacific coast and Alaska and back again, and his decision to go to college had been swift and impulsive, as were all his decisions. He had no reason for taking his course here, he admitted, except that he'd happened to be here when he got the notion.

Another time he said there'd been a girl involved. Where was she now? George asked, for Bo's time was not occupied with women. Bo shrugged. They had both changed their minds, he said, and shed no more light on it, and George never asked for more. He liked to think that maybe Bo had some tragedy of love in his life. It gave glamour and mystery to his great friend, and some day, he thought, he would write a book and Bo Charlton would be the hero of it. He wanted now to write immortals, but he had no facts or words at his command to write for Bernhardt.

Even then, a young man, whose chin and moustache were to become the world's most notorious features, was fussing away in Vienna trying to fashion a political philosophy that would fix on a given target—the Jews. A man scarcely older than George, who had been rebuked by the archbishop. A man scribbling in his scratch pad for the future world to read such rubbish as this:

The terror in the workshops, in the factory, in the assembly hall, and on occasion of mass demonstrations, will always be accompanied by success as long as it is not met by an equally great force of terror.

The young man six thousand miles away, who was destined to play such a part in his life, had never heard of George, nor had George ever heard of him. His name was Adolf Schicklgruber.

What such fellows could do with the destiny of young men like George was a matter for the world still to find out.

There is your material, George Battle. Why don't you write it? Never mind the classics now. Something more dreadful, more designing, more sombre than those is rushing upon the world. Write, in the strident, mounting tones of a cosmic cyclone, for a tragedienne infinitely mightier than Bernhardt.

In the brewing of those frightful prairie storms that George knew, the sky grew livid with a green and yellow biliousness. A sultry wind blew across the plains, and the rolling, ominous clouds gathered in from nowhere out of a guileless blue

sky.

In the brewing of those global tornadoes that George knew not at all, the sky grew tense and threatening also, and the finger of fate wrote for him. Men in Vienna wallowed in folly and intrigue so that the little George Battles of the world would bathe in blood.

In the sultry, expectant air before a prairie storm a chemical something infiltrated your blood, and warned you to lie down flat on the ground and hang on to the grass. In the oppressive air of the world men did not lie down, and so they never knew what struck them.

The great bubble of the West exploded soundlessly, awfully in their faces. For no visible reason, yet for many reasons, the air suddenly rushed upward as in a prairie cyclone. The bottom of the old ways fell out and the roof caved in. The way to the stars became an abyss, without direction and without sense.

Men who were millionaires in their books the day before were paupers the day after. Men who had bought real estate lots for ten thousand dollars yesterday, and set the alarm early so they could get up and sell them for twenty thousand, overslept the alarm and got up to find they could get nothing. Cheques bounced like tennis balls in that heyday of disillusionment. Promissory notes papered the walls; deeds and tax notices cluttered the ashcans of the new El Dorado. Men who had gone West in youth and hope to work a while with the Midas touch of the promoter and then retire, sold out for what the furnishings would bring and moved back on rented farms. The mushroom rows of speculators' stalls dried up like toadstools into brown dust and blew away on the long winds of the backlash out of Europe.

Uncle Jim's fortune went up in a sudden flurry, that lifted and whirled him as it would one of the hen feathers out of his barnyard. In a few weeks Uncle Jim did not sleep at all, but worked with his solicitors, and was inaccessible even to his family for the first time in his brawny life. Uncle Jim had property from Winnipeg to the Pacific coast. He owned city lots that were so far out of town you could ride out to them on country trails, and beyond that, even, the brown earth was rolled up in long rows to show where the sewers had been laid for the cities of men's dreams.

Such was the tempest of 1912 and 1913, when the generation of men's work lifted like a dust pall and flew into the horizon. Of all men, George's father suffered the least. He stayed on his farm because he never had enough money to get off it. Uncle Jim's farms were with him still when the twister passed, but they were carpeted with paper a foot deep, paper underwritten by the glittering promises of gamblers' row in the cities.

In a movie theatre, George laughed at a young comedian from London with a tiny black moustache, preposterous pants and ludicrous feet.

In Vienna the other young man with the silly moustache was forming incredible thoughts which later emerged in blasphemy like this: "Therefore, I believe today that I am acting in the sense of the Almighty Creator. By warding off the Jews I am fighting for the Lord's work."

In London an alert, chubby-faced man with a flair for words and a genius for organization, built an armada, and was spurred on by the grim thought that he had only a short time to do it. He was to live on into a dreadful day, and become the living symbol of freedom for the world.

In Doorn the gardeners trimmed the shrubs, planted the tulip bulbs, shooed the hares away from the green shoots, and were stoically unconscious of events to come.

In Brussels a tall king put on hiking boots with spikes in the soles, and went out to climb a mountain, the same mountain that some day would throw him down and kill him, but not before he had gained immortality.

In Washington a Princeton professor dreamed of the world as a beloved community, and no man with him in the White House comprehended what he meant.

In those years Bo Charlton got his science degree. In those years, too, George Battle worked sporadically at his studies, and ended his sophomore year when the storm broke. His university career had been of part terms, between long periods of helping his father on the farm. And in all his goings and comings, Bo and he had agreed that while he attended college they should have their lodgings together.

Sometimes, when Bo was not with him, George went to a little theatre on Main Street and picked himself a seat in the

front row, just under the edge of the forward boxes. There was a movie, and it was a strange place to choose for a film, because he had to strain his neck and his eyes to see the distorted, jumpy figures on the screen from this angle, people with long legs and one-sided faces. It made no sense, but George did not mind. Between films there was what the theatre programme pretentiously called a divertissement. In plain words, chorus girls, and by sitting here George could see into the wings. He could watch the girls before they came on the stage, and sometimes he could pick out Hattie among them. And then they would come prancing out on the stage toward him, kicking their legs high. He knew them all by name—Yvonne, Bella, Lottie, Harrietta. Harrietta was third from the lead. Under her painted eyebrows and blackened eyelashes he could watch her eyes sparkle, and feel that she recognized him sitting down there in the shadows.

"Hello, Hattie!" George's lips would say, though she could not see them move, "you're the best dancer in the show." He was loyally unable to see why they always had some more homely girl than Hattie to do the solo parts. He knew it should be Hattie Wilbur. Hattie knew it, too, but somehow the theatre management did not.

George gazed excitedly as they came on, singing, their legs moving like pistons in rhythm:

England's lost her dignity,
So have France and Germany—

He loved the reckless abandon of Berlin's "International Rag." In a few minutes after they went off he would slip around to the stage door and take Hattie home. He had done this before and it had an illicit appeal. Hattie lived with Yvonne in a two-room suite in a big old-fashioned house on lower Notre Dame. This evening, as usual, George lingered at her door to say good-night.

"Come on up, Georgie?"

"But it's late," George objected, "And Yvonne—"

"She's gone to eat with her friend Jimmie. Come up and we'll eat here by ourselves. I'm famished." And George went up the stairs to invade a girl's room.

The living-room was slenderly furnished, with a bedroom and dressing-room off it. George stood shyly beside her in the darkness while she switched on the light. Curious how her nearness seemed to pulsate through him. That body of hers could somehow insinuate itself against him by suggestion. It was a different feeling from what he had with Pitch.

"There, take the lounge, Georgie," she said, "and don't sit down too hard or it'll bruise you. Smoke if you want to. I'll be back in a minute, so excuse me."

George sat carefully on the little lounge, lighted a cigarette out of a package he had bought for this occasion, and waited. Hattie was busy in the other room, and in an incredibly short time she was back, in negligée and slippers.

"Cigarette, please?" she asked. He gave her one and she held it in her lips for him to light. A feeling of reckless abandon began to come over him.

"My, this is comfy! What a relief to get your tight clothes off when you're hot and tired."

"What clothes?" George felt like saying.

"Did you like the show?" Hattie asked.

"Oh, yes. What I saw of it," George gulped.

"What do you mean, saw? She looked at him suspiciously.

"Oh, well—" George took the plunge. "Well, you don't suppose I had time to see everybody, do you?"

She laughed contentedly. "I suppose you couldn't take your eyes off that roommate of mine."

"Oh, no—I didn't mean that. I meant—well, you, for instance."

"Oh, did you see me? That's better. Like my dancing?"

"You're the best dancer of them all."

"Now I know you're lying, but I love to hear it." She laid a hand on his and smiled. Hattie could be dangerous, close and smiling like that! She yawned luxuriously and stretched, and George looked at her sidewise, lest she see him. She had a frightening appeal.

Hattie had made an imperceptible move on the lounge, touched him casually, but seemed unaware of it. George pretended not to notice either, but he held his breath for fear she'd move away again. She didn't. His hand was holding hers, and the back of it rested against the sleezy negligée and felt the young warmth of her through it. The touch brought an electric thrill.

"Just think," she said, "sometime I might be famous, and you might be my press agent—maybe my manager, too."

"Yes. Oh, yes!" said George, whose soaring ambitions had never been press agency or even managing. "That'd be great, wouldn't it?"

He wanted to put his arm around her. He always wanted to, on these occasions, yet somehow he didn't. Maybe he was taking too much for granted, he would tell himself. Show girls were candid. He and Hattie were good friends—too good, he thought wryly. If she were just a stranger he wouldn't need to care, he explained to himself. And now he was in a dilemma. If she wanted him to kiss her and he didn't, he was what girls called slow. If she didn't want to, and he tried, she would think—what would she think?

But they talked instead, on and on, even when Hattie nestled her head against his shoulder. Yvonne found them sitting close together arm in arm on the meagre lounge, and both asleep.

"Well!" said Yvonne, and switched on the light.

George started, and blinked in the sudden glare. Who had turned that light out? It was on, the last thing he remembered. Hattie laughed and calmly tidied her negligée. George found one of his arms numb from holding her. He pulled it, and it fell limp and helpless beside him. How had his arm got there?

"I guess we fell asleep," Hattie said drowsily, stretched her round little arms and yawned.

"Yes, I guess so," said George, and straightened out his rumpled clothes with his good arm.

Yvonne gave him a quick look of friendly suspicion, and drew her lips in a pretty pucker of exasperation.

"The little girl who wouldn't come out to eat, had to go home and get some rest," she taunted. "And to think I believed you!"

"Oh," said George, "I guess she was pretty tired, all right. No wonder, the dances you girls do. What time is it, anyway?"

"Two o'clock," said Yvonne severely. "I'm really sorry to have disturbed you two. You looked so snug, and—" she paused significantly.

George sprang up in pretended alarm. "I must be going! I—I—rather overstayed my welcome."

"Well, I'm glad you overdid something," Hattie chided, with mischievous enjoyment of his confusion. "Is that the way you treat all your girls?"

George grinned, uncomfortable, with a feeling that both girls were making fun of him. Suddenly the full appearance of the thing struck him. He blushed furiously to the ears, groped around for his hat, and said: "I'll have to be going. Really!"

"Come again, Georgie! I'll promise to keep you awake next time," Hattie cried, and as George tiptoed fearfully down the steps he heard their laughter. He closed the street door and fled, but his heart was singing and every fibre of him thrilled.

Hattie turned on Yvonne. "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. Remember, smarty, not a word about this to the girls."

"I should say not!" Yvonne giggled. "Not a single word till tomorrow afternoon!"

As Hattie laid her head on the pillow and rubbed cream into her face, she thought: "I can still make it sound pretty good to Pitch. Wait till I see her! Lord, help me to remember every little detail."

Chapter Thirteen

Hal came to see George and Bo one night in June of 1914. He found them buried deep in peanut shells on their study table, with books propped in front of them. They talked of the coming war.

"You bums think there'll be one?" Hal asked abruptly.

George was happily skeptical. "Some archduke or something, wasn't it? Never met him. Anyway, that's over in Austria or Serbia or some of those places. No business of ours, surely."

"Tut tut! Don't you boys ever read the papers! Even the suspicion of war knocked this country flat, and sent men like Uncle Jim worrying back to the land to make a living."

"Germany's pretty snooty," said Bo.

"Why? Can't Austria lick Serbia, without calling in Germany?" George asked.

Hal shrugged. "If it were only Serbia, yes. But it won't end there. If Germany goes in, so will France, and if France goes in, so will England—"

"And if England goes in, so do we!"

"Not so fast," Hal cautioned. "The whole thing may blow over, but I don't think so. Now, let's have a party. Can we get Pitch and Hattie and—What did you say that other girl's name was?"

"Yvonne," said George promptly, important to be able to contribute.

"Ho ho!" said Bo, "One of George's summer studies."

"Say, just what college courses have you birds been taking, anyway?" Hal demanded.

"George has to work too hard," said Bo, "so I'll take Yvonne off his hands. Then all you two have to settle will be the others."

"Suits me," Hal agreed cheerfully. "Hattie—Lord, last time I saw her she was in short dresses."

"She wears none at all now," said Bo. "That's why George likes her."

"What d'you mean, she doesn't wear dresses!" George protested virtuously.

"Bet a dime she hasn't one on right now," Bo offered.

"It's a bet!" said George, eyeing his watch. "Let's go and see."

Bo shrugged. "Anything for an excuse. I'll be a martyr, but it shouldn't happen. I'm a working man now."

To George's surprise, Pitch accepted eagerly. The four of them found a seat in front, Pitch between Hal and Bo, George on the end next the aisle. He leaned outward a little and hoped Hattie might see him.

On they came, with their little panties, and their long black silk stockings that never quite met the costumes. In those far-off days that little ring of flesh was enough to mark Hattie's theatre down for one of the risqué places. They chorused in sharp and breathless voices as they danced across the stage:

When that midnight choo choo leaves for Alabam',
I'll be right there,
I've got my fare—

"Wretched voices," George heard Pitch whisper to Hal, and was delighted to hear Hal answer: "With legs like those they can afford it."

"Bah! I've got nicer legs than that myself," Pitch scorned. And George reprovved himself for a twinge of jealousy. She

never talked to him like that. But he strangled the thought in his wholesome envy and adoration of Hal.

When they had met Hattie and Yvonne, Hal suggested a dance hall, and again to George's amazement Pitch agreed eagerly. What withering scorn would have met him if *he* had suggested it, George wondered.

"I'd never have thought you'd come to a place like this," he said when they danced.

"That's more than I can say for you," Pitch told him witheringly.

"Oh, but this is in honour of Hal."

"A good alibi, if true," she agreed without enthusiasm.

"What d'you mean?"

Pitch looked up cautiously under black eyelashes, caught him frowning, and looked down again hastily. "Nothing, I'm sure. It's probably as true as some of the other stories you've told me."

"What other stories?" he demanded, his face stormy.

Whirling past them came Hal and Hattie, dancing with exaggerated, skilful steps, and Hattie's eyes were shining happily.

"About your studies," Pitch was saying, as if it didn't matter. "Is mathematics really so hard?"

"Math? Oh, that's no trouble. Comes easy."

"And yet you had to sit up nights, studying figures—Poor George!"

"I didn't any such thing. My main trouble was—Say, what are you driving at, anyway? What kind of figures?"

"The easy kind, Georgie—so easy you go to sleep over them, I guess." Her voice trailed off.

In a rough gust of anger he held her at arm's length and made her look at him. There was a glint of laughter there, but it was hard, brittle, defiant laughter. She wriggled in his tight grasp.

"Don't make a show of yourself—and me!" she reminded him. Suddenly she was smiling sweetly again, and snuggling so close that it was he who drew away in embarrassment.

Masculine pride and meeker anxiety clashed within him somewhere. "Did Hattie—I mean—"

"Yes, of course, she told me," Pitch assured him in a voice like vinegar. "I suppose she's told everyone else she knows."

George bit his lip. "Well, at least she didn't talk about how nice her legs were, in company." He regretted it the moment he said it, but Pitch cut in softly and ominously: "Come on, Georgie, let's make fools of ourselves."

She leaned suddenly back in his arm, and he saw the devil in her eyes, felt rather than saw her breasts heave, then her voice rang in his ears with the orchestra:

E-Yip-I-Addy-I-Ay, I-Ay,
My heart wants to holler hurray;
Sing of joy, sing of bliss,
Home was never like this—
Yip-I-Addy-I-Ay!

With a full voice she sang a soprano obligato for those few startling bars. The orchestra leader quickly took his cue and played it over again, and Pitch sang on. Her eyes laughed into his defiantly as she finished up with a staccato shriek.

There was a storm of applause, and George suddenly realized they had stopped dancing, that the orchestra leader with palm outstretched was tendering the applause to his partner. There was only a confused sea of faces in the room, and a stamping of feet, the way people did things across the tracks.

Pitch leaned on George's rigid arm, half swung out toward her audience and smiled at them. Then he felt her shudder,

and she whirled back to him. "Oh, my God! What did I do that for! Come on, Georgie, run for it!"

In an interlude at the table, while the girls powdered their noses, the war topic came up again. Bo said earnestly: "We're in for it, I'm convinced. Been in for it for years, and nobody's ready for it, except Germany."

"Those squareheads," said Hal.

The vague, distant event suddenly took shape in George's mind, because Hal used the word squarehead. He saw without knowing it, the twilight of the old Europe—a twilight years long. And the answer was written for him in the Serbians' national sorrow of the Field of Blackbirds. It was written at midnight, on the moment between August third and August fourth, in 1914, when Britain's last peace offer had expired. Lord Grey spoke the answer to George, and to millions of little men like George the world over, when he said: "The lights of Europe are going out one by one."

"We are fighting to vindicate the principle that small nationalities are not to be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering power.... We are fighting not for aggression, but in defence of the principles the maintenance of which is vital to the civilization of the world."

No, not Chamberlain in the British Parliament in 1940; not Churchill in 1941; not Roosevelt in 1942;—but Asquith in the British Parliament in 1914!

"Think we'll be in it?" George asked Hal.

"Will be?" says Hal, "We *are* in it!"

George looked at him quickly, speculatively. A thought was struggling in his mind. If Hal and Bo should go, so would he! He was dazzled with the new thought now. "It'll be fun! Wonder how long they'll keep us there. Couple of months, maybe!"

Hal swung on him sharply. "*Us!* Listen, my boy, what about Dad? We can't all go and leave him alone. Time enough for you later on."

George's heart sank. It had been too good to be true.

"Hal is right," agreed Pitch severely. "I'm surprised you even thought of it. You must stay with Uncle Charley."

"And how about you?" George demanded. "I don't see you staying with your dad."

"That's different. My mother's there. Uncle Charley's only got Aunt Mary, and she—" Pitch left the phrase eloquently unfinished.

"Just who are you after?" thought Hattie vengefully. "Couldn't rest till you got him here, where his father can't afford to send him, so you could keep your eye on him. Then you high-toned him, and now you'll break his heart and send him back to the farm. Well, if it's Hal you're playing for now, just forget it, dearie. He wouldn't look at you."

Chapter Fourteen

"Well, I've done it," said Hal, and burst into George's room where he had moved after Bo had packed and left to enlist. "How do I look?"

"Hal! You're in uniform!"

"Guess you better go home and make peace with Dad for me. Help him with the threshing, see he gets his wheat stored and *don't* let him sell till the prices go up. They'll go sky high."

Germany has struck through Belgium. The papers tell about the Schlieffen "swinging door" plan. The door swings through the length of Belgium, is to sweep in a wide arc down through France, bring the German divisions to Paris and the Seine, cut off the French army from the Channel, drive it to the mountains and destroy it.

The forts of Liege and Namur thunder, crumble, fall. The juggernaut sweeps on. Hardly has a town fallen till the galloping Uhlans are in the streets of another. The storm sweeps over the little Belgian army like hail over a wheat field.

The French forces spread their lines thinner, hold on grimly in rearguards while their main forces fall back. They are no match for the tempest. The British are going over, "that contemptible little army of George's," says Wilhelm.

At home the recruiting offices are open, the posters are out, the battalions forming. The bugle bands and the pipes are in the streets. Long lines of men at the stations, waiting to swear in. Many others are rounded up, for this is war. Aliens who can show no good reason why they should not be, are interned.

And so Hal comes, with his khaki, his peak cap, his swagger stick and all. George and Pitch go to see them march. They pick out Hal, swinging along there in the inexorable rhythm, played on by the band.

"There he is!" Pitch is dancing excitedly beside George, waving her handkerchief. George sees him, too, now, rugged and beautiful in his uniform. "Hi, there, Hal!"

Tears were in George's eyes, tears at the irresistible swing of the march, the tramp of the feet of the young men who were marching, marching, marching down the long road.

Hal spent a brief evening leave with George. They were silent for a moment at the last, a silence of embarrassment, for each knew what the other was thinking.

"See you over there," said George, smiling wanly.

"Don't be in too big a hurry," said Hal. They shook hands very casually, and Hal swung down the street. At the corner he waved jauntily with his swagger stick, and George saw him dimly through a mist.

George quietly finished packing and lugged his heavy bags to the street car. How silent and alone it was now, the happy tumult of the college gone. He put his bags on the street car platform apologetically, grinning sheepishly at the conductor. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Say, I'm proud to do it! Think of what you chaps are going over there to do for us!" He reached up and pulled the bell cord, and George tumbled miserably into a seat.

"Thinks I'm a soldier," and he basked in a brief and borrowed glory as the street car rattled toward the station.

At the station were soldiers, their kit bags slung about, waiting for their trains. Some had their girls with them, others talked quietly and seriously with fathers and mothers. George passed them self-consciously.

"Why can't Dad look after his own damn wheat?" he fumed, out of all reason in his agony of mind.

George regretted his rebellion in a sharp instant when he reached home and saw his Dad's face. Thin, haggard, sunken eyes, grey hair. A tired face, with more than the age of years in it. A face with lines that had come too swiftly and too recently. A face out of which eyes peered with less of the strong puritan glare of old, eyes that looked through George and past him, that tried to read the riddle of the horizon of his life, eyes with a pleading questioning in them. The face of a trusting man who had suddenly been dealt a blow from he knew not where. He had buried his guide and counsellor

long ago in the lonely Ontario hills, and now yearned to draw her strength back to him again from the young life her womb had borne him, but could draw no more for they were leaving him. A lonely man was Charley Battle, who, though he had never been far from his family, yet had never been close to them.

"Jean's gone, Hal's gone, and here am I wishing I was gone. Poor Dad," thought George fiercely.

Then he shook hands, and felt the gnarled and callous hands of his Dad, and he drew away swiftly. "You shouldn't have taken time to come and get me," he said, after their brief greeting. "I could have bummed a ride."

"I had to come in anyway," Dad said, as they walked toward the hitching posts. George threw his bags in the back of the old democrat, and they climbed on the seat. The iron tires rattled on the rims as they trotted down the sleepy street and out into the country. It gave George a chance to catch up on his thoughts.

Charley Battle knew. Instinct told him what George's averted face tried to hide from his eyes. He would not tell George that he had got up last night in the darkness, unable to sleep, and gone down on his knees to pray for a decision that eluded him, for an appeasement of the conviction that gnawed him. That was for ever his secret between him and God. But this he would tell; this he *must* tell to someone, for it was too heavy to carry alone.

"I've had a feeling ever since Harold enlisted that I'd never see him again." And then he saw the hard look in George's eyes and knew that he could not say that either, just for the moment. It must wait. And he said instead:

"I guess Harold looks pretty smart in his uniform."

"Yes," said George. And it was no lack of loyalty to Hal that made him switch the subject. "How's Aunt Mary?"

"She's very, very well. I think she's in love."

"In love!" George was startled out of his reserve. "Who with?"

"I guess you wouldn't know him. Old codger by the name of Martin, John Martin. Took the Wilbur place this year."

"Oh?" George feigned indifference at the name of Wilbur. Dad judged them all by Johnny and considered them a tough lot, not fit to associate with. "What, for instance, would he think if he knew that Hattie's legs disturb me?" George thought impatiently.

"They're all gone back East," Dad said, in a tone of "good riddance to bad rubbish."

"But about Martin?" George asked. "How old is he? What kind of a fellow?"

"Not a bad sort. Probably will never have a cent to bless himself with. But Mary's happy about it, and I guess that's all that matters." And George knew by this that Martin was a good Christian.

"Aunt Mary in love, at her age!" George marvelled. "Does it make her any less cranky?"

"You'd hardly know her. As skittish as a colt."

Dad was right. Aunt Mary was a changed woman. Her eyes shone, and she embraced George with an affection he could not remember since he and Harold were boys.

"Well, well, Auntie, there's a good time coming and it's almost here— Remember the old song you used to sing?"

"And it's been a long time on the way!" carolled Aunt Mary giddily. No need for anybody to tell that this old lady was in love.

"Guess we're in for baching," said George to his father later.

"You know, I've been thinking," said Dad with a maddening deliberation. And George waited in stubborn silence. "I'm supposed to ask him what," he thought resentfully.

"I've been thinking that we might sell this place," Dad said.

"Oh?" George tried not to betray too much interest. "Got another farm in sight?"

"No, but I might retire, you know, maybe."

"Whew! Dad, you don't really mean you'd leave—this!" George pretended to surprise, but hope was surging.

"Well, maybe not at once—" George's heart began to sink again. "But after a year or so. Nobody would buy now. All too afraid, and there's no money anywhere."

George's hands grew rough and calloused, and, though he loathed the work, he threw himself into it with all the energy of his hundred and eighty pounds and his eighteen years. When Sundays came with the inevitable gathering at church, and the older people told him how well he looked, George found it hard sometimes to be polite. He felt their scrutiny on him, and he thought he knew what they were thinking.

Letters from Hal. At Valcartier. Route marches. Bayonet drill. "Wait till we get there!" George devoured them eagerly, scrawled as they were in pencil, in Hal's hurried style. Soon they would be on the ocean. The ocean! George caught his breath. He would sneak off by himself to re-read the letters hungrily and longingly. To dream of himself in camp, or in action nonchalantly firing the guns—If only Pitch or Hattie were looking on!

Dad read letters from Hal thoughtfully, and George could see his lips move. Dad always read that way. But sometimes George would see him holding a page of the letter before him a long time, his lips moving steadily. And Dad's eyes weren't looking at the paper.

"He's praying," George would deduce without emotion. "Scared out of his wits for Hal. Wonder if he'd feel the same if it was me—"

It gave him a bitter satisfaction to feel like that. Dad prayed more than usual now, and read his Bible more. And between them George felt a barrier that he could not break down because he was always building it up against his own wishes.

The day the news came that the first contingent had landed in England he saw Dad's face flinch and grow pale, and his hand tremble as he held the paper.

"Now, Dad," he burst out, "don't look so worried. They're not at the Front yet."

"Eh?—Oh, yes." Dad had not heard him, he knew.

Aunt Mary took Dad by the arm, with an unaccustomed firmness. "Come on, Charley, and lie down," she commanded. And Dad obeyed, protesting all the time. But Aunt Mary made some tea and took it to him and sat by him while he drank it. She talked earnestly and fast—too fast—about her coming wedding, only a week away. George knew it was a desperate gesture for her to trot out thus the thing that was most intimate to her, because she had to "quiet Charley down." He went out, filled with pity. And when Aunt Mary came to him later and said: "Your father is not a well man," he was not surprised. But he could think of nothing to get hold of, no suggestion to make.

People had begun to ask him more frequently: "How's your dad?" George always said, "Fine." But with Uncle Jim he could be frank.

"I wish Dad could snap out of it. He's got it firmly fixed in his mind that Hal's gone for good. Silly way to feel. And yet you can't blame a man if he gets a hunch, can you?"

"I feel the same way about Harry sometimes," Uncle Jim shrugged. "But I shake it off. If it's gotta be that way, then it's gotta. It's out of our hands, George."

"It isn't out of mine," said George fiercely, and he felt proudly that Uncle Jim no longer called him "Georgie," that Uncle Jim treated him now as a grown-up. "If anything happens to Hal I'm going over there myself, farm or no farm, and knock off a couple of hundred Huns—"

Uncle Jim looked at him in silence for a moment, then burst into one of his thunderous laughs—perhaps of amusement, perhaps to relieve his own anxiety.

"You'd give your eye teeth to be over there yourself, wouldn't you?—Sh-sh! Here comes Billy. He'll go next. I hope it's over before he's old enough. One at a time is all your Aunt Sadie can bear."

"There they go," thought George vengefully on his way home. "Billy next, before me. Always what the old folks can stand. Well, I'm going next year if it's still on, Dad or no Dad."

George kept the vow he pledged to himself.

One day in the summer of 1915 a deep-tanned, eager young man strode bravely off the train to join a Winnipeg artillery battery. The recruiting posters said that soldiers could have two months' harvest leave. George's heart sang as the train clickety-clacked over the rails. He was off for the big adventure. True, there was a hiatus, when he would come back to help Dad with the harvest of the wheat, but after that he would be off to the barracks, off to war!

It was tough to leave Dad, but George could resist no longer, and had gone of his own accord to secure a good hired man. Dad had promised to sell the farm that autumn. He read the papers with an apprehensive look, as if he dreaded the headlines. The casualty lists held a terrifying fascination for him. Hal was in France now, and writing them very matter-of-fact letters, especially to Dad, but never telling either of them where or how he was. Even at that, some of his words were cut out by the censor.

A confused list of names became familiar to George, names he pronounced his own way, places that he hoped he, too, would see. Canadians at Hill 60, at "Plugstreet," at Ypres. Canadians in the first German gas attack that caught them without masks. But the papers left untold what George wanted most to know. Had Hal been in it? What did they do? Hal's letters came at last, and they described it in such intimate detail that George knew where he was. "A stinking sort of mist, started all the boys coughing at first, and then they lay down and writhed and spluttered off to the field stations —"

George sent parcels to Hal, and got special fun out of sending a box of chewing tobacco marked, "From Dad to Hal." He could imagine Hal's laughter; and Dad's feelings if he knew it! Aunt Mary wanted to send cakes she had just baked over at her new home, but George made her confine it to fruit cake that would keep, for Hal had told him of the sad wreckage of layer-cakes that had come for the boys.

George went straight from the train to the recruiting office of the battery. He imagined he would find cannon, and found a converted school building instead. As he neared it he saw a column of soldiers swinging across the parade ground. His heart thumped in his ribs at the sight. Had he known who was there it would have thumped fifty times as hard.

He entered the building and asked a man in uniform where the men went who wanted to join up. The man opened a door, and suddenly George was in an anteroom with four others. In an agony he watched them go through the inner door one by one. Would his turn never come? Would he pass the doctor all right? He fidgeted in futile impatience. He thought of certain intimate discomforts he had felt at one time or another. Would they be ailments? The officers were terribly strict, he'd heard. The men talked vulgarly of the inspection to come, and George cringed. It was still uppermost in his mind when his turn came, and he walked in, to get a glimpse of an officer in khaki at the desk, a soldier at each side of him writing in forms.

The officer motioned George over in front of him. They took his name, age, full particulars of his life—habits, health, married, or single, any children—. George in his eagerness leaned over to place his palms on the edge of the desk.

"Stand up!" The officer's voice was sharp and matter-of-fact. George snapped back with a glow of startled pride. He had had his first army command, even before he was in it!

The officer motioned to a door at the right. "Report to the doctor, Battle."

The doctor went over George from head to toe, weighed him, tapped him, measured him, put a stethoscope on him, made him sit down and tapped his knees, made him lie down and kneaded his stomach, made him read letters and numbers and colours, asked him a question which made George stammer and swallow.

"Speak up," said the doctor, examining him casually while George blushed furiously.

"Oh, about a year, I guess," George lied offhandedly.

"Hm!" said the doctor non-committally, and made notes in the form he was filling. Then, after one more embarrassing detail:

"Well, guess you'll do, Battle. Report to the sergeant outside," he said finally.

"Report?—Is that—Does that mean—"

"Yes, yes. Next!"

In a bewilderingly short time George was aware that he had signed something, had taken an oath, and was being given a printed form which told him when to report for duty. And then he was outside again, outside the building in the clear summer air, the same as when he went in, and yet with a world of difference. He was a soldier now! A gunner in the Field Artillery! He was going overseas to shoot the guns. His dreams of childhood were fulfilling.

He had no uniform yet, and he had asked timidly about it. "You'll get your uniform and equipment when you report to barracks," he was brusquely told. He was so confused and excited that he thanked the sergeant and called him "Sir."

History was being written while George worked at home and waited for the proudest moment of his life.

German armies came swinging down from the Rhine, over the canals and the Lowlands. The Boche was ravaging Marianne again as he had done a generation ago. Seven German armies, and five of them swinging on a hinge, the hinge of Sedan. Sedan where Napoleon III dragged himself from a consumptive's bed to his last battle, and dragged the Third Empire down with him. The Germans broke through Sedan to descend on Soissons, on Paris itself. Let the Fifth Army go down south-west of Paris and part it from the Channel coast, from England, isolate it, drive the flower of the French army to the Alps and finish them. But Kluck was too ambitious, and hungered like any yokel for the city lights. He swung into the Paris line itself and left his right flank exposed. And France struck him in the groin, where it counted.

Boats for Blighty and leave ... Box-cars for eight horses or forty men ... Cheers in the bright morning in the streets ... La Brabanconne, La Marseillaise, God Save the King ... Boots on the cobblestones beneath the Menin Gate ... "Mademoiselle from Armentieres, hasn't been kissed for twenty years, Hinky dinky parlez vous—Flood the Yser, drown the blighters—"

George worked and waited with growing impatience. Yes, the horses. Time to feed them, groom them, milk the cows, then dark, then bed, then up again. Will two months never be up! Soldiers, guns, camps, the ocean, England!

Aunt Mary came over one afternoon to bring some fresh biscuits. She came over a lot. She was worried about Dad.

"George, see what is keeping your father. Dinner's getting cold."

"I left him at the barn door—said he was coming right in." George lumbered off, grumbling. "Wouldn't be surprised if he forgot dinner—he's so absent-minded these days—There, what did I tell you!—But, say!"

George came up and stared in a curious fascination, an emotional stupor. "That's no way to lie down, if he wants a rest," he thought irrelevantly. And he edged closer. "Mustn't waken Dad too suddenly. Bad for old people to be startled out of sleep, and Dad's heart may be on the bum—"

But that man had not made up his mind to lie down. Something else did it for him. It was a queer, slack, twisted posture.

George carried him to the house. "He's too light for a man of his height," he found himself thinking. "Aunt Mary! Dad's fainted. I'll lay him on the bed. Phone for the doctor."

A look in George's face made it unnecessary for Aunt Mary to look at Dad—or to phone for the doctor. George was vexed by the single, stifled shriek in the empty house and the throb of a body falling on the floor.

"Now *you've* fainted!"

But he was numbed with a horror that he had never known before.

Chapter Fifteen

George worked against time, with the deadline of October first haunting him.

He had recovered from the empty, stricken feeling Charley Battle's death left with him. How peaceful Dad had looked there in death. This gentle and devotional man whom he had mentally reproached for his lack of decision, for his wavering in life. Yet in his time he had had to make two great decisions.

The first had been after the burial service in the snow a young lifetime ago. The second had come to him in his own barnyard, and Dad had made this supreme choice with an abrupt spiritual determination that seemed now, in retrospect, to have ennobled and glorified the whole of his life. And George knew at last what indomitable courage had spurred his father in those lonely years.

It was a ghastly thing now to go and shop for a coffin at the undertaker's. There in the little back room they were, slung around the room on raw wooden tables with coarse covers over them. He went from one to the other, getting the price of each, and all the prices shocked him.

In the next room lay all that was mortal of his father, and here he was coldly measuring out in dollars and cents what it would cost to bury that portion. He would have liked to take the first one offered and escape from the clammy room, but Uncle Jim had come with him and insisted that he do it properly. Magnetic and compelling even in this macabre task—thus his Uncle Jim. George felt that, in loyalty, he should get the best, but Uncle Jim took charge:

"I wouldn't do that, George. Your Dad wouldn't have liked it. Now this one here—"

Pitch had come home for the funeral. George was amazed at the vast numbers from near and far. In death he developed a still greater respect for his father than he had ever achieved in life.

He asked Pitch hesitantly if she would sing at the funeral service. It seemed again a callous and unnatural thing to be doing, yet someone had to do it. "I thought maybe you wouldn't mind," he said almost sullenly, as if already bridled against a lash of scorn. A lot of nerve, she might say, asking her, a professional singer, to sing at her own uncle's funeral.

To his solace and discomfort alike, she suddenly put her arms around him and spoke with unexpected, unprecedented tenderness:

"Oh, I'm so sorry for you, Georgie. You just don't know what to do about it all, and yet you're doing wonderfully. Yes, I'll be honoured to sing. Now, let's see, what were some of Uncle Charley's favourite hymns?"

They bent their heads over the hymn book, and Pitch's black hair was close to George's face, and some faint perfume assailed and annoyed him. It annoyed him far more to find that her nearness was sending familiar curls wriggling along his nerves. He looked sidewise at her, nervously saw her eyebrows puckered as she studied the hymns, apparently unconscious of him. She suggested some hymn titles.

"But these are for the service," he objected. "They are just the ones that everybody used to bawl out in church together. There has to be one special song for you to sing for him. Like you sang 'I hear you calling me' at Jean's wedding. How about this one, Dad always liked it: 'Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.'"

He began to hum it, his voice strangled, and he motioned her in silent entreaty. Her voice took it up, clear, subdued, inexpressibly haunting: "Land of the true—" and then rising softly: "—where we live anew—"

Suddenly an explosion of emotion shook him, the emotion that had been dammed and stingy for too long, and tears rained from his eyes. She stopped at once, and her big black eyes searched him, as a mother might search her son for a hurt.

"God! Pitch," he sobbed, "you make it sound so real. You almost make me see Dad over there, with Mother—Your voice is like it must be over there—flawless—like crystal—Oh! What am I saying!" He blew his nose thunderously, angrily brushed his eyes and jumped to his feet.

"A fine soldier I'll be," he said harshly, "blubbering like a girl when my kid cousin sings a song. Guess you think I'm a two-faced fool, a damned hypocrite, a—"

"I think you're a very sweet-hearted little boy—" Pitch began, demurely and seriously.

"There you go again," he blustered. "Oh, I'm sorry, Pitch. I didn't mean anything. Honest!"

"—But you can be most awfully crude and cruel at times," Pitch finished evenly, in harder tones, and her mouth quivered. Then she smiled, and her eyes were once again unfathomable, incalculable, and filled with lightning.

"I didn't intend to be rough," he went on protesting, and then he had a violent impulse to take her over his knee and spank her. Damn the girl, why must she always rake his emotions till they were raw! "Just put it down to irritation, or worry, or—Oh, I don't care what you put it down to!"

"Maybe I'll put it down to—just you and me."

She held her face close to his, and looked at him out of pools of deep night, with a hypnotic, unbearable, unexplainable intensity. All at once to him it was like looking down a dark well, with an impulse to jump in. With an angry abandon he leaned forward and kissed her, on the lips. They were appallingly luscious. Her swift arm clung to his neck, and while he held her he saw only one thing, the pink tip of her ear peeping from her raven hair.

They drew back and looked at each other then, and he felt that his gaze was wavering from one of her eyes to the other, but Pitch's black pupils moved not at all in their flaming, inquiring scrutiny. He laughed in embarrassment. "Guess I shouldn't have done that," he said a bit shakily. "Silly, isn't it? Cousins, and all that."

She looked away a moment, and when she turned again she was smiling. "Yes, I suppose so," she spoke with a wry sound. "Very silly, and *very* inappropriate."

"By heaven! You're provoking—"

"Speak for yourself, my fine cousin."

"No! no! don't take it like that. I mean—sort of—tempting, you know."

"Very sorry I led you astray, I'm sure."

"What do you mean, anyway? I kissed you, didn't I?"

"Judging by your alibis, that's what happened. But if it makes your conscience any clearer, I kissed you back, so we both sinned."

"Who said anything about sin? I just—" He jumped to his feet, and sent the hymn book flying. "No matter what I say, it's the wrong thing—with you."

"I still think you're a crude little boy who never grew up."

He glared at her in fury, but all at once he saw tears in her eyes, and he gathered her in his arms.

"Don't be mad, Pitch. Let's be pals, as never before!"

She freed one hand, ran it through his hair, and looked at him with a brooding, proprietary look. "Do you really mean that, Georgie? You mean—everything to each other?"

It was more sweeping than he had intended. But he was grateful and tortured at the same time, and he looked up and nodded. "I mean it. There's no need for—" He was going to say: "—for us to fight as we do."

But Pitch said: "Darling, I know there's no need to go on pretending. What if we are cousins? There's no sin in loving each other."

"No," he agreed weakly. "No reason at all. Of course not."

She held his head against her, and he felt her breathe very deeply and convulsively. He felt himself being drawn into the loveliest and most terrifying trap he had ever thought of in all his story plots. In a moment it would be too late to draw away, and he didn't know how.

"George, will you hold me in your arms the way—the way you'd hold me if we were married—already?"

Wordless, instinctively obeying her, George did so, as she indicated, and the moment to withdraw had passed.

He had a strange, gratified thrill in him after that. He realized with a measure of abashment that he had kissed and held Pitch in a way that he had never done before, and that Pitch had given him back his kiss.

He did not feel that it had gone further than that, or that he had asked anything at all of her. Only to be friends, of course. And maybe that was all she'd tolerate anyway. The status could be clarified as they went along.

But he did know that Pitch and he had made plans for every day till Pitch should return to Winnipeg to organize her singing classes that she would teach. "You'll promise not to be lonesome?" she asked him.

He assured her loyally that he would not be, yet he was secretly thankful to have a week to clean up his own affairs before leaving for the army. He thought with a brief stab of jealousy of her going back to Professor Oleano for her own studies, to which she stuck with a fierce ambition for the opera, an ambition which George felt she would achieve when she gave the commanding word.

It was strenuous work being in love. He flushed when he put it to himself like that, and then rather liked the idea. Funny, he argued, how you could know a girl all your life, and then because you had a quarrel and kissed each other everything was changed. An uncomfortable state, too, that made his skin crawl to think of his new responsibilities. Of course it was not to be permanent, for Pitch would soon tire of it. But what would Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie say if they knew? Were they as broad-minded as he and Pitch about cousins being in love?

Letters from Hal did not help. The thought of facing Hal, if he ever got there, and telling him he was that way with Pitch made him cringe. He'd hope that Pitch chucked the whole notion before that had to be done. But this thought was meagre comfort. Did he want it that way?

Aunt Mary and the "old codger," her husband, would come and take over the farm, with Uncle Jim to oversee it. So that worry was off his hands. He drove Pitch to the station when she was leaving, and felt that he was shedding still another, and in front of Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie he could kiss her only on the cheek.

"Don't forget, now," she whispered almost soundlessly to him. "Morning of the twenty-eighth. That will give us two whole days together—*sweetheart*." Her fingers squeezed his.

He waved to her as the train pulled out, and that word resounded in him as he bade a hasty good-night to Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie.

Now that he was in love Pitch no longer laughed at him. He was the head of the family here. In a few more days he would be a soldier, and he would have two whole days with Pitch before he reported. Then Pitch would see him in uniform.

George thought of Hattie, too, and hoped that she didn't care. He must think rather wistfully of Hattie, he decided. Be a man with a secret sorrow, maybe.

"Silly thing to think about. Guess I better get the mail and see if any more creditors have turned up."

An official looking envelope nestled with the weekly paper in the post office box. His heart leaped at the address: "Gunner George Battle," and his regimental number. It was stamped, "On His Majesty's Service," and it bore the Military District Headquarters imprint. George opened it with curiosity that quickly sharpened into amazement. It said, in brief form, that he was to report by nine a.m., September twenty-fifth, at battery headquarters.

"I hear they're pulling the whole shebang out right away for the East," said the postmaster, watching George through the wicket.

"Yes," said George. "Yes, I guess so."

"Well, pleasant trip, and come home safe," said the postmaster, and held out his hand.

George shook it and walked out to the street in a daze. "Twenty-fifth! That's the day after tomorrow! I can't make it. I'll have to write and—"

He broke off, startled at his own stupidity. "You're in the army now," he reminded himself. "You don't put the army off!"

And suddenly he was almost running down the street to get his horse. Maybe the postmaster was right. Maybe he'd just get there and leave again. What about Pitch? Might be no time to see her. How did the army manage cases like that? Give you time? Like hell they did!

He drove down the street and out into the country with a new sense of importance. He was under the King's command now. He was a farmer boy and a college student no more. He was a soldier!

"D'you hear that!" he demanded of the horse. "I'm a soldier now, Pete! I'm Gunner Battle! Giddap!"

Chapter Sixteen

They were marching, marching, marching, and George marched with them, down the shining street. The crowd grew dense as they neared the station. There, George remembered, was the crossing they had raced for to catch the first street car he ever rode. How green he'd been in those days! And how far distant they seemed now. He grinned with inward delight.

His day had been breath-taking. Events had fairly leaped at him. But the most incredible thing of all was that he was again with Bo Charlton. In the bewilderment of the quartermaster's department, where he drew his uniform and kit, there he had almost collided with Bo, and heard the dear, familiar voice again.

"Whoa up there, old boy! Where you heading?"

"Bo!" George's was a cry of delight and unbelief. They had corresponded intermittently, and Bo had been with the engineers, so George had given up hope of ever seeing him again unless by chance.

Bo's was a vast pretence of casualness. "They weeded me out when the gang went East. Said I had a bad foot. That meant depot duty for the duration, so I got a transfer here." And had George known how Bo felt, he would have been flattered as well as wildly amazed.

Then had come the order to fall in, with full marching kit, and George learned that they were not coming back. Then had come his panicky dash to phone Pitch Black and tell her the great news. He had waited in an agonized sweat while the operator rang the number. And then: "Hello! Hello! Is that you, Pitch?"

"Miss Black is not at home," said a cool voice.

"Oh, is that you, Aunt Kitty?"

"She is not at home."

George brushed a rain of perspiration out of his eyes. "Say, listen," he tried again, "this is George Battle. Who is that?"

"This is the housekeeper, Mr. Battle." Obviously a new one, George realized in despair.

"Well, look! I'm in an awful hurry—army's leaving—I mean the battery's leaving—got to say good-bye to Pitch—to Miss Black. Where is she gone?"

"I'm sorry I do not know."

"You must have some idea! Come on, she's my cousin! And I'm in a hurry."

"She said they were going out for the afternoon and evening."

"They!" George was almost incoherent. The receiver formed a wet circle around his ear. "Who is 'they'?"

"Miss Black went out with Professor Oleano."

"Oh—oh, him! Yes, I know him. Know any place they might be?"

"Miss Black said they might spend the afternoon driving in the park. The professor is very interested in botany."

"Botany be da—Well, tell her I called, and we're leaving in an hour, if she's interested. I'll see her after the war. Got that?"

"Yes, Mr. Battle. I shall tell her."

He flung out of the phone booth like an explosion. "Yes, Mr. Battle!" Don't they ever get excited, these housekeepers. Park—botany—greasy foreigner—Why didn't she read the papers, or stay home, or something. Serve her right if I get killed....

They tramped down the street in quick, intoxicating tempo with the band leading them. His heart sang with new freedom,

and also with a mighty crusading vengeance against greasy foreigners like Oleano.

Bo Charlton marched beside him, Bo with the sharp-drawn profile that he envied, and the cynical pose that was no more than skin deep. Bo knew the answer to everything and pretended to be surprised at nothing. George looked around him as he marched now, proud and unafraid.

Now and then a man or woman broke from the crowd and ran along, jabbering excitedly to one of the soldiers, clinging with desperate energy to those last few moments. George told himself: "Well, thank heaven, I don't have to go through that. Nobody here to give a damn about me." It made him feel rather exhilarated, superior to the common men with loved ones. He had been purged in the fire, a grim soldier whom girls look at with envy.

And then, as they threw down their kits on the station platform, the crowd cascaded through the entrances and exits, ignoring the police. A tumult surged around them, a vast and confused chorus of good-byes, a strangely moving scene. Some men were hugging girls, and others talked importantly to them, but most of them stood in eloquent silence with older men and women as they awaited the order to go aboard.

"Hello, there, soldier!" A familiar cry in his ears. A pair of perfumed arms around his neck, warm lips kissing him in an ecstasy of shrieks and laughter and crying all at once.

"Hattie!" George's sour scorn fell away like a blanket. "Hattie, for the love of God, how did you get here?"

"Just kicked shins till I got through. You didn't think you'd ever get away to war without seeing me, did you?"

"But I don't see—How on earth did you know?"

"Oh, an old friend of mine told me. I'm looking for him now—George, isn't it too delicious! I had a letter from Hal today and he said I shouldn't have let you go. Imagine!"

George knew that he held both her hands, that it was a silly thing to do, that for all Hattie's delight her eyes were darting here, there, in a quick search even as she talked.

Bo had been down on his knees adjusting straps on his pack. He stood up now, and his face broke into an astonished smile.

"My Hat!"

"My Bo!"

They were in each other's arms, hugging in a sudden, candid way that appalled and fascinated George and told him that this familiarity was no new thing. Gasping and cackling, Hattie turned and swept George into a triple embrace.

A corporal came tearing down the platform. "Aboard, everyone. On the double! Break it up, boys."

"Did you see Pitch?" Hattie asked George.

"No," he said shortly, glad to show his feelings over the matter.

"Oleano, or afternoon beauty sleep?" Hattie's eyes were dancing.

"Oleano."

"Well, I'll tell her I saw you off," cried Hattie. "I'll tell her I—kissed you good-bye for her—like this—" Her lips were against his in a tempestuous warmth, and he hugged her as if he would break her ribs. Then he let go.

"Great girl," said Bo as they reached their coach.

"Yes, she's a peach," George agreed.

Songs rippled back from scores of windows in the long troop train.

"It's a long way to Tipperary—"

"Merrily we roll along—"

"When that midnight choo choo leaves for Alabam'—"

"Sailing, sailing—"

"C'mon an' hear, c'mon an' hear—"

Hattie got Pitch by phone that evening from the theatre.

"Hello," Pitch's voice, cool and cultivated.

"This is Hattie. I'm in a hurry, but I have a message for you. From George."

"From Geo'ge? Has anything happened?" If there was curiosity, Pitch concealed it.

"He just wanted me to say good-bye for him," Hattie's voice dripped with triumph.

"Good-bye? He's—"

"Gone to war!" said Hattie. "They left late this afternoon. I saw them off, and gave George a kiss he'll remember!"

"Oh, when—I mean, where are they going? They left suddenly, didn't they?"

"Yes, that's the way trains usually leave." And Hattie enjoyed her malice. "They're very mysterious in the army. But, of course, *George* told *me*."

"That was nice of him." Pitch's voice was non-committal.

"Yes, and do you remember Bo Charlton? They were right together. What do you know about that? Since you were too busy, I said good-bye to both of them for you as well."

"That was very obliging, I'm sure."

"Oh, don't mention it. George seemed a bit put out because you weren't there. Seemed to have expected you. Said something about your Oleano. Said he didn't really mind, except that he'd wasted *valuable* time trying to phone you."

"Oh? I'm very much obliged to you for calling, Hattie, but I'm afraid I'm rather in a hurry at the moment—"

"So am I," Hattie cried heartily, but Pitch's receiver clicked.

Hattie beamed into the telephone. "That'll hold you, you black bitch!" she murmured affectionately.

Pitch laid the phone on the hook, and clung to it for a moment. Maybe Hattie was lying. But why? Why didn't they let me know? Hattie had said George tried. He "wasted" time, did he!

Pitch aimed a wicked glance at the living-room, where her singing teacher awaited her. All at once she hated him, with a violent loathing. "What's he got to do with my life? He must have known about this! Why didn't *he* tell me?"

The passion that swept her was not a friendly thing at all. It was frustration to a nature that hated frustration. It was rage at herself. She shook her black mane, and flew so suddenly into the room that she seemed to explode into it. Oleano, fat, pink-faced, buncy, saw the hurricane before it hit him, and shrank back in his chair.

"Go on! Go on! What are you waiting for?" Pitch was tearing at him, and Oleano slid out of his chair, wide-eyed with alarm. "I've missed him! They've gone—the soldiers are gone, and I wasn't there! You and your stupid deep-breathing in the park!"

Pitch loomed over him like an avenging demon.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Don't you understand English, you fat little clown!"

Pitch's hand closed on a book-end. Oleano ducked and raced for the door. The book-end, badly aimed, bounced off a chair. Oleano departed through the front door without his hat. Pitch threw the other book-end for good measure, sent it this time with better aim through the glass in the front door after him. It landed on the porch amid a tinkle of broken glass.

Pitch threw herself full length on the couch in the living-room, and hammered the cushions with tight fists.

"You cheated me, God! You let him go away with Hattie's mouth on his, and he's mine, I tell you, he's *mine!*" She waited till the full impact of this had registered, and then out of the tumult of her mind she fashioned a cooler phrase.

"Save him for me. God, bring him back to me!"

Days and nights on a train, a jolting stop at last in the dark and sleepy soldiers swearing and gathering kit, officers with flashlights, tents in rows in a sea of sand amid the hills. Petawawa ... Horselines, gun manœuvres, march-past, salutes, spit and polish, "to-night's the night," trains again ... A march down the black-out streets of Halifax—"Don't they ever do anything in this army in the daylight!" a stumbling, scrambling trek up a steep gangplank into the grey lanes of a ship's deck, blackened port-holes, no lights, no cigarettes on deck, the smell of oil, kitchen fatigue, letters home to be posted on the other side....

A convoy of ships stealing across the ocean with human cargoes, submarine alarms, always the great grey cruiser ahead, her beams awash in the swell, a silent, imperturbable, unflinching guide that held them true and led them on.

Graveyard of the Atlantic. The last five hundred miles. The Irish Sea. Destroyers tearing around like motor boats, cutting through and around the convoy, racing across the ships' prows so close they must be cut in two, lean little grey-hounds of the British navy. Innumerable boats and smacks and the craziest craft of all time, pitching out here in the sea troughs where the destroyers and the convoy passed. The green hills of Ireland sliding silently by.

A sudden forest of masts and funnels, a city on the water, a city of boats. Then the narrowing shores, the Mersey, that incredible river, and the roll of the boat was gone. "I wasn't sick, only once!" "Yeh, once, all the way over!" Solid ground again.

Parade on the wharves, bands, short, crisp commands, quick march. A train with a popinjay engine that tooted always but never slackened speed, a train that often seemed flying, hardly touching the rails. Boisterous soldier songs rolling out of the open windows and assaulting the lovely countryside. Afternoon goes, evening goes. "It's dark now. Sure we'll stop now! They never do anything in daylight over here either."

"All out!"

"Number!" "One, two, three, four—" "By the right, quick march!" "It's a long way to Tipperary." "You may smoke." "Hell! Ain't they generous!"

Paved roads, hedges, open fields, huts, tents, soldiers' voices, smell of kitchens. "Halt!" Eight men to a tent, feet to the tent pole, head out toward the flap. A slashing wind in the night, the roar of the sea afar, rain such as never fell before. Tents down, soldiers swearing with rubber sheets over their shoulders. "Damn these Channel winds!" Reveille.

Bristling S.M. Innocent blue sky. "Quick march!" A glimpse of the sea, thatched roofs, chimney pots. Shorncliffe. Hythe. Over there, Folkestone. Beyond that, France. The guns! You can hear the rumble of them.

Chapter Seventeen

George wrote the letter finally, after weeks of Bo's coaxing. "If she's such a swell girl," demanded George suspiciously, "why don't you write her yourself?"

"My dear man, she's a friend of my sister. One simply doesn't write to a friend of one's sister. I've told you she wants to meet a nice Canadian soldier, with the proper endorsements. What more do you want?"

"Yes, but," George stalled. His heart thumped at the thought of such an adventure. What would you say to a girl you'd never seen before, and you knew nothing about her and she knew nothing about you?

"She'd be bored with me," he thought in dread. "I couldn't face it." And then he sat down and wrote to her on paper from the canteen. Her answer came two days later. Three others were lounging in front of the tent when the mail was distributed. George opened the letter with a staged frown. Thank heaven Bo wasn't there to grin at him.

It was a pretty envelope, addressed in a hand with a faint flourish, the hand of a girl who was used to writing. He would read it very casually, since the boys were around.

"Dear Gunner Battle—" He read it over and over again. He was to get leave "*please*," and she would meet him in London. "Do come! Sincerely, Joy Yorke."

George tried to be cynical about it. "Things don't just happen like that," he told himself. "Fast girls—" he flushed at the thought—"might be up to tricks. But she's not that kind, or she wouldn't be a friend of Bo's sister. Maybe English people are different. But she's Canadian born—Oh, well, maybe I'll never see her. Guess she won't care if I never do."

Bo came in and flopped down on his blanket roll. "Anybody get any parcels, or money from home, or anything?" Two or three grunts from the others, and his eyes were on George.

George thought, "I wish he wouldn't see through me like that."

"Like to ramble over to the canteen?" Bo yawned.

George got up, trying not to show too much alacrity. He had news that was bursting to be out. They walked across the parade ground. "The canteen's this way," said George.

"I don't need anything," Bo said. "What is it you wanted to show me? Was she glad to hear from you?"

George frowned. "I'd like to know how the hell—" he began, but Bo waved it aside.

"You sit there looking as sheepish as if you'd been caught with your hand in somebody's kit bag, your face as red as a spanked baby's bottom, and then ask me how—!"

"Well," said George defiantly, "I got a letter, and you made me write to Josephine, and her name's Joy."

"Just a nickname. They christened her Josephine Olive, and even they couldn't stand that, so they got to calling her Joey, and it finally got shortened down to Joy. Bubby started it, really, said those were her initials. You ought to go and see her."

George hedged: "Wonder how long we'll be sticking around here?"

"Long enough to get some leave, then you can run up to London. Only an hour or so."

"Oh, I'm afraid there won't be any more chances," said George hurriedly. He wished he had gone with Bo, to break the ice. Now he had to face it alone. With Bo, if necessary, he could have been one of those strong, silent men, and just listened to them. But now there was no such escape. That is, if he went, which he wouldn't, and did.

It was three weeks later that he yielded to Bo's suggestion. Half the battery, it was posted on the order board, could have short leave the next day from dismiss at four till drill parade the following morning.

"Look here, old boy, you can catch a train up to Victoria Station at five and be there in no time. That gives you the whole evening, and an early train back in the morning. I'll lend you a few bob if you're short."

"But maybe she won't be home." George sought a way out.

"Write her a note tonight and tell her you'll phone from the station. She'll be there."

"Gosh," said George doubtfully. And to himself: "I'll have to write the note. Don't want Bo to think I'm afraid. I'm really not."

He dutifully wrote the note, then sneaked it into his tunic pocket. "I might forget to post it," he told himself. When the battery mail was gathered, George's note was safely torn and deposited in the w.c. He hoped his face did not tell Bo the truth.

"I'll go over to the station with you," said Bo next day. "Got nothing to do till they tie on the nosebags. Sure you've got enough money?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," said George hastily. "Got a pound or two, guess that'll do." Why not tell Bo and be honest about it? No, no—better not do that.

"Take this along, anyway. You can pay me back later."

Bo stayed with him till George walked through the door into the tunnel under the tracks that led to the up-going trains. There was no way out, he knew. On the opposite platform, out of Bo's sight, he had an impulse to chuck it even yet. But the little train rushed in and stopped, and he automatically opened a carriage door and climbed in.

He kept his eyes steadily on the landscape as the train tore relentlessly through the Kentish fields. He could keep his mind nowhere. It was in a complete fluster. The trials ahead made his heart jump and his neck so hot that his tunic choked. Soon the long grey rows of housetops began to thicken; the chimney pots with their inverted rain shields slid by on a level with the train window. Oh, well, London was large, and it would take a long time to get to Victoria Station yet.

But the train leaped along the elevated track as if the devil were chasing it. George fought to compose himself, and the tell-tale signs showed there was little time left. Must face the music now.

The train was slackening, with that smooth abruptness that only an English train seemed to achieve. The long sheds were now overhead and the city rose above and around them. Rows on rows of tracks spread to either side, and soon the stone platforms and the pillars slid by.

Now the train had stopped, and George's tongue moved in a dry mouth. The voices of the guards were outside. George pushed open the door, and blindly followed the people who strode so fast along the platform, many of them soldiers.

"They all have some place to go and they're dying to get there," he thought forlornly.

It was a long walk to the steel gates, but, lag as he tried, it seemed only an instant before he was through them, steeling himself past the impersonal glances of porters, past the mercifully unseeing eyes of the throngs of people, half of them rushing to catch trains.

George walked stonily toward a sign that said telephones. He wished that he might not see it, that he might by some happy chance walk by it and find himself in the street, out there where the rush of London made a friendly pandemonium, and where a man wouldn't have to tie himself down to an ordeal. Out there in the kindly friendlessness of the crowds where nobody knew him and nobody cared.

George approached a booth, and saw to his relief that it was occupied. It was a good omen. "Maybe that's a sign to lay off this adventure," he thought perspiringly. "What did I want to go and listen to Bo for? Might've known he'd get me in a fix."

With a fierce and bitter longing he thought of Bo's perfect ease in any company, be it officers, sergeants, women. He was about to walk away when a kindly stranger nudged him and pointed to a booth door that had just opened. He said thanks mechanically. The last escape was cut off. He felt his forehead oozing, and took off his cap as he closed the booth door on himself. Where was the number Bo had given him? Oh, if he had only lost it! Accusingly the paper rustled in his fingers when he thrust them into his pocket. He read it in a blind terror, and then he had the receiver off and was asking for it.

The phone girl's voice was cool and composed as she repeated the number after him, and he heard a dreadful click that told of the connection. He stared at the instrument in front of him. A voice. His heart was thumping in his ribs now. The phone girl. "Please deposit sixpence."

"Oh, yes!—I forgot about—Got it right—here—" He was aware that his voice was hoarse and hardly human. The phone girl repeated her request firmly, politely, with no change of inflection.

George's hand in his pocket closed on a coin. He was trembling so much he dare not trust his voice now. What a fool she'd think him. Must get a grip on himself somehow. A treacherous thought slid away from his finger-tips, up his arm, into his brain.

"Darn it—" he gulped. "Guess I—have to get—some change. G'bye." He groped the receiver back to its place on the hook, pushed the door open and charged out of the suffocating booth.

"She probably wasn't home anyway," he told himself fiercely. "And even if she was, what's she care about me? Bored to death to have to put up with me, but she'd do it for Bo. English people are like that. Good job I tore that note up. Wish there was a pub near. Ho, here we are, I'll just lift one. I need it."

He laughed nervously, inside him. "Might get some Dutch courage," he admitted to himself, then marched in with all the nonchalance he had. "Double Scotch," he told the barmaid with a flourish, and dropped half a crown on the bar. The place was half full of soldiers and sailors. Two elderly men were talking by themselves. George looked at them all with studied carelessness. None of these people knew his secret. He was safe.

A soldier next to him raised his glass. George saw with a momentary uneasiness that he was a Canadian. "Here's to good old Blighty," said the soldier to his comrade. "If I don't go on a binge tonight, then I made a mistake, and this ain't London at all."

His companion looked at him with good-natured pity. "Is that all you wanted on leave," he demanded scornfully. "Me, I'm gonna be respectable."

"Hi, there, Canada!" barked one of them. "Whatcha with? C.F.A., eh. Whazzat? Can't find Annie, haw haw! Have a drink."

George had three with them, and the fine reel in his head made him blissfully forgetful. He began methodically to measure in his eye the distance to the door, and to memorize the direction. The binge-man's eyes were glazing; he hung to the bar with one hand and heroically kept his balance. "Gotta find woman. Give us drink, shister." The barmaid caught his companion's wink, made to take away his glass, then pushed it back just behind his elbow.

George shook hands elaborately with the other. "Must go now—got to see a man—"

"Ho, ho! He's gotta see a man! Why, you didn't finish your drink." George obediently finished his drink. He felt he ought to repay the man in some way, so he ordered more Scotch. Then all three took turns ordering.

George went with his new friends, weaving through the street. He had one fleeting recollection of being in Whitehall, singing, and then they rambled on. The binge-man broke out often and impatiently, but his companion warned him: "Sh-sh! I know where to go." And then the other man took it up, and presently they all went steadily along, saying: "Sh-sh-sh! He knows where to go—Haw haw!"

George laughed openly now. How solemn the people looked. What would they say if they knew he was bound for high adventure abroad with total strangers in London, on a binge?

Then they turned off the street, guided by the man who did not demand a binge, and George saw an open door. Beside it, an inverted red-and-white triangle of the Y.M.C.A.

"Sno—hic—binge in here!" objected the seeker.

"Sh-sh. I gotta get my money, don't I? Can't leave it here all night."

They went arm in arm into the hut. The man whispered to the attendant, who nodded, then they passed long rows of cots covered with grey blankets, some of them occupied.

All at once they stopped, and the man pushed the binge-seeker down gently on the cot. "Sit down a minute while I go get my money."

"Hurry up an'—gotta have a binge," murmured the other.

Behind him, the other man put his finger to his mouth as a warning gesture to George. Then he pulled back the blankets of an adjoining cot, climbed in fully dressed, and turned on his side.

George caught on. "I'm to pretend I go to bed, too," he thought. He saw no empty cot near, so he sidled around behind the binge-man's, sat down and waited. The binge-hunter went swiftly to sleep. George marvelled at the acting of his companion.

His thoughts strayed to the letter from Joy again. He'd like to read it again here. He patted the pocket that held it. Presently his companion would decide the binge-man was safely asleep and they would sneak out. "Life's funny," he thought. "Never saw this fellow before, and here we are as if we'd been friends all our lives. Regular sort, too."

He fell to dreaming again, wondered about Joy, and tried to recall what he had been so frightened about, since he felt no fear now at all.

He stared at his companion who was feigning sleep, then at the woman-seeker. Surely it must be safe now. He nudged the man cautiously. The man did not budge. George eyed him with qualified suspicion for a second or two, then shook him a little more strongly. The man puckered his face.

"It's okay to get up now," George whispered.

"Like hell'tis. Ain't shentry—on leave—go way." And he heaved himself contentedly to his other side.

George unwillingly realized the truth. So this was the end of the adventure! In a Y.M.C.A. hut! He peered at his watch. Eleven o'clock! Too late now for a pub. No use going out and wandering by himself; no fun in that.

Disgusted, he looked around for a cot, and was about to lie down when he remembered the attendant. So he sneaked up the aisle. The man was dozing over a magazine.

"Can I get a bed?" whispered George.

The dozer awakened slightly. "Take anything you can find, brother," he said. "Better leave me your sixpence now."

"I've got to get a train for Shorncliffe first thing in the morning. Will you call me at six?"

"Sure, call you at five, if you want. Makes no difference to me."

George thought of Bo as he lay back under the grey blanket, and of the story he must invent.

He still hadn't thought of it when he reached the tent next morning. The boys were all shining boots and bandoliers.

"Well," Bo greeted him, "If here isn't our prodigal son, home in time for the parade."

After the customary greetings and unwashed jokes from the others, Bo steered him aside, "How'd you make out?"

"Not very well," George began, appearing crestfallen.

Bo looked at him with a suspicion of a laugh, but he said: "How come, didn't you hit it off?"

George looked sorrowful. "No. Fact is, I didn't even find her. I phoned her, but she wasn't in."

"Oh? That's too bad. She'll be no end let down when she finds out."

"Oh, no," George protested hastily. "Don't ever tell her, will you?"

"All right, I won't. So you went out on a bender on your own, eh? Painted the town red, I hope?"

"Yes, met a couple of fellows, and we went to some pubs."

"And got roary-eyed?"

"Yes," George made a gesture as if that were nothing. "And then we went out to see some girls the fellow knew."

"Which fellow?"

"Oh, just one of the two."

"Which one, the tall one or the short one?"

"Well, there were just two, and you wouldn't know them anyway."

"What were they, Imperials?"

"Oh, no, Canadians."

"Artillery or infantry?"

"No—no," George hesitated. "I mean—artillery."

"What battery?"

"Say-ay, that's funny," George laughed nervously. "I never even asked them."

"What division were they?"

"Division?—Oh, Third, I guess. Yes, Third."

"What were their names?"

"Oh, one called the other Bill, and he called the other, Jim."

"Gad! Jim and Bill, eh? We ought to know those two. Let's see, now. Jim—and—Bill—Hmmm!"

"Oh, I never asked their last names, if that's what you mean," George protested.

"So you did the town up brown, eh? Where did you finally wind up?"

"Oh, some place off the Strand. I forget the name."

"Gad, too bad you missed Joy. Wish you'd seen her. Might be your last chance."

"Yes, I certainly was disappointed. Tried two or three times, too, but no answer."

Bo paused with the button brush raised in the air. Suddenly he laughed, a loud, dismaying guffaw that chilled George with alarm.

"Haw haw haw! Ho ho ho!" Then, just as suddenly as he had started, Bo stopped and fixed George with a stern and paternal stare.

"What's the matter?" demanded George suspiciously.

"I was just laughing at the London telephone service. Awful, what!"

"Oh, I guess they got the number all right, but there was nobody in."

"Too bad. Parents out, Joy out, even the maid out!"

"Well, there was no reason to stay in, particularly, I guess." George's face began to look sombre.

"No, except that there's always somebody home. And to make doubly sure, I phoned Joy at her office yesterday afternoon and she said she'd wait in all evening. George, I've heard some sticky alibis in my time, but you win the fur-lined soup spoon."

"What for? What d'you mean?"

"For being the poorest liar in the army. Don't ever commit a crime, George. That face of yours would give you away in no time."



Chapter Eighteen

A man was a recruit one month, a veteran the next. And so it was with George, who in the first year of his service learned that he had said good-bye to Hal for ever.

It was in the Christmas season of 1916 that he had spent in France, and he had found on a brief trip of his battery to a rest camp that Hal's battalion was near by. He had gone to visit him, and they told him then of the strafe where Hal had died.

Gone! He grasped it slowly, unwillingly. Gone was his own youth, too, and many other things besides. Gone were the nightmares of the Somme, that dragged its murderous, muddy banks dog-legged through northern France and spilled the blood of a million soldiers into the patient sea.

Gone was the battle of Jutland. Folded up into gallant history was Brusiloff's offensive, and the Czar's men were rolled back into the maw of a Red revolution. Gone was Kitchener, his ghost to haunt the romantic sleuths of rumour for years to come. Gone was Asquith, and the fiery, little, white-maned Welshman was in his place.

Gone was the thought of peace for America, already at war. Gone was Nivelle, making way for Petain, who saved the country only to give it away a generation later.

Gone was Bo to Blighty with a gash in the ribs from a shell splinter. George saw him get it when a black one burst near him, and was first to pick him up. Bo started to shrug, "Nicked, I guess," and collapsed. He stirred again long enough to say, "Won't get a Blighty out of this," and that was just what he did get.

Gone was Andree in the Coq d'Or, with the smile and the eyes that haunted you, a pale memory in the march of war, a rugged, shrugging little French girl who laughed off the jokes of a thousand soldiers. In the still night the memory of her came back to George with an intensity that made him squirm. He would write to her, in his laborious French—but then the thought of an officer reading those words overcame him, and the letter never did get posted.

"There'll always be leave. Maybe I can get a pass and go and see her."

But how could he face the boys in the battery if he took leave and went off to see a French peasant in a little estaminet beside a cesspool? George had once perspired at thought of Red Dall's guffaw, at the silent scorn of Bill Dunn, at the noisy profanity of Streak Johnson. Often, in hogaboon or bivvy, they discussed leave. Paris, said Streak, and that meant such a torrent of contempt from the others that George ruled out the estaminet, and dismissed the Coq d'Or as a wild and childish dream. If only Bo were here to help him decide, to give him advice. The memory of Andree faded again, in the turmoil and grief and toil of the war.

Bo Charlton came back at last from Blighty, and George had need of him, for suddenly he and Dunn were all that were left of the original gun crew.

Red Dall had gone. He and Dunn tossed for the sentry shifts from midnight till morning. Red had won, and with a good-natured jeer had sent Dunn out for the graveyard shift while he slept. Before Dunn had finished and come back, Red's hogaboon had disappeared in a shell explosion.

Streak Johnson was gone, died with a smile and a good-natured oath on his lips when a shell fragment tore his head from his body. Only one of George's Three Bombardiers was left, and he now silent, moody, surly at times, philosophical at others, patient with new gunners, a sergeant now in charge of number three gun, and George was limber gunner, the thing he had dreamed to be. But the sweetness had gone sour in his mouth. He had not asked for it at such a price, the price of this precious and profane comradeship of the guns.

Well he remembered when Dunn and he dug the remains of Red Dall out of the tangle of sandbags and corrugated iron, and Dunn pronounced his epitaph: "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away." That was the nearest George ever knew Dunn to come to reverence, and the solemn impact of it went deep. And yet, now, the Lord had brought Bo back to him again. Back after the Passchendaele Ridge was history, with its sad tree skeletons, its lonesome pillboxes, its bloody and murderous mud, its ghostly mists laden with the foul and eternal stink of gas and cordite and dead men. Passchendaele, taken at the cost of half a million lives, to be lost again without a fight. Passchendaele, a passion of death beyond the Menin Gate.

George and Bo adjourned to an estaminet, for George wanted Bo to himself a brief time.

He looked upon him with awe, upon this man who had lived through a grievous wound. "And I haven't even a scratch yet," he thought.

"Now, tell me what's been going on since I've been away," said Bo.

"Oh, nothing much, outside of Red and Streak getting it. Just the same old things—"

"You're a cheerful liar," Bo said. "Put in for leave yet?"

George shook his head. "No; guess I'll get it anyway, when my turn comes. Got to have at least one original around the gun."

"Rubbish! You see that it comes your turn, and take it. You've been here the best part of two years, and have been cheated out of one leave already because you wouldn't stand up for it."

"I got one rest camp," George objected, "down to Boulogne."

"Not the same. Get your leave."

The word brought up George's bothersome question. "I can't talk about it to the others," he thought. And he blurted out: "That reminds me, where d'you think a fellow should go?"

"Where else would you go?"

"You mean Blighty? I know, of course. Still there's Paris."

"Listen, George. Tell me what's on your mind. If a fellow's going to Paris he knows what he wants and he doesn't talk about it to his best friends. He just makes up his mind. Am I clear?"

"Well," George spoke with defensive asperity. "I guess you'll think I'm crazy, but there was that little girl at the estaminet—you know—where we were when we came to the battery—"

"The Coq d'Or. Don't pretend to me you forget her name."

"I kind of thought I ought to go back some time. Cricket, you know."

"What's a French girl got to do with cricket? Forget about it, old boy. It's a long war, and a long war means a lot of soldiers—Sit down! old horse. You don't have to defend her honour. Remember, these estaminet people are making more money out of soldiers than they ever did before. What for? So they can marry Canadian soldiers? Don't make me laugh. And don't be fooled about the breed. Good people, but just nothing in common with you or the people you know. Forget it, George! Go back to London and drink some good Scotch whiskey, see some good shows, 'Chu Chin Chow,' George Robey and Violet Lorraine at the Palladium, Lupino, your old favourite Grock. Get this whole French thing out of your mind and out of your system. You're on your first big adventure—"

"Oh, I've been around," George boasted manfully.

"—and don't make a hash of it," Bo went on. "Now go back for a couple of weeks and meet people who speak English. Take a good dose of salts and get this bully beef and Maconachie out of your system. Go and meet Joy, if she'll still see you, and I'll guarantee you'll wonder what in God's name was wrong with you."

"I guess you saw her a lot over there," said George, trying not to look interested.

"Certainly I saw her. Stayed at their flat after I left hospital."

"And told her all about me, I suppose," George sulked. "Told her what a yokel I was. Had a great laugh at my expense, I suppose."

"Yes, old thin-skin! If that's what you want, I'll tell you. I did tell her all about you, and how green you were when we came over first, and how fast you took hold, and weren't afraid of anything—"

"Except her," said George morosely.

Bo laughed, and called for more *vin blanc*. "She'll think all the more of you for that."

"She won't get a chance," said George firmly. "Not after you told her. I'm not going over there and be made a joke of."

"Well, now that's settled," applauded Bo, "you and I are going to clean up at crown and anchor and get us a board."

"What for?"

"Make some money for you to go on leave to London and show Joy a good time."

"I'm not going, I told you."

George landed in London with twenty pounds from his pay, the maximum he could draw, plus another thirty he and Bo had made with their crown and anchor board, which Bo had forced on him. He had a new uniform from the Q.M., had gone to the bath to get a clean shirt and underwear, and by luck drew new issue. It was the twentieth of December, and he would have Christmas and New Year's on leave.

He had explicit instructions from Bo. He was to telephone, and was to suggest Nelson's monument as a meeting-place.

Bo was taking no chances this time. "If George welshes," he wrote to Joy, "you mention that place."

It was gathering dusk when the train slid in over the familiar fog-shrouded roofs, and George braced himself for the ordeal which he dared not bolt this time. Again the train reached Victoria with its merciless speed. The hands on the big clocks pointed accusingly at the hour. Four-thirty. He must phone Joy before five at the office, Bo told him, or wait till after six when she would be home.

"I'm a bit shaky," George thought. "Maybe I ought to have a double Scotch—pick me up."

The accusing voice of Bo: "And no drinks beforehand. I don't want any drunks meeting my sister's best friend, nor any fake alibis like the last one." Sadly George yielded the idea of a pub. He paused before a news stand, pretended to be engrossed, but read nothing because it was all racing in front of his eyes.

Then suddenly he had marched to a phone booth and rung the number. Perspiration again was running down his neck. His hand on the receiver was a wet and shaking hand. A pleasant musical voice answered him, with a slight accent, rather like Bo's—a friendly accent that narrowed the O from a circle to an ellipse.

George stumbled through some words. Her voice came back with quick interest. "Mr. Battle—or should I call you Gunner? And you're really on leave at last!"

"Yes, really—I was wondering—I'd like to see you," George lied. "Could we—could we arrange a meeting somewhere?" following Bo's coaching.

"Why, yes, I'd simply love to," said the voice, also following Bo's coaching. Silence a few seconds, the voice waited. It was George's turn. He knew what to say next, for he had it memorized; but his face was working, his voice on strike. The voice helped:

"May I suggest something? Perhaps I know London a little better."

"Why, yes," George gulped thankfully, and swallowed a lump as big as his gas mask. "I guess you could. H-how about Nelson's monument?"

"Isn't that a coincidence! I was just going to suggest that myself."

"The—the corner nearest the Strand," George plunged on desperately.

"Splendid. What time will suit you?"

"I don't know—any time, I guess," George swallowed again. "What time would suit you?"

"Shall we say five-fifteen? That will give you time, and I'm quite close."

"Y-yes—I mean, fine. And how'll I—How shall we—"

She laughed. It was a laugh with a brook tinkling through it, George realized. "I wear a long, medium-grey coat and hat to match. But that won't be enough. Tell you what. I'll tie a little white ribbon in the left lapel. I shall know you by your badges and the picture Bo showed me. I'm sure we shall have no trouble."

"Yes, I'll be there. Yes, five-fifteen—Nelson's monument—yes, and thank you! Good-bye."

George hung up the receiver, a bigger man than when he had taken it down, but appalled at what he had done, fighting with a momentary panic which bade him to run even yet. Then he suddenly stuck out his chest and walked into the throng of people to check his kit at the Y.M.C.A. hut where he would come later to sleep. He was a man now, a man with an important mission. He wondered if people saw the set look on his face.

To George, at that moment, Pitch was writing:

... Harry tells me they are opening up leave again, so I guess by this time you may be getting yours. You have been there so long! And I have had oh, so few letters from you. (How many do you write to your other girls?)

Harry says that nearly all the boys go back to London for their leave, just a few going to Paris. Of course, there is nowhere else to go. But I imagine you will have enough of French people, and when you have the chance you will want to get back among people who talk your language. How I would love to be with you in London! Nobody is nicer than an English girl, for a change. But of course they wouldn't wear so well, since their ways are different, and I imagine would get on your nerves after a while. Everything is frightfully this or awfully that!

A friend of Harry's (Pitch invented one without blushing) was invalided home. He had married a lovely English girl, and now something has come up and for some reason she can't come to join him until after the war. And the funny part of it is, that he says he wishes the war would go on for ever! You are different, Georgie mine! If you lost your heart to an English girl you'd stick to her, even if you had to settle down and live over there and she bored you to tears. That's your nature. Or if you brought her over here it wouldn't even change your loyalty to find her different to the people you know. I guess they rather look down on us colonials, but don't let that spoil your leave. Just ask them what they think you're over there fighting and giving the best years of your life for!

Pitch read it over with satisfaction. Harry's account of London had been too glowing, but this allayed her anxiety a bit.

George walked importantly to the washrooms and cleaned himself, wet and smoothed out his hair. He put on his cap at a slightly rakish angle, and was glad of its sophisticated, veteran appearance compared to the stiff, wired thing he had worn when he came overseas.

Filled with new dignity, he boldly called a porter in front of the station, and sent him off up the endless string of taxis to hold a car for him. He rejected the bus, which would take him up to Victoria Road and Whitehall, for he feared it might get held up for some reason. He tipped the porter a shilling and sat back in the taxi. It gave him a brief feeling of command. He descended at the square to find he was twenty minutes early. He was sorry now he'd been in such a hurry. People looked hostile, and none had a rendezvous here. He watched the endless sway of traffic, especially the double-deckers as they swung ominously to the curb with the eternal certainty that they must upset.

He was in the exact place. He feared to stand there and stare, so he walked deliberately to another corner of the monument's base, then back and back again, and gazed at the dark stone fronts with their endless armoury of commerce.

"She might be a little late," he told himself hopefully. "I hope there was no misunderstanding about the place," he went on lying. "Still, I could wait—"

He saw a girl in a long grey coat. Lots of girls would wear grey coats, he told himself vengefully. Why hadn't he got some better signal? He walked along the edge of the curb past her, and pretended to be absorbed in some mythical sign. But though his head was averted, he could see her from the corner of his eye, like detectives he'd read about. He hoped he would not see what he looked for, and he saw it—a white bow of ribbon tied into her left lapel.

He saw, above that, a grey fur-trimmed hat perched above eager, unafraid eyes examining people. He saw her eyes rest on him for an instant, her face illumined from the war-time lights above, and his heart bounded into his throat and suffocated him. He hesitated, made to pull his greatcoat collar up and remembered it was not raining. He glanced desperately to right and left for a way out. This could not be *her*! This could not happen to *him*! There was a catch in it. Not this lovely creature, meeting an unknown Canadian at Nelson's monument! No, no—

She spoke in cool, comfortable accent. "Perhaps we are looking for each other?"

"Yes—Do you know me—I mean, do you know Bo—Fred Charlton? That is—"

She laughed, and it was the laugh that had come to him on the phone, a thousand times more magical than any other sound.

"Thank heaven, I'm not wrong!" How could she contrive to get so much music into a voice! "And you are really George Battle?"

"Why, yes, I'm—Oh, yes, Miss—Miss Yorke. Is that right?"

"Quite. But Bo told me to make very sure, so please give me your regimental number?"

George did. Joy held out her hand to him. George took it reverently and awkwardly, and wondered what you did in London. Maybe you kissed it. He shook it instead.

"I'm glad to—it's a pleasure—" said George.

"I'm delighted," said the voice.

"It's—you're—Here we are!" said George eloquently.

She tried to hide the excitement in her own voice. Her laugh betrayed her, came too readily, and George hoped she would never stop it, for he could listen to that melody for ever. When her hand tightened on his arm he was thankful and reassured and proud, and had no way of knowing that she was hanging on for dear life. It was a signal to walk.

She spoke again. "Let's confess! We're both frightened out of our lives, aren't we? Bo has been telling me so much of you."

"Yes—yes. And he's told me so much about you," said George. "But—but he didn't—"

"Nothing too frightful, I hope?"

"But he's simply no good at—description," George gulped bravely, and hoped his cold effrontery wouldn't spoil it all.

"Oh, but am I so terrifying as all that!" And with the lights in her face, his eyes devoured the dimples that her smile revealed.

"She must know she's the prettiest thing that ever walked!" he thought in haste. He found himself saying: "I say, we shouldn't stand here, should we? Perhaps we could eat, don't you think?" And then he thought that the abrupt way he brought up the subject of food wasn't in good form, either, and he rushed to add:

"I mean, you know, it's so much nicer to think of talking to you where it's quieter—and where I can see you better."

"Oh, indeed, yes, and you must be starving! I fancy you haven't eaten all day, have you?"

He suggested Lyons, and when he asked her if she thought that was good enough for her, she laughed and said that was where all soldiers went sooner or later, and the roast beef was especially good, and who could be in England without roast beef.

He revered their hour together there. He had forgotten his shyness in the magic of her company. He even forgot to remember that his table manners might trick him and reveal the coarse, good-natured manners of the gun crew, to whom lusty hunger lent a refinement beyond etiquette and beyond words.

An adventurous, confusing, amazing, ravishing, memorable hour of his life, he knew it was. It was a sweet agony to be

there with her, to feel the flattering scrutiny of her eyes on him, and to wonder if those eyes were blue or grey, and how they could change in a moment from serenity to laughing mischief.

She had an impulsive, possessive gesture when about to speak, of touching his hand or his arm swiftly, and her voice would be as if it were for him alone and always had been so. As if for good measure, when he sought to find what English girls thought of Canadians, she reminded him that she herself was Canadian born—in Victoria—and that her parents had returned to England when she was ten.

And then they went to the Alhambra to see Jose Collins in "The Maid of the Mountains," and Joy produced two tickets which she said her boss, Colonel Gregory, had given her, as he couldn't use them. Joy lied brightly and bravely, and she had a perfect alibi when George suggested "Chu Chin Chow" at His Majesty's. For, of course, there would be no tickets at that time of evening, and she was able to tell him so.

At the theatre George swiftly gave himself up to a delirium of delight. The fate of Baldosarre and the distress of the Maid formed a fascinating overtone along with the robbers and the music. But all of them together were mere tinsel and thin air compared to the proud and possessive frenzy of happiness it gave him to be there with Joy at his side, to know that she was exquisitely the girl of all his dreams, and his alone.

Sometimes, when her knee would touch his, in the darkened stalls, an electric, almost unbearable thrill ran through him. He longed to have it repeated, tried to arrange it casually, was appalled at his own daring, and bewitched when she did not draw away. And presently, as he hoped they would, her fingers touched his, and he held his arm rigid in case it were accidental and the slightest move might cause her to draw her hand away.

When Jose Collins sang "Love Will Find a Way," he wondered if it had a message for him. It was the most wonderful song he had ever heard, because this time Joy's little finger stole over the top of his hand, and linked itself around one of his, and stayed there. He'd thought vaguely to himself when the famous Collins sang first, "Pitch can sing better than that, I bet—oh, that's crazy." And he wondered what Joy would say if he told her. Nod politely and say, "Really?"

But what would Pitch say if he told her about Joy! If she could see them there now, and he holding Joy's hand! He took a grim satisfaction out of the thought. He was beyond Pitch's reach here. He felt that he would always want to be beyond her reach by the only way he knew, of having Joy beside him.

And he thought of Hattie, too. Now these chorus girls—he stuck loyally to Hattie. But maybe all these girls were famous, or understudies, or something.

All these thoughts raced swiftly, and were banished half-formed. Only one thing mattered, the tingling intoxication of Joy, the faint perfume that seemed indefinably to be especially for her. Once, when she leaned to whisper something to him, her hair brushed his face lightly, and he moved still further into Paradise. And the spell of it, and the spell of Jose Collins' gorgeous voice, brought moods to meet. Here, he realized, was an outpouring of emotion, yearning and beauty and a lovely thing of life, and that it must never end. But the song did end. Joy drew her fingers away, and turned starry, excited eyes to him, and George trembled.

"Isn't she splendid?" Joy whispered, and George nodded gratefully.

"She's wonderful," he said, intending a low tone, but his voice was hoarsened with emotion, and his words came out roughly. His heart pounded in his throat with the knowledge that he was going to add: "But not nearly so wonderful as you are!" He whispered it to those starry eyes in the half light.

Now that it was said, he knew he had been working up courage for it the last hour. His forehead was moist, and he was rewarded by a quick pressure from her knee against his. Joy shook her head with a pretended frown, and her lips framed the words: "Mustn't say that!" But behind the faint frown was the shadow of a smile, a wistful smile.

The show ended, as he knew it must and prayed it wouldn't, and his first solace was that he could help her gather her coat around her shoulders. For one blissful moment he leaned close to help.

"Can I—see you home?" George asked, as they came out. He wondered how you went about getting a taxi in this crowd. And Joy said:

"I think you certainly may, thank you. But we'll get your bags first, shall we?"

"My—bags? But they're at the Y.M.C.A. hut, at Victoria Station," he objected.

"Then shall we walk that far—It isn't far, really, and it would be fun, if you'd like it?"

"Like it! I'd love it! But why not just—leave them there? I have to come back there anyway." He was struggling with a thought that seemed too wonderful to be permissible.

Joy confirmed it. "But, George," and it occurred to him that without effort they had been calling each other George and Joy for hours, "there are things in them you'll need, aren't there? That is, if you'll come—and you will, won't you?"

Her arm tightened in his in a sudden appeal, and he thought there was a fleeting look of anxiety behind her smile.

"Do you mean," he asked incredulously, "that I'm really to come home with you and—and stay there?"

"Oh, yes, you must!" And there was something of finality about it, as if nothing else were thinkable.

"But, Joy," he lingered over her name as if he would fondle it, "that's lovely, and it's too good to be true. But what would your—your mother say if you landed home with a strange and homeless soldier like me?"

"My dear, what would she say if I didn't! Oh, George, we've been counting on this so much. You must come, just as Bo does. This is your home, with us, if you'll have it."

So they found themselves walking, they two alone amid the crowds, along the Mall, which Joy explained to his question was not Pall Mall, and past St. James's Park. At last she pointed out to him the rambling, shrouded skyline of Buckingham Palace, and George told her, with his new-found courage:

"That's where you should be living, isn't it?"

"As if our flat in Kensington isn't large enough!" she laughed. "But why should I live here?"

"Because you're a queen—every inch of you," and he hoped he disguised the thrill in his voice at measuring her by inches.

Her laughter was like the quick mirth of a mountain stream, and he could be pardoned for feeling that her soft intake of breath that followed, as if drawing some of the laughter back to her, was the sweetest music also.

"You'll spoil me, George. Maybe I shouldn't take you home with me after all." And George hoped and felt that his brief lyrical venture had been not entirely a failure.

"But I mean it," he insisted, afraid to push the subject too far and too fast, yet afraid to let it go lest he not achieve it again. "I meant queenly qualities."

"So queenly that you wouldn't come to see me before?" Joy asked, and in the lamp glow he could see that she was smiling.

"Maybe I was afraid—afraid I wouldn't measure up."

"It's I who won't measure up, I'm afraid," Joy said very decisively.

"But you do, of course. I know that, taking me in as if I mattered. That's just it! It's being conscious of the needs of people who are in need and—and making them feel welcome when they didn't expect to—I mean when they didn't have any reason to expect to be."

"But you have—every reason," and Joy searched his face closely in the dim light of the street. "It's you who have the kingly qualities, coming over here, thousands of miles, to fight for what you believe. Isn't that it?"

"I'm afraid not—quite," George admitted, and he grinned to relieve his embarrassment. "Fact is, I came over because I wanted to shoot off guns. And now I'm here I want to stay, because I've met you," he finished in desperate haste, as if afraid he'd lose the courage of saying so.

"You're being modest," Joy told him. "You haven't told me half—yet. Bo told me about your being afire with ideals, and I know it's so. And about your writing. I think it's all very wonderful."

"Oh, that! I'm afraid it's all very putrid," George confessed, exaggerating his own deprecation. "But I did want to see England, and to see the wonderful people that live here and make history, and now I've seen the most wonderful of all, and I want to write such great things...."

A maid answered the door, where George stood with an inclination to weak and quaking knees beside Joy. The maid called Joy "Miss" and looked as if her name might be Dora.

Joy called her Dora.

The maid said to George: "May I take your cap and coat, sir?"

George gave it to her obediently, and said, "Thank you."

Dora said: "May I take your bag, sir?"

"Thank you," George mumbled again, "I could really—" He bit the words off, for he had been going to say "—take them myself." He hoped Joy hadn't noticed. She paid no attention.

"Now come in and see mother," Joy said, and he was glad she took him by the hand, even lightly, as they went into the subdued light of the room with its soft rug, its fireplace, its reading lamps, its pictures and its general feeling of luxury. Joy left him to run ahead and kiss the cheek of the woman who came toward them.

And then Joy was saying, "This is Bo's friend at last, Mother!"

Mrs. Yorke was Joy's height, a slim, almost girlish figure, moving with that same grace that had so entranced him with Joy. Her hand which she held out to him was slim, shapely, beautiful. Her hair, drawn back from her brows and gathered at the back, was ever so slightly flecked with grey, but her face was without wrinkles.

One look in her eyes told where Joy had come by her elusive but never far away flash of mischief. They were the same eyes, and yet not the same. There was a restfulness here, an indefinable quality that did not belong to youth, yet was too utterly lively for age. Here was a woman who unconsciously commanded respect and affection, who was trusted and knew where to trust, one to whom economic and family security were natural and unquestioned factors of life.

George looked into her face and wondered why he was not afraid any more, and heard her welcome him and thank him for sparing so much time for her daughter. Then she made him sit by the fire, and hoped that Joy was not tiring him out, and asked him to smoke.

Joy, disdainful of a big chair, was perched on a stool in front of the fire, her legs folded under her, a pose that did her such attractive justice that George tried not to keep staring at her. His eyes refused to obey him. Every time he drew them away, they swung back as if tethered.

Dora brought in hot chocolate, and George balanced a small cup and saucer on his knee. They talked about father in the same way as they talked of themselves, as if George were a part of them.

"Father belongs to the old crocks," Joy said.

"They're the volunteer service corps, of older men," Mrs. Yorke explained to his relief. "Father's been assigned to Manchester for the present, in the transportation division. He has to do with the scheduling of trucks and lorries—I'm afraid I really know very little about it. But it's you we must hear about, George."

The warm, natural use of his first name thrilled him. He saw with envy the deft hands of Joy's mother moving the china, and hoped his own dugout habits would not betray him. He felt the gracious spell of the household that drew him into it and made him conscious that he had always belonged.

He drank his chocolate with a young soldier's appetite, but refused a second cup because he dreaded the balancing ordeal over again. Joy sprang up to get his cup and to light his cigarette for him. It brought her so near that his fingers, holding the cigarette to his lips, were trembling.

They asked his opinions of the war, and he was flattered. He gave them with caution, feeling they were of no importance.

"Father says the war will last for one to two years more," Joy said. "Do you really think it will?"

He almost wished it might, if it meant more leaves in London. They made him feel that his coming had been an exciting event and that it was they—not he—who were honoured.

How different, this, to Pitch, who asked no one's opinion, least of all his; who guided every situation and ruled everyone her own way.

But he brushed the memory of Pitch away, and because it would not go easily, he did it roughly. For suddenly every moment that Pitch intruded here was a loss and a penalty.

"May I show George where he's to sleep, Mother?"

"Certainly, dear; and do see that Dora has left everything needed. I'm sure poor George must be exhausted, trotting all over London with you."

"Come along, George," and Joy took him by the arm, into a room that was so luxurious that he felt it must be her own. He felt clumsy and out of place in it, and his kitbag and boots looked grotesque. Most incredible of all was the monstrous deep bed, with the expensive-looking eiderdown comforter gathered artistically over it.

"Like it?" asked Joy.

"It's terribly nice!"

"It's father's. Bo slept here when he came to see us. I'll show you how the windows open. You just undo the catch and push out."

She moved around, deftly making minor adjustments that only a woman would think of, and he was tortured by the longing to touch her. It wouldn't do, even accidentally.

"Now, I'll show you the bath," said Joy. "Dora's put some towels in for you, and I hope the wretched janitor hasn't forgotten the hot water." She led him into the ornate bathroom and tried the tap, then picked up a bar of soap and held it behind her. "Now, when you're all prettied, come right out and talk to mother and me."

George realized he was to take a bath before he retired to his magnificent bedroom.

"Catch, George!"

She held out a clenched hand, and out of it flew the slippery bar of soap, fair at his face. He ducked, and it fell in the corner.

"Oh, sorry," said George, and bent to get it, just as Joy pounced for it also. They collided on their knees on the floor, and George seized her to save her from bumping her head on the wall. Joy laughed, a little breathlessly. He had his hands on her shoulders, and their faces were terrifyingly close.

He straightened up swiftly, and reached for her hand to help her. "I'm pretty awkward," he suggested.

"Not awkward, George, but you need lessons at soap-fighting. I'll teach you. That's Bo's game, and he and I have great fights. I scored the last one on him, with lots of lather on it, and he got even by dropping it down my neck. Ta-ta, now, we'll be waiting for you."

She danced out of the room and waved as she closed the door.

George stared after her, and then at his own startled and ludicrous expression in the mirror. He thought of the rough-and-tumbles she would have with Bo, and felt that such freedom must be a thing afar from him. But he blushed with thankful comfort at Joy's thoughtfulness, and her easy tact in showing him where to go.

Joy trotted in beside her mother, bent over and said: "And that, Mama, is our new friend at last. What do you think of him?"

"He's very polite, and he talks so—" Mrs. Yorke began to say, and then Joy threw her arms suddenly around her and hugged her cheek to cheek, which told her much.

"—nicely," Mrs. Yorke finished.

"He's everything that Bo said of him—I think." Joy dropped to her knees, spread her elbows on the chair arms, facing her mother, who was thinking:

"Your actions prove you haven't lost much time! And if ever I saw worship in a boy's eyes—Isn't it strange, Bo meeting him in the barracks in Canada, after their college days, and now he's here in the house with us!" And she knew it was not strange at all, but it was a reality, and realities had better be held to, for a new thing was arriving, and arriving quickly.

"Maybe it's fate, Mother."

It was again unspoken.

"Come and sing, George!" she called, and George came obediently through the hall, with his face washed so that it shone, and his kinky hair drawn reluctantly into order by brush and comb.

When finally Mrs. Yorke rose and said, "Now, children, we really must go to bed," Joy kissed her affectionately, and then Mrs. Yorke bent over and kissed George on the forehead.

"Come, Georgie," said Joy, and led him by the hand to the hall. "I do hope you'll sleep well—" She paused, then swiftly stood on her tiptoes and pecked his cheek. "If mother can do it, I hope I can," she said with a sparkle in the eyes. "Good-night, dear. Breakfast at nine?" And she darted to her room.

"Good-night, Joy," he said, very inadequately, and idolatry was a pale and listless indifference compared to the look he sent after her. In a half daze he tiptoed to his room. "Good Lord! Did I hear right? She called me dear!"

He found the bed clothes turned back neatly, and pyjamas laid beside his pillows. Pinned to them was a note, on crisp, embossed paper:

"Dear G.: Hope these fit.—J."

He looked stealthily around the room, and covered the note with silent kisses. He wanted the wild courage to go and knock on her door and thank her, just to get one more look at her. But he crept into the pyjamas instead and went to bed with the baffling sense that he was being a bother to people who thought of everything, the passionate hope that they wouldn't mind it, and the certain knowledge that he was wildly and irretrievably in love.

In her room Joy examined her face in the mirror, tried to look stern, gave it up, examined her finger-nails minutely without thinking of them at all, smiled in a musing sort of way, wondered if she could steal in when George was asleep and tousle his hair that he wanted to have neat and she wanted kinky, and thought:

"What an insane idea!—But it's an idea!"

Chapter Nineteen

George awakened with the vague idea that he had asked her, and that just as she was about to answer, there was the ominous Colonel Gregory playing fire the soap at her. The man was a powerful, superior sort of person who sneered at George, and in a second George was cleaning the barrel of the gun with the ramrod, and the Colonel was peering through the muzzle to see how polished the rifle was.

There were voices in the hall. It was all unreal; it couldn't have happened, any more than the dream happened. Then a loud singing in his heart told him it had, and he snatched for his watch. Eight-thirty! And she'd said breakfast at nine!

He bounced from bed and reached for the nearest of his clothes. On the chair beside the bed was a heavy silk bathrobe. "Now, that wasn't there last night," he muttered. A slip of paper peeped through one of the barrel loops that did for buttons. He opened it and read:

"Dear G.: Hope this will cover you.—J."

He hastily folded the note away in his paybook, then pulled on the robe, strode to the door, listened in the hall, then sneaked at full speed for the bathroom. He stared, unflattered, at his reflection in the glass. His hair, which he had smoothed down so carefully the night before, stood up in wrinkled tufts with a Fijian abandon.

He shaved in five minutes.

Joy, in a wrap-around print, with her hair tumbling gracefully over the lovely arch of her neck, was waiting for him when he finished. She was a vision for the gods, and he wanted to tell her so. But she came to him and took both his hands, with such a trusting, almost childish gesture, that he forgot all the fine words he'd thought of while shaving.

"Sleep well?" she asked, and then answered herself: "I know you must have. You look so—groomed." Her eyes stole for a fleeting instant to his hair, which he had hauled down under control again with brush and comb.

She was so appealing that George's eyes betrayed him. She lowered hers suddenly, and turned to lead him into the room.

"Breakfast is waiting, so come and see Mama and then we'll eat. Poor Mama has some bad news for us."

An opened letter lay beside Mrs. Yorke. She held out her hand to George, and he bent over it. He wanted to kiss it, but didn't know whether only Frenchmen did that, so he shook it instead. It seemed odd, shaking hands with a person when you hadn't even left the house. And then he remembered what Joy said. "You said you had—bad news?" And a hundred shadows crossed his mind.

Mrs. Yorke laid her fingers on the letter. "Mr. Yorke finds it impossible to come home for Christmas, and he asks me to join him. He says he can't bear to spend it alone. It seems so terribly rude to leave you, and I'd thought I wouldn't go, but Joy says I must."

George's heart sank. "I knew it would be a dream." Then aloud: "Oh! that's too bad. I'd hate to spend it alone, too, if I were he. But I can—I mean, what you said about leaving me—Please don't let that hold you back, because I'll move right out, and be out of your way while you pack."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," scoffed Joy. "You'll stay right here and play Christmas games with me—won't he, Mama?"

Mrs. Yorke looked at her with a consent that had already been given, and then at George, whose eyes were about to bulge from his face. "Will you mind terribly? Dora will look after you both, I'm sure."

"Would you like to go shopping when we've finished breakfast? Dora usually does it, if you'd rather not."

"I'd just love to," George said. And to himself: "I'm so balmy I'm even talking sissy."

They came home laden, and at the door George said: "I wonder if you'd pardon me for a little while? I just remembered something I forgot."

"Why, certainly! You can have till eleven-thirty. Mind, now!"

"I'll be back! I won't need nearly that long!" he said.

George didn't know what he wanted, but he remembered a jewellery shop on the corner they had passed, and almost ran there. He was no judge of brooches, but that seemed the safest thing to buy, and he fingered them anxiously. He had once read an etiquette rule against giving a girl expensive presents unless you were engaged to her. The very thought of the word was luxury.

"I'll get something fairly nice, though," he argued to himself, trying to listen to the jeweller. He hovered in anguish between too much and too little. The thing to do, common sense told him, was to ask the jeweller, but he couldn't bring himself to that. It was none of the jeweller's business.

"How much did you say this was?" he asked, forgetting that the tag said two pounds. "Oh, yes, it's right here. This will do. And now, once again, what's this setting?"

"It's an opal, sir, and these little insets are rubies. A very pretty little job, sir."

"Yes, I hope she'll like—yes, it is indeed."

He arrived home panting, ahead of the deadline.

"Mama wants to go to King's Cross alone," Joy said. "We shan't let her, shall we?"

It was momentous for all. For George, the roof could have fallen in and he would not notice. For Joy, it was a hostess occasion such as her twenty years had not brought before. For Mrs. Yorke, it was the obvious elation in the two young faces before her, to which she gave no outward sign. She would not, she knew in her heart, make too much of the George and Joy situation to Mr. Yorke—not at least until after Christmas Day.

"I may be able to persuade father to come home for New Year's," she said hopefully when they were at King's Cross.

"Great, we'll plan a party for you!" Joy cried. "Paper hats and crackers and blood pudding—"

Mrs. Yorke shuddered. "Spare the last!" she implored. "Father ate it on a shooting trip once, and he's talked with a Scotch accent ever since."

Their laughter was too high-pitched, too ready, for a normal leave-taking. But there was a deep well of compassion in the mother's heart, a heart that ached at the sight of this lonely boy from her native country, who had seen his brother and his friends go down one by one, and had come to her in the desperate need of that which they could give him.

With some uncanny intuition she assessed his feelings. It was no conceit, she had told herself, for her to see that he worshipped the very ground that Joy trod. And those exaggerated gestures of composure, that hostess air—bless her heart, Joy had adopted George for keeps, or until—he goes down like so many others have around him, in France.

"Who am I to prevent it, even if I could? To discourage it, even? My child is happier than I have ever known her. So is that boy—he's not had an easy life. No childhood at all, that's plain, even as Bo said. He loves to play, he wants to respond, as Joy does, and he doesn't know how. My heart aches for him."

None knew better than Alma Yorke the tumult now going on in Joy's strong, brave young heart. She had only to close her eyes to remember that night in another year when Bo had telephoned from Folkestone, and when Joy had started nervously at every movement, had gone repeatedly on some pretext or other to the hall, which she bravely concealed and they all knew was to see if the receiver was squarely on the hook, and had finally flounced off with a stout show of cynicism to bed.

"God help me, I've encouraged it. He fairly smells of Canada, and that's what I so greatly desired. Now the whole thing's out of my control, the thing I was going to manage so beautifully. It was out of my hands before it reached them."

Alma Yorke put her hand on George's big khaki-clad shoulders with their harsh badges and drew him down to kiss him on the forehead.

"It's a frightful thing to do, leaving these two together. Maybe I'm not worried enough. But I shouldn't be worried at all. I wish he was my son, darn him!" thought Alma Yorke in a hearty Canadian accent. But it was Mrs. Wendell Yorke of

London who said:

"Thank you for being so considerate, coming to keep two lonely women company. Do have a happy Christmas, and may God bring you back safely, when you go to France again."

"Why—yes," George said, abashed by the sudden fervour in her voice. "I'll be all right. They can't hit me, I'll run too fast. Ha ha! Merry Christmas to you, too, and to Mr. Yorke."

He stepped back respectfully while the two said good-bye. Joy threw her arms around her mother with the comradely gesture that he so admired in them, the feeling that he could not even remotely trace back to his own home. They whispered words to each other that he could not hear and did not dare want to hear.

"I think your mother's wonderful," said George as they stood a moment on the great domed platform before the gates.

One thing sure, he told himself, he wasn't going to show her he'd just waited for her mother to leave so he could take advantage of it by making love to her when she might not want it. As she looked away he feasted his eyes on the profile of her face, and the perfection of the place where her eyebrow sloped down to meet her cheek.

But she turned immediately, tossed her head back, her eyes laughing once again, and seized his arm with a chummy vigour.

"And now, poor George, you're at my mercy. It's our Christmas Eve. Our *first!*"

That night when they had bid each other Merry Christmas, he waited until she had closed her door, and then he sneaked out and placed a small package on the hall table, fairly palpitating with apprehension about it. Then he went to bed and a tidal wave of emotion swept over him, so that he invoked all the religious training of his life to pray for her. "Pray God, talk to her and keep her and make her mine alone. She's so small, God, but she's so brave, and so competent. Tomorrow—no, it's today—I'll know whether she likes the brooch. You might put in a good word for me there, too."

He was sure he wouldn't sleep, but after what seemed like a few minutes he realized that he must have dozed off after all. And then he found that it was nine-thirty. He stared, blinking and puzzled, at the lampstand beside his bed. There was a white oblong parcel on it, tied with a ribbon, and a tag with "George" on it. On the other side, the tag said: "To G., with Merry Christmas from J."

He opened it and found cigarettes, and a small envelope which held a miniature picture of Joy. He held it rapturously to his lips.

"Yoo-hoo! Are you covered? Can I come in?"

"Yes—" He dived frantically into the bathrobe and drew it about him. "Yes—come in!"

The door burst open and there was a flying vision of flowered silk robe, of shining eyes, and Joy had sprung on him with all the abandon of a child. The rush carried them both into a heap on the bed behind him. For a moment he was blissfully smothered in the folds of her silk robe.

Joy sat up then and thrust her feet to the floor; one of her slippers had fallen off. "You bad boy!" she scolded. "Look—what you've done!" She pointed to the clasp of her lounging robe, low on her throat, and it was the brooch, and to his confused delight he saw that it was attractive.

"I love it!" she cried, with an ecstatic catch in her voice. "And I warned you not to throw your money away on leave!"

"Oh, it's really nothing!" George mumbled happily.

"It's a darling. But how on earth did you think to get my birthstone?"

"Oh—" George waved it aside airily, for he had not even thought of that, and luck had been with him. "I thought that might be best. I'm really not much good at picking things for girls."

"You couldn't be much better!" And she threw one of her impetuous, terrific one-second hugs around his neck.

They had breakfast before the fire that Dora had built, and Joy chattered happily about their day. Her feet were dancing

with eagerness even while they ate, and they pattered on his under the table.

"And then you're to come to church with me. Then the guests—*our* guests, George!—will be in this evening and we'll play games. You'll like them."

"I'll like them, no doubt of that. I hope they'll like me."

"How could they help it! Bubby's coming with Dick Brentwood—he's in blue, you know. And Bo's told you about Bubby. Then there are friends of Mama and Dada when they were in Canada—Mr. and Mrs. Lynch. And then there's Audrey Palmer—in the office next to mine. She's a blonde, George, so be careful! And one of the men, there, Jim Norton. Poor chap is lame, so he can't be in the army, and he feels it so badly ..."

She prattled on happily, and suddenly broke off and cried: "You must think I had a frightful nerve, offering you my picture to put with your collection."

"There is no collection, Joy. That picture will be kept by itself. It's sacred."

George sat stiff and proud beside her in church, and did his best to appear familiar with the Anglican service. During prayers he divided his time between thinking about Joy and wondering how he would fit into the Christmas party. The thunder of the guns in France was far away, the war only a muddy horizon out there, a dismal dream that might be all over by the time he had to face it. He frantically dismissed all thought of it. Over and over, instead, he revelled in the thrilling rush of her into his room. "She must like me or she wouldn't do that," he exulted.

It was a warm and welcome fortification against the brief gusts of despair that assailed him when he realized his leave was flying, and would fly, despite all he could do.

He thought of the guests during the day with jittery trepidation. They were all old friends. They would talk about things and people he didn't know at all, and they would monopolize Joy, and they would be polite to him, and he would spend the time in high, middle and low dudgeon.

He hated himself for these thoughts. He knew they were contemptible and told himself so. Joy was his hostess. Yet he wanted her to be more, to be his sweetheart and have time or thought for nobody else.

"What right have I? Who am I, anyway?" he asked savagely, jealously, bitterly. "She's good to me only because I'm a friend of Bo's—"

"No! God, no, I don't want to think that way. I *don't* think that way. And I won't let her feel I think it." Thus his other half argued. "What a contemptible rotter I am to have such feelings. Here she's trying her best to make my leave enjoyable, and I'm trying my best to spoil it."

On Christmas night, when the guests had left, George ventured cautiously into small talk, "so she won't think I'm pestering her the minute I have her alone," he explained carefully to himself.

He knew that she had given Dora the evening out, and so they had no chaperon save their own discretion. It was a gesture of her confidence in him, he felt; such a gesture as she might have made for Bo, who was almost one of the family.

Joy leaned her head impulsively against his shoulder.

"Oh, Georgie, I'm tired, aren't you? They're darlings, but see, it's after midnight. Our lovely Christmas is over."

"It was the loveliest Christmas on earth," he said. "I can't help feeling that it's all a dream, and that I'll wake up in France."

"Won't it be wonderful when you don't have to go to France any more, when you can go aboard the ship and say, 'Canada next stop?'"

"I'll be sorry," he said shortly, and his eyes were sombre when he looked into hers.

But as if sensing danger, she laughed and stood up. "Oh, I don't believe that—And now, come, Mister, and march yourself right off to bed. Remember, I told Mama I'd look after you."

George forced down the headlong feeling that was seizing him. It was too late, he told himself gloomily, to tell her now how he loved her. "Joy's tired," he argued, "and it would only make her impatient. I mustn't ever do that. Besides, there may be some one else—"

It was a torturing feeling to go to bed with, but there was no help for it. Like an August fly, the more he swatted at it, the more it came back to sting him. When he said good-night, he felt their position called for discretion. Wasn't fair to take advantage of it by even hugging her, ache as he did for her. He bent over hesitantly and kissed her on the forehead, and they said good-night with painful politeness.

He opened his door softly a few minutes later, peered down the hall to make sure Dora wasn't yet home, and called to her softly. Joy put her head out of the door.

"I wanted to say thanks again, for Christmas. And I love you," he added abruptly, and then bolted into his room before she had time to answer.

He stared in dismay when he turned on the light, and saw a grotesque little being reclining on his pillows, with his cap on the top. It was made of his pyjamas and sundry stuffing, in the shape of a dwarf. "Those girls!" He blushed to think of them handling his more intimate clothing.

When he lay back in the dark to sleep, Pitch came into his thoughts. How different Bubby and Audrey were from her! Resolutely then he tried to drive her out of his mind, and just as resolutely she came back, to keep him accusing company in the dark.

It was not for Pitch he worried, but for his lack of courage about Joy. After all, he'd once said he loved Pitch. "All the girls you've flirted with," Joy had said.

"Why couldn't I be man enough to say I'd done a little harmless flirting?" And then Andree stole in. Was that harmless? What would Joy say if she knew? And what about Hattie?

George stared at the patch in the dark that was the window. He began to fidget and wish he could get up and see Joy's picture. Perhaps he could have a smoke. But he didn't dare lest he waken Joy. "Go to sleep, you chump!" he told himself.

He lay determinedly on his right side, his face away from the window, and started grimly to count sheep, but he got them all mixed up with the people who had been there, and always with Joy. "I'll think of Joy, Joy, Joy till I go to sleep." He started shaping the word with his lips. He liked it so well that he whispered it audibly, and suddenly, to his consternation, his voice came right out with it, and it sounded loud in the silent room.

"Oh, God, what a chump! What a jackass!" He lay so still he hardly dared to breathe. After a few moments his senses were alert to a sound. The door was opening unmistakably, inch by inch, letting in a barely perceptible hint of light. Dora, maybe, looking to see if everything was all right. But Dora wouldn't peek in rooms.

The faintest possible rustle reached his ears. George lay still as death, and suddenly realized he was too still. He should be breathing, regularly but not too deeply. He began to try, but every nerve was twitching. The faint rustle stopped. He felt he was being looked at. Well, a fellow turned in his sleep sometimes. He'd try it.

But there was the faint rustle again, and then something touched his hair very softly, hesitated, then light fingers rustled it, an almost imperceptible caress that sent shivers of delight down his spine. He stood it a moment, then he moved slightly, but was sorry he had done so, for the fingers were snatched away.

"M-m—uh!" said George, trying to give a realistic imitation of waking up, which he knew had to be pure guesswork, since he had never been present to watch himself waking up. He stretched out an arm as if to yawn. He touched another arm, soft and warm. His fingers closed on it quickly.

"Oh!" Joy gasped, and she gave her arm a cautious tug, but George held on. Then she whispered, very softly: "Asleep, George?"

"M-m—uh!" said George again. "Oh, that you, Joy!" This might well be too sudden for a man who had just wakened, he

realized.

Joy laughed softly. "So you've caught me!"

"Well!" said George innocently, "so I have. I must've been asleep." And then Joy stopped tugging on her arm—she hadn't tugged very hard anyway—and switched on his reading lamp. He saw that she had her satin robe on. Her eyes were wide, startled, but she smiled.

George blinked in the light, and wished he might have the courage to throw his arms around her. He lacked it. He said instead, "My! it's good to see you. Is it time to get up?"

"No, no!" Joy's voice had the little-girl catch in it, the thing that made him swear to protect her forevermore. "Guess I might as well 'fess up. I'm a burglar." She sat on the bed beside him.

"Oh, charmed to meet you! You're the most gorgeous burglar I ever saw," said George cheerfully.

Joy's face screwed up, and she looked as if she might cry. "You'll think I'm a silly ass. I—I c-came in to—Oh, George, don't laugh!"

"Not for a million dollars," said George with feeling, and sat up to face her. "I hope you weren't walking in your sleep, that you really came in to see me. But of course—"

"That's just what I did!" Joy wailed. "I couldn't sleep—and then—I—well, I'd come in and ruffled your hair before, and I thought maybe if I did it again I'd—be able to go to sleep. Oh, it's silly, isn't it? But anyway, you look so cute with your hair all ruffled."

"Go ahead! I love it—Say, is that—" He remembered the vision of himself in the mirror, started to laugh, and checked himself. "Better watch myself," he whispered solemnly. "Dora might wake up."

"Oh, no, she won't; she isn't home yet."

"But, say, suppose anything happened to her? It's late for her."

Joy wrinkled her eyebrows, she began rather breathlessly. "Dora's gone to see her family. Poor dear, she worked so hard. I told her she needn't come back till morning—provided she never breathed a word to Mama."

Joy stopped and averted her face, and then suddenly she turned to him and there was a hint of defiance in her face which, he thought, made it look lovelier than ever.

The draft from the window blew through the room, cold from the winter, and Joy shivered. "Oh, I must go back; it's so cold in here."

But his hand darted out in a flash, in a compelling gesture, when she made to rise. "Let's put this eiderdown around your shoulders," he entreated, and did so before she could consent or refuse. Then to hold it he put one arm around outside it, held the two edges together in front of her, and his hand thus pressed against her body. He felt the terrifying softness and warmth of it and knew it was her breasts. She let him hold the eiderdown, and did not move.

"But you—" she murmured softly, "you'll freeze."

"Then let me—put it around us—both—like this—" And he let go one edge, being careful not to move his other hand, and drew it over his own shoulder, so that they sat touching. "Are you comfy now, darling?"

"Oo-oo," she said, and snuggled into the eiderdown, but George lost his grip on the edge over his shoulders, and grabbed for it so suddenly that he lost his balance in the soft bed, and fell backward on the pillow, and since he did not let go with his other hand, he pulled Joy down with him, till her head met the pillow beside his.

"Oh, my—" Joy tried to rise, but he protested: "No, don't, please. Won't you lay your beautiful head there for just one moment and let me look at you? May I kiss you now, sweetest girl?" She closed both her eyes, opened them wide again, and there was a twinkle in them, and George's lips fell on hers with all the eagerness his eyes had bespoken.

He could trust no more to words for a moment, and he looked into her face again, beseechingly, as if to say, "Please,

please! don't move it away. Let me have that much of you!"

Not daring to look away from her lest she elude him in some magic way, he reached without looking and drew the sheets part way over her shoulders.

"It's very wicked, Georgie. I shouldn't be here at all. I'd better—"

"Oh, darling! No—no, darling, not for just one—oh, just one moment, please! Just stay here a *tiny* little time."

"You bad boy! You've gone and done what I told you not to do—" She ran out of words, because George's arms suddenly tightened on her and drew her warm, incredibly lovely body to his too suddenly for her to protest. It was a hungry, not-to-be-denied desperation, a reckless realization that, if his life were blotted out in the next, this one moment had to be.

"Darling!" he whispered in her ear, and then drew her face around so that their lips were together, and he would trust words no more until he tasted again the amazing sweetness that her mouth gave to him.

"I'm—not—sorry," her words beat small but determinedly in his ear. "Are you? Nice to be—by ourselves—don't you think?" The last word caught in her throat, and she was trying to be brave on the brink of an alluring and unknown abyss. But in his hunger, and his ache to touch her more fully yet, he could not realize what storm was going on in her mind, or even in his own. He hardly even knew that he was saying words.

"Sweetheart, you said you'd tell me—Will it be, yes, some time?"

"If you—want me—" And then when his eager, frightened hand strayed: "But I meant—about the other."

"And you'll marry me—when—I come back?"

He kissed her long again, and forgot that his lips were clumsy, that he did not say the right things, forgot all except the terribly insistent question.

"We mustn't dear—we mustn't!" Her voice had real distress in it.

"Oh, darling, you are so wondrously, divinely sweet and warm and beautiful—You will let me hold and press you—*All* of you, darling, won't you—like that? Is that such a terrible sin, when I love you so much, and when you say you will marry me?"

It was sweet madness, beyond the wildest dreams. It was an ungovernable force transforming his imploring hunger into realization, and George whispered: "Maybe we're both just on the outside of heaven, darling. And some time—Oh, but you are beautiful!"

Their eyes told each other that they were in the presence of an imponderable thing for them, a simultaneous yearning, a tumultuous imperative that terrified and fascinated them. The sweet madness of her, pressed so close to him that she had no secrets left from him save one, brought him all at once to the knowledge of reality, to the knowledge that her body was trembling and that her lips were quivering and that her eyes were suddenly filled with terror.

And he knew, too, that there was one thing he would not do, because she had trusted him and her mother had trusted him and had trusted Joy. Let go of her he would not, for she was too appallingly desirable and he could not yield her just yet. But that one thing he would not do, that one supreme moment for them must wait because honour and decency and his idolatry of her bade that it wait. Slow! was he! Was that what they said of men who acted like this! Well, he loved her, and she was on a pedestal in all her unspoiled and pristine whiteness of soul and body and there she would stay. There God had put her for him to love and worship until he could come in honour to possess her. There he would worship her now after this embrace, with a fuller and sweeter and more inspiring vision of her as she was. And if he were wrong, if indeed this restraint were a fundamental mistake in her heart as well as his, then so be it. But it was unforgettable, and without any equal in sweetness that he had ever known, to hover on this brink of the chasm.

Joy's eyes were wide, two lovely, incalculable pools of appeal and love together.

"And my boy will never doubt again that I love him?"

Joy's voice was like the sheerest embroidery of tone.

"I—love you—Oh, dear God, how I love you! May I be damned and die if ever I doubt!" And his voice was a sob and a prayer.

"—And he will wait—for me?"

"Darling, yes. And you will be a temple, all of you, my temple, always and for ever."

She kissed him then herself, for the greatest peril had passed.

"I'm very, *very* wicked to be here," she whispered, more sure of her own discipline, once more in command, she knew instinctively. "And I, too, will love you, as I love you now, with all my heart."

And he knew that it was her strength, and not his own, that had drawn them back again to safety.

Chapter Twenty

George Battle stamped back into the battery lines sterner, sadder, older, happier than when he left, and he felt immeasurably more important. He knew the first ribald questions his gunmates, except Bo, would fire at him. He compressed his lips in a grim and superior smile. He'd say to them: "Oh, sure, often. Is that all you birds think about?" But this time he would not betray by his guilty look that he was lying, for of those things he had a more vivid and precious gift than even knowledge itself. He faced them with an inner amazement at the days when he had held them in awe. But then, he told himself, they were different now. The gods of his early worship had gone.

Yet Bo was there! Bo was at the guns, and in his eagerness to get there he hardly paused at the horselines, but went up in the ghostly twilight with the ammunition and the rations, to where the guns lay, and where he would find Bo.

His memories were vivid and enthralling. Amid his recurring and frantic despairs at being away from Joy, came the healing memory that she was waiting for him, that she had told him she loved him, that he had held her as he had never held anyone in his life.

And with it came the recollection of what had come after that, of his wakening in the slow, sweet dawn to remember that she had risen at last, and kissed his forehead, and had fled and told him not to follow.

"Dora, you know!" she had pleaded, and he had respected that.

But now in the dawn it had been different, except that it was again imperative to be near her, to confirm that which bathed his heart with a rapture beyond endurance.

He had thrust his feet to the floor, pulled on his bathrobe, stepped into the hall and tiptoed to her door. It stood partly open, as if in her final gesture of trust. Looking through it at her dressing-table mirror, he could see her reflected there. Joy was sleeping, peacefully, ethereally beautiful.

With a strained, tense feeling of a learning thief, he pushed the door noiselessly wider and stole in on the soft carpet. Intoxicated, he gazed upon her face, its perfect features in their doll-like repose, the long dark lashes seeming to sweep down to her cheeks almost. How incredibly perfect she was! One hand, her left, lay on the coverlet, and part of her arm was bare. George looked longingly at it, at the small tapered fingers half curled. How diminutive she looked there, in the half light.

"She's so completely lovely, without a flaw!" he thought again. "Oh, Joy! everybody that meets you must be in love with you, and yet you come to me. *Me!* Am I awake! Am I crazy?"

He dropped noiselessly on his knees to gaze at her the more, and almost held his breath lest he waken her, yet wished she were awake. His face was close to her hand where it lay. He bent forward, touched it with his lips. The hand drew softly away. George crouched so rigid that his own pulse rocked him. How his heart was beating!

He was looking at the hand again, and a sudden thought rushed into his mind, so bold, that he began to brush it away as preposterous, then seized on it again. "Why not? I wonder how much they cost!—But how would you buy her a diamond ring?" he stormed at himself.

It was so stupendous that he must weigh it, must make sure it could be done. In a gust of excitement he started to get to his feet, lost his balance and put a hurried hand on the bed to save himself.

Joy's eyelids quivered, the long lashes lifted, serene eyes looked at him with the wide innocence and interest of a child's eyes. In a moment the beloved twinkle came into her wide eyes. She reached her hand to touch his cheek. He seized it, pressed it fervently to his lips.

"Darling!" he whispered.

"Why did you come here?" she whispered.

"I came because I couldn't stay away. I got lonesome for you." He spoke as if there were ears at the keyhole. "Joy, I wanted to ask you, will you wear a ring? I'll go out right today and get one."

"But you can't, dear. This is Boxing Day. There are no shops open."

"Then tomorrow! It would have to be just a very small one now."

"You mustn't do that. Won't the brooch do instead?"

"But that's not the same. I want you to—I want to be—really engaged, out in the open, for everybody to see!"

"I have a ring—" she began.

"Oh!" He sat back on his heels so swiftly he nearly fell backward. "Then I'm sorry. I should have known I was dreaming."

"No, no, silly boy! I meant to say, I have a ring my mother gave me. Wouldn't it do till—till afterward? Please, don't mind me saying that. But, dearest, you simply can't go and sacrifice your leave to buy a ring."

He kissed her rapturously. "I love you, Joy—more than all the world and heaven put together. I'll work after the war, and I'll get ahead, and I'll never let you be sorry."

"What have you done to me? I was a bad girl to come to your room, and I know it now, and yet I'm not sorry—"

There was a sound in the hall that froze them both. It was Dora's door opening, Dora's voice.

"Did I hear you calling, Miss Joy?"

They stared at each other a second, and then Joy found voice. "Yes, Dora. I didn't hear you come in. It's awfully early, isn't it?"

"Rather early, Miss. But would you like some tea? I'll have it ready in no time at all. Shall I make the fire?"

"Oh, yes, that will be nice. Please don't hurry. We were just talking about our Christmas party. Sorry we wakened you so early."

"Oh, indeed, Miss, I wasn't asleep. I came in half an hour ago. I thought, Miss, that Mr. Battle or yourself might want your tea brought to bed."

"Oh, no, thanks. We'll come out."

Dora went to the kitchen, and Joy seized George's hand. "Now we *have* done it!" she gasped, and seemed as mischievously pleased as a child. "Thank heaven you weren't in here when she came in. But now you run, Georgie, till I get covered, and I'll race you to the fireplace."

And then there was the time Mr. Yorke had returned home for a day's visit. George had seen him put his arms about his wife in a brief affectionate embrace and kiss her, after a brisk: "Alma, my dear!"

And then Joy ran across the room at him like a streak of light to fling herself at him shoulder high. After her hurricane greeting, she seized her father by the hand and hauled him forward into the room.

"Now come and meet George, Dada." That was it, as if nothing else came before this.

George, in a moment of near panic, had time to see a man almost his own height, with a thick-set jaw, dark moustache, shrewd grey eyes topped by bushy eyebrows which overhung them with a hewn-out authority, dark hair thinning at the top and greying at the sides, with the sideburns longer than usual. A man about fifty. A strong man.

"Delighted, George," Mr. Yorke smiled, and a hundred crinkles sprang into life and softened his face at the eye corners and between the eyebrows above his nose. "My wife has been telling me about you—filling in the places Bo left out, you know. Nice of you to be with us and keep them company. They felt so dreadfully dull until you came. Nothing like a man about the place, to be sure."

George grinned ruefully to remember how, with Joy at work in her office, he had tortured himself in spare time, and how he pictured himself telling her father.

"I could say, 'I intend to write, sir—to make it my career.'"

"And he'd say: 'Of course, most amusing, a splendid hobby. Chaps write bits of poetry and jokes and things. Naturally they expect no revenue from it; they have their business to look after that part of it. Yes, yes, a nice hobby. Personally, I prefer a bit of golf, or a swing over the Common. No future to that either, of course.'"

His meeting with Colonel Gregory, whom Joy called her "big boss," stood as a gentle backdrop to his memories. A little, grey-haired man in civilian clothes—George's salute attempt halted even as his hand went to his uncapped forehead—Gregory's hand gripping his—Gregory's voice: "I meet you at last, Battle. What a pleasure—But here, none of your damned salutes to an old crock like me!"

Their last hours—his and Joy's—their anxiety to get to old Victoria Station so that they could stand together a little before he had to go aboard. Her last words: "You must come back to me!"

And as he had strode down the platform to a compartment, he had seen her tiny, oh so brave figure pressed against the iron railing of the tall barriers.

He found Pitch's letter waiting for him in the battery mail, and read it dutifully at first, then angrily. He was about to tear it up, but hesitated, looked blank, folded it up and put it away again.

"Who does she think she is, talking like that!" he silently demanded of the air around him. But there were passages in it that worried him. Such as: "—plighted our love in the presence of your dead father, whose still lips seemed to give it the sanction of eternity."

The words stared back at him like an accusing conscience.

"There was nothing said about marrying her—Or was there? All I said was I loved her, if I even said that. Well, I thought I did at that time."

The postal sergeant had two parcels for him, one from Hattie, one from Pitch. Hattie's was in a tin box, with cloth sewn around it, in perfect preservation. Pitch's was in a pasteboard box, battered and shapeless, with holes in the wrapping, but its contents were safe and satisfying: tobacco, cigarettes, chocolate bars, and a carefully folded newspaper clipping with a two-column-width picture of Pitch herself.

The lines over the picture said that Miss Margaret Black the soloist of Grace Church, which George knew was the swankiest in town, and described her as the sensational star of the Oratorio Society. That meant little to George, who had never heard an oratorio and vaguely connected it with some sort of speech. He read the lines impatiently and laid them away. There had been a time when such news would have brought only a hopeless feeling that it took her farther than ever out of his reach. Now it left him cold and indifferent, and had the question come to him at all his answer would have been: "Who cares?"

He must write her and thank her, and congratulate her. He knew that. But it could wait. His letters would be stilted now, stilted and awkward. There was only one real letter that could be written, a letter which would repeat itself every day, written with blushes at thought of the officer who must read it. But the golden vision of Joy gave him courage to face even that.

With a sudden sense of having overlooked something, he picked up the clipping again. There was some reason for Pitch sending him this. With a vague uneasiness he read on, how Pitch had sung for soldiers, tirelessly worked for them night after night at the hospitals for the legless, armless and shattered wrecks of the war.

"She sings," said the writer, "with a fire and a yearning which bespeak more than art. It is a throbbing message of meaning, and while some would call it the consummate art of the trained singer, I prefer to ascribe it to the knowledge, which is no secret, that her heart is overseas, in the firing line. That to me is the reason for the thrill and heartache I find in the voice of this black-haired, black-eyed beauty."

George laid the paper away again, with a baffled, vexed feeling. There was her avowal before the world. "Maybe it's

someone else she met," he exulted, but half-heartedly. He wished he could believe it. He wished such a thought could fit in with her letter.

"Sorry you didn't go to Paris, after all?" Bo greeted George at the guns.

Others were there, so George hedged. What he had to tell Bo was for Bo's ears alone. "No, had a swell time," he said, and felt that it was almost sacrilege to dismiss it so.

When Bo and he were night firing, with no one else in the gun pit, George got his chance. He unloaded his full heart.

Bo listened to George's rapid, breathless sentences, of how he worried lest it be all a dream, and when he was through Bo said: "But you say Joy promised."

"You bet your life she did!"

"Then she'll keep her word, even if you go home on a stretcher. But why didn't you get married on the spot?"

George shoved a shell into the breech, levelled the bubble, checked the range. Bo squinted in the sights and spun the traverse wheel.

"But it wouldn't be fair," George argued.

"Just as fair as to ask her to be an old maid," Bo snorted.

"Why? This war'll be over in another year or so."

"Yes, it's all over now—all over the world."

Two shells came over, with a snore that ripped the air, one went behind them, another fell fifty yards in front.

"Huh! Take that," Bo grunted, and pulled the firing lever.

"What are we shooting at, d'you know?" George asked.

"Some bloody crossroads, I guess."

Bo sounded surly, and George asked him anxiously, as he ripped open the breech: "You don't mind, do you, Bo?" A horrible thought thumped suddenly at his mind. Was Bo secretly in love with Joy himself? It would be the most natural thing in the world! The idea stabbed at him so unexpectedly, so viciously, that he almost cried with pain. He forced himself to be casual.

"Guess you think I'm a chump, pretending I could marry a girl like Joy?"

Bo grinned cheerfully as he peered through the sights. "Nothing to stop you, old boy, except your own feelings."

"My own feelings!" George's dismay was comic.

"Feeling you're a chump," Bo explained. "Duck, here come some more!"

This time the whole German battery had fired. Four shells, two that snored over the pits, two that fell short. A rain of frozen mud thundered down on their gun pit roof.

"Some day," said George, when the last clod had fallen, "I hoped you'd be my—what d'you call it—my best man? Since you're my best friend. You know, stand up with me when Joy and I are married."

"Balance myself on my wings, you mean?"

"Bo!" George barked at him in sharp anxiety. "Don't say that!" His voice sounded shrill and small against the awful obligato of the next salvo of shells that snored in over them. One fell so short in front that it shook the gun pit.

"My God," said George, in forced humour, "I believe he's shooting at us!"

"Did you ever get the feeling one of these things had your name on it?" Bo asked, as casually as he would for a match.

"Yes, but don't *you* go feeling like that."

Bo was sighting again, for the next round. "Damn it," he said calmly, "the swine's gone and shot down our aiming post."

"I'll go," said George. But Bo had ducked out already, through the gun pit mouth into the darkness, to find the post and place another candle lamp on it. He saw Bo's shadowy figure limned an instant on the edge of a shell hole.

"There's another!" he yelled. "Duck, Bo!"

Crouching at the gun wheel, he saw a sudden geyser of flame and earth in front, where Bo had been. For a horrified second George stared into the black void ahead while the clumps of earth thudded down. Then he found his voice. He found his feet. He darted through the gun pit mouth.

"Bo!" George bawled. "Bo! Where are—"

His foot stepped into a void, the crater that the big shell had torn out of the soft, guilty earth. He tumbled sidewise, his hands groped around in the reeking mud. On hands and knees he crawled to the top of the shell hole, flopped suddenly on his belly at the ominous snore again, was up the instant the shell swooped down to burst with an appalling bang behind the pit. Again his feet found a void and he rolled, scrambled or slid down into the next deep shell hole. He was yelling at the top of his voice, but hardly knew it.

He landed with a hard bump at the bottom, and his hands touched something oozy and warm. The touch brought panic, made his heart catch fire against his ribs.

"Bo! Are you there? Are you alive?"

"Get off my—foot, you—mug!" said Bo's voice, almost at his ear. It was a weak, shattered voice.

George pawed with frantic haste to feel with his hands Bo's outline in the blackness of the earth. He could find only half of it. The rest, both legs and one arm, were covered with mud. George clawed it away till his hands were raw. He was babbling madly all the time.

"Are you all right, Bo? Are you hurt? Where? Thank God you're alive!"

A salvo of big shells bracketed them right, left and in front. He hardly heard them.

"That one—had my name on it," came the withered voice. "But he didn't—have it—spelled right—" A groan broke his words off, twisted them into a gasp of anguish.

"I'll get you out—I'll get you out!" George stood up and shouted: "Hey, help! HELP, you gunners! On the double, you so-and-so's! Here—in front of C gun! Help!"

To Bo he said, as he clawed more mud to get his hands under Bo's shoulders: "Can you stand it if I lift?"

"Yes—" said Bo's curious disintegrated voice, "yes—left arm—shoulder—"

Bo's right arm helped George, caught a firm grip around him, and his left arm hung limp as George raised him. With a strength he never knew he owned, George got Bo's arm over his shoulder, then the body of Bo wrapped around his back, dragging him clear of the slimy embrace of the earth, and started crawling along the side of the crater.

At the top he lost his balance, fell on his stomach, but kept Bo across his back, felt his way down the wall of the next shell hole, stumbled, landed face down against a giant clod of earth, spat out mud, sobbed and swore in a falsetto of rage against the bursting shells and the hellish mess they had made of the man he loved most.

Something had struck again. Something appalling and incomprehensible. Something that came without sound, as they always did when they landed on top of you. It was not a crash. It was a volcanic eruption beneath and around him. It was the instant reduction of real things to a nebula. It was the shattering of the universe. A wall of mud blown by the

concussion of it lifted him and his burden and flung them under. The mud was pregnant with the stink and smoke of the shell's explosive. His nose was filled with it. The blast had flung him, like a flyleaf, from one side of the original shell hole to another.

He knew he was alive because he wanted to breathe. He could not breathe because his mouth was full of the filthy mud in which his face was thrust. He wriggled clear, and his cheek touched something warm, and he knew it was the sticky blood still flowing down Bo's tunic. The shell had thrown them both together, and now Bo was lying on top of him, groaning, in a twilight of consciousness.

With blubbers of rage, George kicked his feet and got up to his knees again. He used his arm beneath Bo as a lever and pried till his elbow might have snapped. He could do it now. Yes, he could do it. Bo's breath was coming in gasps. A loose clod, dislodged by his kicking, rolled down and pinioned one of his legs. Voices mocked him in the tempest of shell fire that now poured on the little battery. He shouted in rage, as if at the night itself. "Lemme up! I'll show you, God damn you. I'll bounce one off you for this. I'll—Hey, let go him, he's hurt! His left arm—Oh, it's you birds at last! Gimme a hand here."

Sanity came to him again in the brigade dressing station where an ambulance man gave him a hasty run-over. Outside of caked mud, raw hands and a host of bruises, George was all right.

"Never mind me!" he fumed. "Tell me, how's Bo?"

"Being examined now," he was told. "Your S.M. ordered you brought over for examination, you had so much blood on you."

"Bo's blood," said George, and quieted at once. He stared at the doctor who was bending over Bo's stretcher. They worked fast, those field men. In frightening speed Bo's ragged, bloody clothes had been cut away from the smashed arm, the torn flesh pulled together and the whole thing bound in splints. Bo was still muttering under the swift anæsthetic.

They carried him out, past George, toward the light railway ambulance that ran over the crazy field of shellholes, bound for hospital, bound for Blighty, bound for—?

George brought up suddenly in his questioning thoughts. Bo's face fell away loosely out of shape as he lay on the stretcher, his good arm dangling. George picked up the hand, laid it on the bar of the stretcher.

"Good-bye, Bo," he whispered brokenly. "God go with you. It's your second time in a year. They just won't leave you alone, old boy!"

With a mind blacker than the night, he walked back to the battery, back to the gun pit where substitute gunners were firing the night rounds. The shelling had fallen off now, as if the German battery had given up trying to silence the impudent little pipsqueak. Number four gun was also firing, and the front was livelier.

"Looks like a strafe coming up," George said. "Let me have a shot at the swine."

"You have a shot at some rum in that water bottle," ordered Dunn, and George swigged it angrily, without choking. It burned a fiery canal down his throat and set his stomach aflame.

"Now get to hell outa here," Dunn ordered him, but George seized a shell and snorted:

"No, by the gods, not till I plunk one back at him."

"All right," Dunn grinned, "just one, and then on your way."

In his hogaboon, George found jealously guarded sheets of canteen notepaper in his haversack, and wrote to Joy by the light of a candle on a stick thrust into the clay side of his dugout, to tell her about Bo, and to pour out his aching heart to her.

Her first letter came a week after his return from leave, and George held it in hands that trembled. He waited till others were not looking to read it, and then he did, with eyes that burned the pages. He knew that he would read it over and over again, and memorize it.

Three weeks later Joy's second letter came. Bubby had been notified about Bo and was going to the hospital where they had taken him. They had taken Bo's arm off, near the shoulder. George's heart ached at the thought of that gallant swagger with only one arm to swing, and that his gunmate was gone from him this time for keeps. But he breathed a prayer of thanks that Bo was alive, and hurried on. He read the lines for the message he hoped to find. He read between the lines for the message he hoped he would not find.

Chapter Twenty-One

With a full heart George wrote to Pitch to tell her all about Joy. He should not have done it, nor should he have done what came after. Yet he did, because his conscience told him to be honest, part way at least. He was careful not to overdo it, to leave her to guess. "A good friend, you know." That, he thought, as he folded the letter and put it into the service envelope, will make her so mad she'll explode—or else she won't care at all. In either case it'll put an end to this foolish idea of hers. Ten to one she's convinced herself it's a duty.

Sweetly, Pitch wrote, and in due time her letter came to George. He gloated when he saw it, and he thought: "Here's where I'm in for a swell bawling out."

... I am so glad you were able to find company on leave. And isn't it odd that her name should be Joy! One of the girls that joined Hattie's troupe after you left was called Joy—it's such a popular name with girls of that type.

But so many of the boys who have come back wounded have told of finding happiness, thanks to the generosity of London girls. I see the boys quite often, as I sing at the hospitals, you know.

Of course, as soon as they went back to France they knew that there would be some other soldier to take their place....

... I am so happy that you have been different, and have found real comradeship. Please do not worry that I shall be narrow about it, George. To the contrary, I'm delighted if I can feel that it is friendship. But, George, promise me, if it should turn out to be more than that, you will tell me honestly how you feel. It would break my heart to think that our understanding should become merely a matter of loyalty to you. Mind you, I hope and pray it will not come to that, but if it does, I will try to understand.

I do so want to write to Joy and thank her for her kindness to you. You have told me her name. Won't you please give me her address, so that I can do this? Or if you would rather, I could enclose a letter to her in my next one to you....

"Poor Pitch," thought George, "she thinks I'm the same as the rest, and she is trying to pretend not to. And she hasn't seen Joy. But she didn't raise hell, so that's something." And then he suddenly frowned. Pitch had put it up to him. Either he must give Pitch Joy's address, or he must tear up her letter when it came, or he must forward it to Joy.

"And what would Joy think? No, that's out! Course, I could just burn it when it comes, but—I don't know."

George was lying to himself. He did know. He did know that he dared not burn Pitch's letter, for in his superstitious fear of her he felt she would find out, and then she would know he was afraid of her, and he was not afraid, not much, at least.

"Well," he comforted himself as he posted the letter to Pitch containing Joy's address, "just let her write any wisecracks to Joy. She'll get one back that'll burn her eyebrows!"

He would have felt less assured if he had seen the gleam in Pitch's eyes when she read it, and had he seen Pitch pick up her pen, and had he heard her say to herself:

"We shall now settle the London problem, once and for all."

To Joy, Pitch wrote:

... This is bold, I know, for I haven't met you, but as George's fiancée I could not resist writing to thank you for your great kindness to him while he was on his leave. I have begged him to give me your address so that I might do this. You conferred a much greater favour than perhaps you realize. For George is a curious boy, very moody, and with something of an inferiority complex. Perhaps that very quality makes him more than ordinarily grateful and appreciative. Like all boys of his type, he is incurably romantic, and has told me of the welcome friends (Pitch had been tempted to underline it.) whom he has found in England on his various leaves.

We are to be married when he comes home, and if you should ever return to Canada, you will be our welcome and honoured guest....

Pitch read it through thoughtfully and she mailed it herself, with a quiet smile of confidence.

Joy drew a deep breath when she read the letter, and she clung to the arm of her chair for quite a while. Then, white-faced, she drew off the ring she wore, held it against her lips a brief moment, and placed it away in her jewel case. After a long while she wrote to George:

You must know I understand. I have taken off the ring. I will look at it sometimes, and remember when we were together.... But this won't spoil our lives, will it? Do write to me, and I will write to you, and you will come to see Mama and Dada and me when you are on leave again....

Then, firmly, and with eyes averted so that she would not stop herself from doing what she was doing, she placed Pitch's letter with the note in an envelope and sealed it quickly.

George wrote frantic denials. He begged Joy to believe him. He poured out all the desperate anger and hunger in his being to her. Joy's answers came back dismayingly sweet and friendly. Her assurances that she accepted his word were too ready. He felt that, deep down in her heart, she thought him a liar. Oh, if he could only be there, with her, to tell her with his aching arms what his letters did not seem to tell convincingly.

Down over him had settled a black gloom that became almost stark fatalism. Nothing that he had ever treasured remained. They had taken his brother. They had taken his gunmates whom he idealized. They had taken Bo. And now they had taken Joy, as his premonitions had told him they would.

The misery in his heart ate into his common sense. He borrowed a *sang froid* he could not feel. He stood up or moped around under shell fire pretending to be oblivious when others ducked. He did this to convince his own mind, that he meant his threat to Joy when he swore that he would get himself killed if she did not believe him, and sometimes he honestly wished he might be killed. He pretended to forget his gas mask, but Dunn's watchful eyes were on him often, and, by them and the grace of God, he had his mask on him when the gas came.

Joy's letters relayed the news about Bo, glowing accounts—perhaps too glowing, he sometimes thought miserably. Bo was out in hospital blues. Bo was gaining strength. Bo had decided to take his discharge in England when the time came. Bo often spoke of George in his letters to them and to Bubby. Bo had told them that Pitch's letter was all nonsense. Then why couldn't she believe me? George demanded to himself.

Sometimes, in a panic because another leave might yet come around and he could again see Joy, he was shaky and timorous, not simply at the thought of inviting death, but that death might accept the invitation before he could go and clear away this misunderstanding and know that it was cleared away.

Other times he laughed bitterly at this, and coaxed the thought of Bo to torture him with jealousy. Joy wrote that Bo was coming to visit them, and that she would take care of him. Bo was still in the army, and had been given a place in the paymaster's department.

"She can have him," he said to himself, and added with an effort: "And he can have her. Damn them both. Oh, Joy, Joy! I didn't mean that. Forgive me, Joy!"

Across the torn canals of Cambrai, over the tortured swamps that led to Valenciennes, along the blasted side roads to the north, always north—

Their guns stood in an orchard, and fired across a canal into the outskirts of Mons. It was told on the night of November the tenth, in 1918, that there was to be an armistice. It was told while German shells ripped holes in the ground around them. It was told by every soldier and to every soldier, and none believed it. It was told by excited Belgians George met in the street, and they believed it. And George told them, in his mangled French, that it was not so.

"*Pas au'jourdhui. Au Allemagne, alors!*" said George, and grinned with superior judgment.

It was told around their gun trail while they fired in the open field.

"Tell that to Sweeny," George guffawed.

"A blinking fine pipe dream," someone snorted.

That night in the dark, as a gesture of contempt for these simple-minded Belgians who thought a war could end, and for those people in London who might still be glad to see him again, George spread his ground sheet beside the gun, rolled up in his blankets, pulled the gun's tarpaulin edge over him, rolled his tunic into his tin hat for a pillow, prayed that a whizzbang would blow him to hell, and profanely went to sleep.

"Tough guy, eh?" jeered a gunmate.

But the guns died down, and there was no morning salute of the shells that rained on them the day before. Over in the street the Belgian workmen were gathered at dawn, babbling and shouting, and George listened to them as he lay in his ground sheet. It was armistice, they said.

Deliberately George stretched, stood up, hauled his tunic on over his sweater and walked over to them.

"*Qu'est-ce, que c'est, donc!*" he greeted them cheerily.

"*La guerre est fini!*"

"Nuts to you, Messieurs," said George.

He took the breech cloth and muzzle bag off the gun and automatically ran the ramrod through the barrel to wipe off the dew.

"Hey, Battle!" shouted Dunn from the corner of the barn that had been the gunners' sleeping quarters, "Lay off that bean blower, the war's over!"

"Sez you!" shouted George.

"Breakfast's on, then," said Dunn.

"That's different!" shouted George, and grabbed his mess-tin.

Their breakfast on this last day of the war, he remembered, was a large thick slice of bacon laid on the shallow lid with a slice of bread, with mush and canned milk in the deeper dish, and tea in the big enamel cups they carried.

The battery was going into Mons at nine. They squatted on the ground to eat their breakfast, and they all talked about it. Nobody mentioned the armistice much. It was so, they knew, but they kept their tin hats close.

George walked behind the gun as they rumbled down the streets of Mons. All the people were out, screaming at them, waving, cheering, roaring mingled snatches of La Brabanconne and the Marseillaise. From the little shops rushed people with cakes and buns and other pathetic delicacies to give them. Men embraced them as they walked behind their guns, or reached up to shake hands with the drivers astride their gun-horses.

Through the town they went, and placed their guns in firing position in a park toward the outskirts. Then selected gunners and drivers paraded to the square before the town hall and joined the military review. They stood at attention on the cobblestones, and officers' commands rang out everywhere.

A band played "God Save the King." It played La Brabanconne and the massed crowds of Belgians sang, but the band played it too quickly for them. Then came the Marseillaise, and the voices of hundreds burst out with the suddenness of an explosion. Thrills ran up and down George's spine, and a mist dimmed his eyes for the first time as he saw these eager people waving their hats in the air, and heard them singing a song that had been dead to them for four years.

They went afterward in search of cognac and found much of it. They talked mostly about their good luck, for many others sought in vain. Now and again they pessimistically and skeptically discussed the chances of an early leave, or of getting a ride to Brussels.

They accepted armistice, just as they accepted leave, as a favour to be enjoyed while it lasted, with the cynical certainty that it would end sooner or later. They talked idly, too, of what they would do when they got home. George envied them the definite careers they saw ahead. Himself, he looked forward into a dim horizon of doubt which he wanted and dreaded to explore.

George always hedged when they asked him in the gun pit what he aimed to do, for he didn't know himself. In some

vague fashion he felt that the scattered notes he had made in his diary, and the scraps of paper he had folded away with his shaving kit in his haversack, might by some magic form themselves into a pattern, and the plots that grew unceasingly in his head become stories for the world to read. He thought of some of the things he had written in past years and blushed; the stories that had come back with the publishers' cards neatly printed saying they were "hardly" what was required.

He remembered them now with pitying scorn. How immature they were, those things. How could he have expected to write masterpieces, he who had known nothing of life? But now he knew. Now he knew the sharp stab of grief, the torture of disappointed love, the long hours of self-taunting when he hated himself and even tried to tell himself he hated Joy, only to cry into the silence for her forgiveness.

He thought of Joy now, hope fighting despair. His arms and his body ached for her.

Leaves came after the weeks rolled by, quiet, discontented weeks while they endlessly cleaned their guns, polished hubcaps, and helped the drivers with the dull jobs in the stables.

"You're first up in C sub," Dunn told George one day.

"I don't want to go first. Let some of the others have a chance." George was morose enough to say things to hurt himself, but he was ready to die of despair if Dunn took him seriously.

"Listen here," said Bill sternly, "that's enough of that. You're the senior gunner here in this sub, and you're going first on leave whether you like it or not. You get to the Q.M. and ditch that lousy tunic. Get yourself some new clothes and get going. Hear me? Don't be a sap when the army offers you something."

The nearer George got to London the heavier his heart became. He thought savagely of Bo as part of the family, thought of himself as an outsider to be tolerated, thought of Joy as having changed her mind in spite of her loyalty, and hated all his thoughts.

"I'll have to phone them, of course. I can tell by their tone whether they really want me or not. If it's Joy I talk to I might even tell whether she really believes me. Guess I'll try and be casual about it."

At Victoria Station he walked till he found what he believed was the same phone booth that he had used the first time. He walked, too, while his heart thundered in his throat, and to calm his excitement he thought of the cool, distant voice he would use:

"I just thought if you'll be free any time—Of course, if you're engaged, don't let me trouble you. Oh, no, I couldn't do that. Not for the world."

He put in the coin, and there was Dora's voice, and he found himself stammering into the phone: "Is that you, Dora? This is Battle—Gunner Battle—I—"

"Ee-eek!" Something between a squeal and a gasp from Dora. "Mr. Battle!—Really you! Does Miss Joy know? Oh, she'll be so thrilled—"

George's grim manhood fell away in a sudden tempestuous thaw. All his resolves, his nourished bitterness, his rehearsed indifference, all were in the discard. He knew in a flooded instant that no power on earth could have kept him away. He was almost shouting:

"Can—can I speak to her, please?"

"Oh, I must tell her, I must tell her—" Then Dora seemed to regain sense. "Oh, but I'm sorry, Miss Joy has gone out, for just a little while—with Mr. Bo—"

"I see," said George, suddenly lame again. "She went out—with Mr. Bo. Oh, well, just tell her I called."

"But I can't do that," wailed Dora. "She's told me so often, and the last thing before she goes out every day, that you are

to come at once—if you should happen to telephone when she is out." Dora's voice was breathless with anxiety, and she rushed on.

"Oh, Mr. Battle, *please!* I'm—I'm—Miss Joy says I'll be responsible to see that you come without a moment's delay. I shouldn't say it, Mr. Battle, but only today Miss Joy said to Mr. Bo, 'Do you know, I feel that George is coming soon.' Meaning you, sir. 'He won't breathe a word in his letters,' she said, 'but wouldn't it be heavenly if he could come again for Christmas.' That's what she said, Mr. Battle. I shouldn't have listened, but I couldn't help it."

"And what did Bo say?" It was on George's tongue, but he bit it back sternly, and said instead: "Of course, no one's expecting me, so please tell her I'll call some time tomorrow. It's pretty late—"

"But I can't do that, Mr. Battle!" Dora's voice was pleading. "She'll blame me for letting you wait that long. She said she would."

"Did she really?" said George politely. Dear, homely, loyal Dora! How fearful he had been at first to be either too friendly or too distant with her.

"But you will come, then?" Dora's voice was as nearly frantic as it was ever likely to be, and he could almost see the tears in her eyes. "At once, Mr. Battle?"

"Why, yes, in that case, thank you."

He sauntered with an exaggerated leisure out of the telephone station, looked at the great clocks. They said ten-thirty. He edged with increasing stride away, and walked as a man who is being pulled. When he descended the steps into the Underground he was running. "Of course, I didn't write," he panted to himself. "Didn't know myself till I was on the way. That's the army, never tell you anything." As he wound along the tunnels he was in the same desperate haste that he remembered so well of Joy—as if there were only one train, as if by running they would be sure to catch it no matter what the time.

As the express tore away from the platform and stabbed into the tunnel he fidgeted, torn between the fears that he would get there too soon and that he would never get there at all.

Dora greeted him with such outright excitement that he knew it was more than a faithful attempt to screen Joy's absence. The girl was so genuinely glad to see him that his heart was touched.

"This is your home," Dora's manner was saying. "You have come home!"

An unwilling sense of luxury and wild happiness besieged him in all his torment. "Oh, settle down, can't you!" he told himself, and stared steadily into the fireplace to get control of his riotous thoughts. He told himself over and over again, and completely ignored what he was saying:

"Back on leave after a year, and she's out with Bo. What else can I expect? She'd sooner believe one fool scratch from Pitch than all I could say—because she wanted to. And then she'd believe Bo when she wouldn't believe me—"

His heart stood still a moment, then tore loose with an unbearable bound when he heard the hall doorbell, heard Dora answer it, heard voices, Bo's first, Dora's, then Joy's.

Joy's!

Snatches of words. Dora's: "—Oh, I really think that some tea, Miss, after the chill. The fire is nice, and you might like to sit by it for a while—No, no indeed. Yes, I will at once!"

George got to his feet as he heard Bo's boots pounding toward him.

"Well, look who's—You old blighter!"

Dora's frantic "sh-sh!" suddenly stifled.

George's eyes swam dizzily. He started reeling forward, and Bo was wringing his hand with the right hand which was still his.

And then Joy's voice in a shriek of excitement, Joy rushing toward him, Joy's eyes shining like stars and wide with amazement, her cheeks flushed from the cold air. Joy, he noted crazily, madly, happily, wearing the same furs she had worn last year, Joy flinging impetuously into his arms, her own reaching swiftly around his neck, drawing his face down to hers.

His own arms went convulsively around her and all at once he was sobbing, helplessly and childishly. Forgotten was Pitch then. Forgotten the letter and the doubts and bitterness. Forgotten his shallow and ill-fitting crust of borrowed cynicism. Forgotten all except that she was near him again, that the fragrance of her hair set every yearning sense in him afire, that she was more beautiful, more bewitching, more utterly imperative than ever.

Then she pushed him back, as she had a way of doing, and kept one arm around him, and still pressing tightly against him she leaned her head back to look at him. And after that George's lips fell on hers again with a lonely, dammed and terrible hunger.

He knew that Joy was lovelier, more wonderful, than she had been. He knew, in a dim sort of way, that Bo again had one of his hands and was pumping it and yelling, "Hey, break, and give me a chance!" And, as if bringing a field-glass into focus, he saw Bo take shape before him, Bo, thinner, older, a friend's face, a friend with an empty sleeve that reached into his jacket pocket without bulging it.

They burst into talking, and everybody talked, and then nobody talked, and they laughed at nothing in their wild delirium. Joy pulled George down on the fireplace stool with her, and they balanced on it as if there were not another chair in the house.

Bo left them alone for a little while, and when he came back he announced himself by whistling noisily from the hall.

The sheer happiness of it tore away George's worries in its tide. He had a weight on his mind, there were things he must say, confessions he must make, but they could all wait. These minutes were too blessed, too incredible, too fleeting and never to be regained.

It was absurd and impossible that he was received and swept back among them as if he belonged there, as if nothing had happened, and yet here he was. It was humiliating and embarrassing to be made to realize that he was their hero, their warrior home, that Joy was unquestioningly claiming him as her own. Yet there was no mistaking, no doubting the look in her eyes, the shining happiness there. There was no ignoring, however modest he bade himself be, the regal glory of a girl's pride in the man she had chosen. Never, even in the bewildered happiness of that first leave, had she been so desirable or he so hungry for her.

He knew now what a year had done for him, how it had sharpened him, ripened the rustic simplicity of his mind, and worn away the fearful hesitancy of his whole being. He had grown older, immeasurably older, than when he had stumbled down the old Victoria platform at New Year's nineteen-eighteen and gone back to the war.

And now the war was over. He could understand why he had not realized it over in Mons, where they went through their army routine with the same fatalism as they had gone to rest camp. Always they would be going back into the line at sudden notice, always there would be some of them who would never come out again, always he would be faced with the nightmare that he might never see her.

And now he realized. It had taken Joy to shoo away and banish the timid ghosts of his fears and his evil dreams that came in her absence. It was a sardonic thought that he had darkened many of his hours alone on his last leave with the worry and fret about her and the things to come. He would not similarly spoil any part of this leave with worry and fret over the things that had gone.

He realized, too, against his modest self-command, the sincere and humble homage of Bo Charlton. Yes, his great pal Bo, who had left one of his arms on the surgeon's table and his blood in the ground of France, this same Bo was giving him honour by word and gesture as the heroic veteran of this war.

It was frightening to be lionized, to be raised on their mental shoulders as a knight. It was gratifying, too, but it was a glory that he knew could not be his, an accolade he must honestly reject, a sublimation of anxiety into thanksgiving for which he felt unworthy.

Yet once again the gracious balance of their house was able to rationalize it and spare him. There was a mercy in

briefness for this sort of thing. The little gestures and the small things rushed in to relax and dismiss the strain. There was Bo pouring whiskey at the sideboard, Joy with her soap game, Dora with her tea and her fluttering, flattering sincerity that made him love her blessed plainness.

There came also the finest compliment of all, and the most acute embarrassment of all, when Joy's mother and father came home. George saw with amazed alarm that tears sprang suddenly to Alma Yorke's eyes when she kissed him and hugged him as her son and cried in her soft but broken voice:

"Oh, George! It's over at last!"

As if to help him bear what could not be borne for long, there was Wendell Yorke's more haggard face, the deep lines that were the indelible imprint of the war, but his strong, confident hand wringing George's, and his voice:

"By God, it was rough going, but you were all magnificent. Magnificent, old boy!"

He knew in his heart that what he had done and what he had given was nothing compared to what this man standing before him had done. A year had passed for him. Twelve months. But it had been like twelve years for Wendell Yorke. His tired face showed it. And yet he said to George, "*You* were magnificent."

There was the time at last when he got the opportunity and the courage together to tell Joy he was sorry about the letter. She implored him: "It was not your fault, dear. It was mine, for being so childish."

Something about this eluded him, bothered him. It could not be left like that. Chivalry or no chivalry, the blame must go where it belonged.

"I'd never trust her again," he said earnestly. "I guess I wanted to boast, telling her about you."

"Her letter was rather horrible."

"She's a fiend from—" George began, but Joy's fingers were laid on his lips.

"You mustn't say that about your cousin. After all, she loves you, or she wouldn't have done it."

"She doesn't love anybody," he burst out angrily, "except herself."

Joy bit her lip. "We must all learn to respect ourselves before we can respect others," she said loyally.

"But we don't have to be so poisonous about it."

"It's a terrible thing," Joy said, "to love someone, and know he's beyond your reach. It leaves you with a tortured feeling around the heart, like something clawing at you from the inside, and women do funny things—sometimes."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Home! Three things above other things on the earth and in the sky. The girls' voices sounded raucous and their syllables bitten. The trains looked colossal and unwieldy after the little English coaches. They served real butter to the troops on the boat and train.

Such are the major mysteries as revealed to the younger mind by the war that was to end wars.

But there was a fourth realization that transcended the rest and struck a frightening thrill and a sweet terror to his heart. He was a married man, a benedict, a man who had pledged away his freedom of thought and action long after it had been lost to him anyway. Two months now it was since Joy and he were married, in the quiet ceremony there in England. And she had sent her love and her blessing with him as he left, to find their new home and make a place for her.

March, and the brittle wind blew down from the vast and lonely horizon of snow afar. The soldiers' boots crunched on the streets where they staggered off the ship with their inflated kitbags, their souvenirs and the various rubbish they had picked up on their last leave.

Halifax came down to cheer them. Halifax, the wounded veteran of the war, still nursing its sores from the explosion that ranked among the greatest single disasters of time. Halifax with the cold wind and the warm heart, and the girls whose "r's" knifed through thin lips with a harshness that startled him. Halifax, which had been an "Eastern Canadian Port" for four years and could once again be itself.

It was fashionable to "hang the Kaiser," and George heard the cries from the crowds as if walking in his sleep. He was drugged against such histrionics of hatred. He stifled an impulse of pity. They were still in the armistice, these people, hungry to have their boys home again, hungry day after day to see the big ships come in from the sea, because one day the one they sought would be there.

He felt aloof and alone, back here among his own people. Well did he know he had no friends there, for from this place to home was farther in map and mind than back to Joy and England. Over his shoulder lay no green walls of the sacred island where his heart stayed, but the grim and hardy headlands in their wintry nakedness.

Well, he would go where there was none of this. Go and prepare a place for Joy. How long would it take, before it was possible to send for her? Before he could burrow again into civilian life and start to do the things he had vowed to do?

He must force his way into life now. No waiting. No idle whiling away of leave. No luck or trusting to it. He must make luck. He was irrevocably bound to it. He had no place left in his life for shrinking or timidity. He would even conquer a wilderness for her. And a strange wilderness was ahead, the wilderness of a career for which he was untrained and unsupported. He must go it alone, as he had never gone it alone before.

Even in the hair shirt of his thoughts, it was still a relief to stare through the train windows and imagine what must be done. That took less skill. It would be five days yet before he must be skilful.

With its abrupt seaside vigour, Halifax was suddenly behind them. Leafless trees reached their gaunt stringy necks into the sky and shook their palsied hands at each other. The sprawling silence lay like a blanket over the hills. The black train slithered and smoked among them like some prehistoric reptile breathing fire. The long horizons rose and frowned their long farewell as they slid and tumbled away into the white valleys.

On the second day they ran up the long banks of the St. Lawrence River, that migrant ocean with its ice field yet unbeaten, unaware as yet of the spring to come. Inside the coaches the battery boys played cards, or sang, or gathered in knots around crown and anchor boards, or exploded out in groups on the glistening platforms.

George joined with them when he felt he must to escape the libel of recluse or sorehead. But when he had the chance he hunched himself back in the corner of his seat with pencil and paper, wrote jerky notes, stared in a vacuum through the window, emptily counted the telegraph posts and dreamed of Joy. And someone sang in a doleful tenor:

Bring out your satin-lined hearse,
Bring out your rubber-tired hack—
I'm gonna take mah man to the graveyard

And I ain't a-gonna bring him back—
He was mah man
But he done me wrong.

The whole car was rocking to the lugubrious and immortal story of Frankie and Johnnie, and they all sang different words, so that some were yelling "Root-tee-toot-toot, three times she shoot" at the same time as others were bawling "Swore to be true to each other."

But time and the meridians and the land rolled by. Montreal behind them, the theme changed, the pulse of excitement rose, the reality of the homecoming grew. The forced enthusiasm of the earlier stretches on the tireless train yielded to a new freedom, a spontaneous and contagious thing, that sent the boys prancing up and down the aisles as they had in those dear dead days of his boyhood so few years ago, roaring greetings to every human denizen in the lonesome leathery wilds of northern Ontario.

Another day and another night and—Home! For them, yes. George surveyed them without excitement. He would say good-bye to them then, good-bye to the boys of the gun pits and the stables, good-bye to all that. They jibed:

"Don't forget to jump off when you come to the Pacific."

"Trust Battle to grab the longest ride when the government pays for it."

"What you gonna do in Vancouver, George? Be mayor?"

"What's wrong?" Dunn demanded of George in one of his brief visits to the boys from the sergeants' car. "Something's in your crop, George. Can I help?"

And George knew he was sincere. But he said: "Shucks, Bill, it's only college town to me, you know that. I've got to go on."

"Aren't you even getting off to see your folks?" asked Dunn incredulously, and George saw behind that tough, gallant front of his idol the softer nature that had been hidden for the years he had known him.

"Hell, no, I've got no folks in Winnipeg." And this time it was George who could at last feel superior. He thought spitefully of Pitch. This would show her. She'd ignored him when he left. He would ignore her when he returned. He would like to see Hattie, of course, but where was she?

He was in flight, he knew. In flight from Pitch Black already, before he reached home, because he had decided not to see her or go where she was.

"It was spite, to write as she did. I'll never forgive her," he told himself.

He laughed inwardly to remember his fears the first time he had come to this station and its platforms. He laughed still more at his fears that Pitch might pounce on him when he came this time. The platform and depot at Winnipeg were crowded with people, till it seemed the train must have plowed through and over them to get in. They caught the boys as they left the car steps and carried them. They climbed iron posts and railings. The younger of them even defied police to crawl out on steel beams above the train. Noise rained from them. It came in a shower-bath of clamour that made the senses real. It billowed out of the roof and roared above the band that played till its cheeks went red.

George's carefully thought out good-byes to the boys were swept away in the hurricane. The boys simply jumped from the coaches and were engulfed. For a dizzy moment George saw the S.M. who had somehow gained a vantage point on the stairs. His mouth was moving, wide open, with the roar of his commands to fall in. But no sound could penetrate the tidal wave of tumult. Like an uneasy sea the crowd swayed back and forth, and after a long time began rolling almost imperceptibly as a solid mass toward the exits. The battery and the brigade were home.

George received his diploma of service, the certificate signed by a demobilization officer at the barracks, stating that Gunner George Battle had been honourably discharged from the army. Reason, demobilization. He scrawled his name nervously and awkwardly on the paper and placed it in his pocket. He received his active service bonus. He walked in a haze out of the barracks. He was a civilian once again, in all but clothes.

He went to a haberdasher, bought a suit for twenty-five dollars, shoes for eleven, hat for five, shirts, ties, underwear, socks, and he dressed in the store's trying-on room. Then he had them wrap his uniform in a brown paper bundle. He screwed the returned soldier's button into his lapel and started out.

"Your hair," said the salesman, with the candour of the army—he had a wooden leg—"is a foot too long."

George looked ruefully into the three-way mirror. "That's right. Thanks."

He went back to the barber shop of his college days where he had spent agonized moments. The barber greeted him casually, as if he'd never been away.

"Give me the whole programme," George said.

"Yes, sir," said the barber politely. George looked at him in the mirror from his chair. He had once thought this man the model of sartorial, tonsorial and sophisticated elegance! Why, the man was grey, and his collar was none too neat, his white jacket frayed at the cuffs. The whole place looked seedy.

"Where's the shine that used to be here?" George asked loftily.

"Army," said the barber briefly. "He stayed there. So many of your old crowd joined up."

"Yes, I went over myself for a while," said George, and hoped it did not sound like boasting.

"Yes, sir."

George had two hours before his train left for the West. His curiosity mastered him, and he sidled into a telephone booth. He thumbed the telephone book and called Pitch's number.

The operator told him: "Sorry, sir, the number has been taken out."

He hung up angrily and strode out with his paper parcel. Now that he could not find Pitch, he wanted to see her. He thought malevolently of how he could tell her that her miserable trickiness had for ever branded her with his contempt. But Hattie! What finer irony than to see Hattie! He walked back self-consciously and phoned the theatre where she had worked. The girl who answered had never heard of Hattie. She was plainly bored with the whole idea.

"But I've got to find her. Could you ask any of the chorus if they've seen her? Maybe some of the girls know where she is."

"Chorus? Mister, this is a moving-picture house. The only chorus we have is the piano player, and she won't be back till half-past four."

"Oh! Sorry." George hung up the receiver and stared vacantly at the instructions over the instrument. He absent-mindedly put another nickel in the slot, then grinned sheepishly when the operator's voice demanded a number, for he had none to give. "Sorry," he said again, and hung up the telephone stealthily.

Chump that he was! Why hadn't he looked up her address? It might be close. He fished for the grimy notebook he carried. It was in his tunic, and his tunic was in the brown paper parcel. He picked up the parcel, stepped out of the phone booth, started to undo the difficult knots, laid the parcel down uncertainly, saw someone coming toward the booth, picked up the parcel again and hurried out.

What to do? A fellow couldn't stand in the street and let People think he'd lost his mind. George started to walk, lugging his heavy bundle. He stopped on a street corner. He knew what corner it was, but he pretended to study the signs. Then he crossed over to a street car platform as nonchalantly as he could and boarded the first car that came, forgetting to notice where it was going.

"Oh, well," he thought, "doesn't matter much."

His thoughts went back to the battery boys he had left.

"Poor dopes!" he thought. "Big celebration for you tonight, and then tomorrow the old grind—if you can find a job. You in the grocery store, you in the blacksmith shop, you driving a delivery wagon, you trying to get back tending bar when

all the bars are closed—Look at me! Your fun's over after tonight. Mine's only started. I'm going where I don't know a damn soul, see? I don't know what I'm going to do. I've got hundreds of dollars, and when I get a job and make some money my wife is coming. Get that? What have you to show?"

He sat on the hard polished benches in the station and watched the clock. Joy hovered over him. Joy's fingers played lightly with his hair, brushed her face tenderly against the beard bristle. No one paid any attention to them there together. He was rather proud of his new suit and his hat and shirt and loud socks. To these people, in their endless quest through the waiting-rooms, he was just some fellow who'd never been away, another of the stay-at-homes, the draft dodgers.

"But we know better, don't we, Joy?"

He sat up stiffly and realized that he had spoken aloud. He looked suspiciously around. "Keep quiet, you fool," he told himself. "These people will think you're nuts."

He had a consuming desire to write to Joy, to pour out to her all the unexpressed longings of this homecoming. But, having no pencil or paper handy, he sat instead on the hard bench and wondered in misery about her. He thought of her with Bo. He realized, with peace returned, all the things that had endeared London to her would return to her stronger than ever. They were part of her. How can she, he asked savagely, look forward with any pleasure to this wild adventure with a young country bumpkin she hardly knows? And he thought involuntarily of a phrase from one of Pitch's letters:

The picture of these war brides is really pathetic. Unused to our ways, among people who think their accents affected, they remind you of what Papa used to call the "bloody Englishmen." They mean well, but they are simply hopeless.

"Spiteful wretch," thought George, and shook the black memory of her out of his mind, only to have it come bouncing back again. It was exciting to think of her here, a few blocks away, unknowing that he was home. It would be a blow to her pride at least, he thought with glum satisfaction.

"What would she say if she knew I sat here alone in the station on my first day home?" That, he vowed fiercely, Pitch would never know. He cared nothing for her feelings, but she would never have that club of ridicule to hold over him. She was through holding clubs over him.

He suddenly asked, "What am I doing here? I've got the shakes, that's what. I'm afraid to face it. Face what? God knows. Well, I'll tell you, Battle. All the other fellows will have better stories to tell about their experiences than you. People will throw you a pitying look, and try to talk to you because they feel sorry for you. 'How interesting!' they'll say, and then they'll be gone, bored to tears with you and glad to be rid of you.

"And when the boys want their old jobs back, or new ones, what will they get? 'Oh, yes, you must come around and see me—Let's see, well, some time—No; sorry, there isn't a thing right now, but I'll keep you in mind.' I feel sorry for those poor suckers who have to take what they can get, who had something before and expect it again. I had nothing before. Nothing but dreams. And now I'm going to write a great story that will make me famous. Then I can take whatever job I like—

"Oh, you will, eh! You'll eat dirt, Battle, and be afraid of everybody, and you know it. Why, you're no hero, you aren't even wounded. What claim have you to sympathy? Two months from now they'll forget you were even away. They'll forget all about you—little man!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Yo'-all gets a mighty fine look at the big stones up ahead, suh," said the porter the next day.

"Eh! Stones—what's that?" George stirred out of a day dream. The train had stopped at one of the innumerable little towns with their long wooden platforms, brown stations and red wheat elevators that had dotted the prairies everywhere. The endless trek through the still tablelands was over now. The inert plains had begun to undulate, to heave into long rolling hills and valleys. The wheat fields had fled and in their place were the colossal reaches of tufted grass. Here and there a fence ran swiftly along the tracks a while, then, as if giving up the strenuous race, veered off crazily into the hills and vanished.

"The Rockies, suh," said the porter. "Mighty cleah. Yas-suh."

"The Rockies!" George tramped out, and a sharp, hard wind smacked him. He was glad now he had his uniform on, not that silly suit he had bought. He stood on the platform and gazed in awe at the lonely, jagged skyline of the peaks fifty miles ahead. As if carved out with a cosmic knife they stood, bald, white, terribly beautiful against the Western sky.

It was breath-taking, and yet it warmed him to think he had actually pictured them like this. He had wanted to think of them as he wanted to think of his new life—an abrupt eruption out of the dead level of his mediocrity, a sudden soaring into new heights among the gods of his dreams. Like all the magnificent dreams he had had, would there be a sudden end to them, an abrupt emergence into the old way again after one brief, inspiring enthusiasm?

Hours later, as they plowed up the long reaches of the Bow Valley into the pathway among the peaks, he sat in the observation platform and drank in the glory around him. Yes, it was as magnificent as he had hoped. There was no disappointment. The sheer rock cliffs that now shot away from the trackside, the boiling blue water of the Bow that one minute rushed beside them, then darted away into the trees, the amazing speed of the train that rolled so easily into this kingdom of the giants.

He was happy, in a lonely and complacent splendour that night. Morning came, and he feasted hungry eyes on the rampant green growth that slid richly by the train, endless green under the heavy clouds and the soft abundance of the rain. Behind him lay the white, stern world of conquest, here lay the lovely fertility of the earth, flung about with a prodigal's lavishness. The great drive wheels were turning faster now, with a more eager rhythm as the black engine sniffed the Western sea. He breathed the air in rapture, for this was to be his air.

They rolled down the shores of the long inlet and his heart thumped unmercifully. For now his train, which for days had been his rambling home, assuming all responsibility for him, making all his decisions for him, was suddenly a relentless monster, hurling him into a new world he was not prepared to meet, and glad to be rid of him.

As it rounded a curve into the yards he saw the coaches of soldiers far ahead, khaki shoulders and arms at every window. These men were home! They knew exactly where to go and what to do. George knew neither. There would be more receptions, more bands, more excitement, and he would again be out of it. He would be hovering on the sidelines again, pretending to himself that he was superior to all that. Yet, though he might deceive people, he could not deceive himself.

Back there through the mountains, in that world of make-believe, his future in Vancouver had seemed very much at his bidding. Now it was aloof, uncompromising.

He thought of that again at the station, under the long smoky roof of the platforms. The soldiers poured out of their coaches up ahead, in among the waiting and weaving crowds and formed into line. George got off at the other end of the train along with civilians, for he felt out of place among the soldiers, since they were Seaforths, and he was of the artillery.

And so he waited with the other passengers while the crowd stormed and flung itself about the soldiers, and the pipes blew, and the troops swung off through the sea of humanity into the exits. When they were all gone, the way was clear for the passengers, who good-naturedly took second place. George trooped along with them. In front of the station there was the old familiar review, the shouts of command, and away went the boys, swinging to the pipes. The excited crowds cheered themselves hoarse and waved flags and hats. George was the least emotional of them all.

He saw a brisk, smartly dressed man with a hard hat exchanging greetings with a group of the onlookers. The man seemed to be giving instructions, for he pointed here and there, then abruptly lifted his hat, turned away from them and came walking rapidly toward George.

George watched his quick stride, and envied him his evident singleness of purpose. There was a man who knew where he wanted to go, made his decisions fast, and hurried to fulfil them. "Like I'll be, when I get into the swing of it," he resolved.

The man looked about fifty, lean, moustached, walked with athletic vigour and, as he came closer, George saw that his brows were puckered deeply on either side of the bridge of his nose. He lifted a hand sharply in greeting to some acquaintance, shouted at him, and his face was suddenly suffused with a smile that altered his whole expression.

His eyes swung back, and fell on George, who was wondering where to go, and mentally measuring the prospects of the visible hotel signs.

The man stopped in his tracks. "Hullo!" he said. "Missed the parade? Oh, no, you're not with the Seaforths. Just came in?"

"Yes," said George. "I wasn't with any unit, though."

"So I see. Artillery, eh? Are you the only survivor?"

"Not quite that bad," George grinned. "I was demobilized in Winnipeg."

"Oh, but your people are living here?"

"No, I'm on my own."

"Family in the East? I suppose you saw them, coming through?"

"My family are rather scattered out," George hedged.

"You mean your father and mother—?"

"Well, you see, they're both dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are there any others?"

"My brother was killed in France. I have one sister—she married a school teacher."

"I'm sorry—I mean, about your brother. You saw your sister?"

"No, I didn't. They're down in Kentucky, and I hadn't time to go that way."

"It is a bit off the track. You've business, no doubt?"

"Well, no, not exactly. But I have to get started. I have a wife and—"

"Here?"

"No, in England." George felt as if he were being cross-examined.

"Oh, married over there, did you?"

George nodded. He liked the man because he didn't say: "Oh, I see, war bride."

"And you have a job waiting here?"

George coloured. "No—I'm afraid not."

The man smiled faintly. "Then what was all your hurry to get here?"

"So I could find one, I guess."

"What is your line? What did you work at before you enlisted?"

"Well, not much of anything, I guess. I just finished college, and then my father died, and I had to wind up the farm."

"And did you—wind it up?" The man's face wrinkled in amusement.

"Yes, in a sort of way," George made a wry face.

"I see by your expression you don't like farming. Too bad. At least a farmer needn't starve to death. So you're going to look for a job. What kind?"

"Anything I can get, I guess."

"Don't say that," the man's voice sharpened. He was evidently used to giving orders. "You must have some idea."

"Well, I want to write—and then get with a newspaper somehow."

"Hm-m. Got that a little twisted, didn't you? Most fellows would say get with a newspaper, and then write."

"I thought I'd write a story—about the war," George defended, wondering why he told this to a stranger.

"But so many are doing that," the man objected. "The bookshelves are choked with war books."

"Not the kind I would write," George began, and added hastily: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to boast. I—just think—"

"Don't worry about that," the other smiled, and his face lighted up oddly with it. "If you don't blow your horn, no one else will do it for you. But, tell me, where are you going? Can I give you a lift? My car is here."

"I'm afraid I don't just know. Thought I'd find a cheap hotel somewhere. You see, I haven't much."

"I shouldn't wonder, coming out of the army. But don't do that. The cheap hotels are no place to write in. The good hotels are too expensive for you. What you need is a room in some quiet house. I'll put you up in my caretaker's place till you get a chance to look around. Come on."

He picked up George's haversack and made off rapidly.

"But—I can't—you see—" George lugged the kitbag after him. The man did not even pause.

"Why not? You can't stay on the station platform. There's plenty of room and the place is comfortable. You could come in the house with us, but there's always such an ungodly row going on. You wouldn't like it."

The man paused at a Cadillac coupe parked by the curb, and threw the haversack in. "Climb in," he said, and got in himself. They drove off through the traffic.

"What is your name?"

"Battle—George Battle."

"Good name, for the life you've been leading. Mine's Clayton. Some of my cards in the glove pocket there. Reach in and get one. If it's ever handy, use it."

George reached hesitantly for the little door in the dash.

"Go on, don't be afraid. It won't bite." Clayton's voice had an odd combination of sharpness and friendliness, and George was reassured. He found some cards, dumped loosely with some newspapers, envelopes, a pair of pliers, parts of a windshield wiper, and several pencils.

George held the card up. It said: "*The Pacific Post*, Reginald C. Clayton, Publisher."

George's heart leaped into his mouth. "A—newspaper—publisher!" he gasped. "Are you really!"

"Anything wrong with that?" Clayton smiled.

"No, but—Gad, it seems too good to be true!"

The man looked at him curiously. "What's good about it?" he demanded.

"Why—meeting a newspaper publisher—and me looking for a job in a newspaper!"

"Oh, have I given you a job?"

George's face fell. "Oh, I didn't quite mean that. Guess I was just thinking too fast."

"You can't be wrong doing that. Fast thinking isn't exactly an epidemic in this world. But you said you wanted to write. What did—" He broke off, and pulled his car to the curb. "Here I am," he said, getting out the left side, ignoring traffic. "Come in and see me this afternoon at—Wait, I was going to put you up, wasn't I?"

"Oh, I couldn't let you do that."

"Never mind. Can you drive a car?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"Nothing to be afraid of. Can you follow directions? You take a street car number—Oh, by the time I explain it to you I could have you there." He climbed in again, and before George could protest he started the engine, yanked the gear lever back and they shot into the street.

"What do you remember about the war, and about England, that all the other fellows haven't remembered—and written?" Clayton asked.

"It's not what we remember about the war, but what we can apply of it to the post-war that counts, I feel," George said, stung by the challenge.

"Hm-m! That's getting somewhere. And what do you see in the post-war?"

"Mainly the danger that there'll be too much pre-war about it, I think. It was like going to college, rather. You don't get a real education in college, you only train yourself to get one."

"Well, what did we train ourselves for in the war?"

"I think we trained—or should have trained—ourselves to think that we didn't fight for the things we were so fond of saying we fought for."

"And why didn't we?" Clayton's eyes gleamed with sudden interest.

"Because they weren't worth it. If we drift back to the opinions that we had when we started to fight, then we'll have lost the war."

"That's true enough. You're rather bitter, aren't you?"

"No, I don't feel that way. I didn't come back to lick the wounds I didn't get, if that's what you mean."

"Then you must have some definite ideals—they make the difference between a crank and a creator. Which are you?"

"Not a crank, I hope," George flushed. "And as to being a creator, I'm hardly in a position to boast. I have visions and dreams about what I'd like to see and do—"

"Plenty of people have those," Clayton interrupted brusquely. "But it's no good just projecting yourself into another world. You have to get there with the realities at hand."

"That's just what I want to get at. I want to see people equipped to live, and love, and feel secure. The essayists have spent four years fighting for ideals and freedom and catch-words. But the soldiers fought for a hill, or a trench, or a blockhouse—and the whole world fought for natural resources."

"But what use were the hill, or the trench, or the blockhouse, except for the safety, security or the jumping-off place they

afforded? Doesn't it all add up to the same thing?"

"Up to that point, yes," George admitted. "But it's the use they made of them that really decided whether they were worth the price—"

"Yes, go on. *Say* that!"

George reddened with embarrassment. "I just *was* saying it when—"

Clayton laughed, a merry, free, friendly laugh, and George's embarrassment melted in his warm rush of liking. "Can you use a typewriter?"

"Yes. But I have none with me."

"I can see that. Never mind. See Rogers. He'll fix you up."

"But—who is Mr. Rogers?" George asked hesitantly.

"He's my editor. How much money do you want?"

"Do you—mean—I'm hired?"

"We'll see. I'll pay you forty dollars a week."

George whistled. "That's—that's fine. I'll guarantee to—"

"Never mind the guaranteeing. Leave that to the circulation department. An editor's job is to write, to find others who can write and to pick their brains. Can you write editorials?"

"I can certainly try," George said eagerly.

"Not enough! Nobody *tries* to write editorials. It either explodes out of you or it isn't an editorial, it's an essay—and usually rubbish."

He drove into a wide gateway, and rounded a driveway to stop by the front of a severe-looking house.

"You can work in the den. There's a typewriter in there, and all the things you need. Tell Mrs. Clayton I sent you in—Here, better take your bags in. The caretaker can look after them. Or tell the maid."

George's heart was suddenly thumping until it stifled him at his sudden and uncertain fate. He looked at the front door in such obvious panic that Clayton smiled, a quick, impulsive smile, clamped on the parking brake, stamped up the step carrying George's kitbag, and motioned George to bring his haversack and parcels.

He rang the bell and burst in when a maid answered. She was a middle-aged housekeeper. "Tell Jenks to come and get these," Clayton told her. "Tell him to have the clothes pressed, then bring them back and get Mr. Battle's uniform and press that and bring it back at once. Show Mr. Battle to the den. He wants to work there." He rattled off the orders at lightning speed. "Is Mrs. Clayton at home?"

"No, sir. She said she might be back at lunch time."

"Good. Give Mr. Battle some lunch and tell Jenks to look after him." He turned briskly to George. "Hope you will find your way around. You can change in Jenks' place, or upstairs. There's a washroom behind this corner," he waved a hand. "Ask Nina for anything you want."

George groped for breath, swallowed, sought some way to fend off the accumulating terrors ahead. "This is an imposition—" he protested feebly, fencing for time. "I don't feel—it's not fair to—"

"Sorry I can't sit down and have a real talk," said Clayton, ignoring his protests and striding to the door. "We'll have chances for that later."

"Yes, I'll be glad to!" George stammered. And he watched through the window in goggle-eyed bewilderment as Clayton ran down the steps to his car, and tore around the driveway as if shot from a gun.

"Will you come this way, sir?" the maid asked him. George followed her obediently through the hall to a door on the left. It opened into a sunny room, one wall entirely of windows, and appeared to be part of an ell in the house. Pictures lined the walls, shelves were packed with books. Nina indicated the typewriter, and placed paper beside it. George saw, with a nostalgic thrill, that it was the familiar copy paper of newspaper offices that he had known years before in haphazard and part-time jobs of his college days.

Nina withdrew and closed the door, with the request that he ring if he desired anything. To his great relief, he was alone. He sank down in the leather-backed chair before the typewriter. He wanted time to digest this fabulous fortune that had fallen on him out of the skies. It was all fantastic, frightening, and was, of course, a dream. He would wake up if he shook his head, perhaps.

He found his eyes focussing on a woman's picture which, he thought from its prominence, must be Mrs. Clayton. He studied her dark, comprehending eyes, and wondered what sort of woman she must be to keep pace with an impulsive man like that.

He studied the desk. It was littered, piles of notes here and there, copies of *The Pacific Post* piled in one corner, with large pieces torn out of their pages. Pencils lay, ready sharpened. The desk of a busy man—No, not only busy. An impulsive, headstrong man, who made up his mind fast and was acting on it before others had decided.

He braced himself stiffly before the desk, threw back his shoulders. He, too, would be like that. He, too, had made a swift decision—"No," he thought with honest candour. "It was made for me. But here I am."

He tapped awkwardly on the typewriter, was pleasantly surprised to find that he could write, "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party," with only three mistakes.

His thoughts rambled, and he and Joy were in the mountains, where the silent peaks lifted their jagged foreheads to God. Their arms around each other, he came with Joy through the chiselled canyons, saw the stern fortresses of the wilderness crumble and spill away into the softer moods of the deep valleys. He tried to rehearse his feelings. And all at once he gripped the desk in excitement.

Would he try it? Would he dare present Mr. Clayton with such a presumptuous attempt! Why, it was cosmic, but—"Stick to what you know." The words kept dinning in his ears. "Well, I know that, because I thought it out all myself."

He fumbled then, wrote hesitant words, tore the sheets out and crumpled them guiltily into the waste basket. His stuttering fingers picked out the keys:

"I shook hands with God in the high hills—"

No, that wouldn't do. No editorial ever started like that. He began to perspire. Drops trickled from his armpits and ran down his ribs to his hot underwear where it was tight around his waist. He felt stifled, took off his tunic, loosened his shirt neck. He went grimly to work to tell, in an impersonal way, the things that were all but next to his soul, the yearning of the pilgrim, the daring of the heights, the company of sureness, the road of a young nation—

He read it many times, rewrote it, then part of it again, finally laid it doubtfully away. For another idea had come. He wanted to record, in some way, his gratitude for this inexplicable hospitality, for this friendly fate that had overtaken him, but to do it objectively, to point a moral.

Clayton stormed in at four-thirty. "How did you make out?" he demanded.

"I did a little something. I hope they'll do." George pushed the papers toward him. The dream might end any time now.

"Hm-m!" said Clayton, and sat down at his desk, motioned George to sit opposite, pulled the papers apart and seized a pencil. "What's this! 'The Boys Come Home.'" He started reading rapidly. George watched him, saw his eyes light suddenly, then his forehead wrinkle in a frown as he went rapidly down the sheet.

"But this won't do," Clayton began severely, and George's heart froze. Then it leaped again, for Clayton was speaking:

"Good literature. Where did you learn to write? But this is not an editorial—it's a eulogy. Too flattering. Never give these people the idea that they can come down to the station and cheer these boys home, and then forget them. We're responsible, don't you see? Now, let's go through this—" His pencil began to fly. He crossed whole phrases out, phrases

that had cost George hours of sweat and toil. He wrote between the lines, in the margins, then turned the copy paper upside down and wrote on the top, almost without a pause. Then he read another page and did the same thing over again. George watched in dismay as his cherished opus was mangled and doctored.

"Have to put a snarl in these things," Clayton explained, not looking up from his wiggling pencil.

"There!" he said suddenly. "I think you'll stir them up with that. Nice work, Battle. You've done a good bit of writing there." And he handed the finished product to the dazed George.

"Just leave that," he said, "we'll go through this other one." George saw his eye roving down the page. He must be reading half a dozen lines at once. Then all at once his eyes shone, stopped racing, went back to the top of the first page and started more slowly. George's heart thumped so that he feared Clayton would hear it.

"Great piece of work! Just the idea I had myself when I came through the Rockies the first time. Very strange. Shows I must have been right. Now we'll have to make one or two changes."

Once more his pencil was flying, the copy paper twisting as he sought new places to scribble. Once more it slashed down tender shoots of literature with a ruthless swath across the page. But Clayton was eagerly filling in the blanks. He went on and on to the end, finished writing, tossed the sheets over to George, leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands.

"That's really remarkable, Battle. Two fine articles you've done. Read them over, with the few notes I've made."

George was tracing out the pencilled amendments. The editorials had ceased to be his. One horrified glance told him that. It seemed to him now that all the things he had liked best were crossed out, that the things he had put in merely as bridges between his flowery phrases were left in, that all the worthwhile things in both articles were Clayton's.

"But they're—your articles," he blurted out. "I didn't—"

"Nonsense, they're yours. Maybe touched up a bit. You put the whole idea together. We'll run them tomorrow."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Joy, his wife, came soon to George; with her came Bo. And he had need of them both, for, after the first wild flush of success when Clayton accepted his editorials, he found that his idealism lay at the end of a road of toil and not, as he had dreamed, under the spell of inspiration. For inspiration itself, he learned, was mostly perspiration.

There were days when he tore his hair in vain to produce the things he felt must be wanted. He wondered why his thoughts had been so clear and closely knit before he started, and why they were so vague and elusive when he tried to express them.

"Keep them short," Clayton exhorted. "Never try to exhaust your subject. You'll always exhaust the reader first. But let's have facts. Theories are not enough."

And so, to produce facts, George pawed through the files of *The Post*, trying to absorb the swift rush of the world's and his country's events. One telling of a fact, he always had thought, should be enough. But he was learning now that facts must be told over and over again.

It was on one of these quests that he came upon a terrifying piece of news. In the women's page of *The Post* he saw, with eyes that stared out of his head, the picture of Miss Margaret Black, with the information that Miss Black was the soloist at the First Presbyterian Church, that her climb in the world of music had been phenomenal, and that she had returned from a concert tour. It told of her compositions, her classes, her high honours with the Toronto Conservatory, her trial engagement with the San Francisco Opera, her hopes for an operatic career.

George read the lines through twice to make sure there was no mistake. "Pitch! Out here! Of all places in the world, why'd she have to pick this? Why couldn't the opera people take her on? And I thought I'd left her safely behind for all time! Small world! Why didn't she at least wait? Now, when Joy comes and finds she's here, and was here before I came, what'll she think?"

In a fog of dread, he knew it meant trouble, and he began to convince himself: "Of course, I don't have to see her. Maybe she won't even know I'm here. Might go on for years and never see her. Well, here's hoping for the best."

And so, the next day, the office switchboard called to say that Miss Black wished to see him.

George rose with a groan, and walked like a condemned man to the reception room. He paused a moment to look at her, and saw her there, with her wide-brimmed hat, her smart ensemble, her knees crossed sedately as only Pitch contrived to cross her knees, her figure in repose—a girl at her ease.

She heard him then, and sprang to her feet to come toward him. George saw her face limned against the perfect coiffure of her black hair, her eyes shining with a compelling and hypnotic gladness, her smile a destroying thing that shook his props away and made quicksand of his knees.

Her gloved hand was held out to him. She threw back her head, and the light illumined her face. A face of appalling liveliness, with not a flaw. An arch in her neck, her young bosom already mature beyond her years, its lines flowing out in a swift challenging contour.

"Georgie!" Her voice was cool, rippling music. "My dear! How good to see you again!"

He longed for Bo at that moment. He yearned for the smooth words Bo would have to meet this young destroyer, with her tempest of memories and her mesmerism that seemed to be sweeping away all his anger and his defences before he'd had a chance to mobilize them.

"But you're a very bad boy!" she was saying now. "Coming home and never telling us where you were after all these months. Fancy you coming away out here all by yourself. And look at you now—Right from the war into a great big position!"

"Oh, I guess I'm not so much. But you—How come you were away out here without telling anyone either? Where's Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie? And Harry and—"

"Why, didn't you know? Papa and Mama are in Winnipeg, retired, if you please, for the second time." George's heart

beat feebly, and sank back into an abyss of despair. "They're simply dying to hear about you. And so am I. Wasn't it cheeky of me to come and drag you out of your office! But I simply had to, the moment I learned about you."

"How—did you find out?"

"The strangest thing! Yesterday afternoon I sang at the Women's Auxiliary, and at tea afterward I was talking with Mrs. Clayton. We talked of the war, and of all the young men who had come back that we knew. And, of course, I told her about my big cousin—I didn't confess you'd hidden on me! And Mrs. Clayton told me about your coming, and of Mr. Clayton running into you and putting you to work before you even had a chance to breathe, and how terrible she thought it was. Now, wasn't that a heavenly coincidence?"

"Yes—wasn't it! Say, that certainly was!" George simulated enthusiasm. And to himself he thought: "Is that the sort of coincidence it's going to be always! Well, I'll see to that. I'll be as busy as blazes if she suggests anything. I'll tell her nothing."

And so, having vowed to himself he wouldn't, he went to her apartment that evening for dinner. Gradually he told her everything that could rightly be told. And he saw Pitch wince perceptibly when it was about Joy. And because he had sworn he wouldn't, he showed her the picture of Joy he carried, and heard her gasp and say, with probably a shade too much generosity: "My, isn't she beautiful! The perfect English type." Before it was over, he congratulated himself that he had not gone further even than he did. Instead, he comforted himself.

"Oh, well, it's a small world, and she'd find out, anyway. And I certainly told her off about the letter she wrote to Joy."

So he had, but she had brushed it merrily and imperiously aside, and he had seemed to get nowhere. He would leave it to Joy to settle that.

Pitch took up where she had left off, he could see. She was more bewitching, more terrifyingly beautiful in her maturity, her black eyes had a deeper mystery, a look in them that made him squirm, as if she knew everything.

And so it was a mercy to him when Joy came to join him and give him once more an anchor.

Bo had written: "You're such a howling success as an adventurer, that I'm going to chuck it over here and strike out myself. So expect me along with your wife."

George had read that, when it came, and had sat with a dreamy smile: "Adventurer! A timid, quaking jelly mould! Bo with his one arm is stronger than I am with two. Why, he might even be able to handle Pitch!"

Chapter Twenty-Five

The tumultuous twenties of the twentieth century brought George Battle the conviction that there was no final solution for any problem, including Pitch Black.

But to balance the scales they brought to Joy and him their two children, Hal first and then Alma, as they had dreamed and planned in their brief honeymoon days of the Armistice.

He could not accept the popular illusion that a new world had been born, for all the fantastic boom and inflation.

Now, after eight years, when the twenties were roaring on to their zenith, he could look back on them and measure his happiness against his sorrows and feel vastly rewarded. The years had been good to him, he knew, beyond his wildest youthful vision. It was true that they had started out by bringing Pitch Black again into his life. But that, he realized at last, had come with a shock of its inevitability, rather than as a genuine surprise. Moreover, the merciful erosion of the years had worn away some of the harshness of his emotions when she had come upon him almost before he had arrived himself.

Perhaps, he had sometimes thought, the solution would lie with Bo. His brilliant cousin would make a superb foil for Bo, for his stabbing initiative and his boundless ingenuity which he tried to cloak with a pretence of cynicism and nonchalance. Yes, Pitch Black would make him more than a foil, she would be a rich complement to this pal he had known in youth and now in years.

Bo, however, had gone into his own career with unerring directness, for barely was he home than he had picked up almost where he had left off in England, his peacetime absorption in the drug business. With his own qualities and his connections, Bo had speedily established himself with a wholesale and retail drug concern, and it looked as if he would have little time, even if he had the inclination, for Pitch Black.

Bo, indeed, had seemed to concentrate his concern on Joy and George, and then on their new family. For this George was thankful, on Joy's behalf as well as his own. That Bo should be always a part of their lives had seemed so natural that he could hardly imagine it otherwise.

And to Joy, away from her own family moorings as she was, Bo was the eternal bridge between the old life and the new. His very impersonality was a strength on which she might lean. He helped her, as he had always meant to help her, to understand George.

Bo had been to Joy, in the years gone by, a boy who had tumbled her about in their games with royal impartiality for her sex. His family and hers had been close together for a generation.

George had wondered candidly: "Was Bo ever in love with her? No, no! That's disloyal to him to think like that. But what would be more natural? And how could Joy have helped seeing how superior he was—and is!"

He had once excused these thoughts. He knew, as life went on, that they had been mere descents into self-pity and jealousy, and that he had hated himself for them afterward.

It was more satisfying, in surveying those past years, to recall his wholesome delight at seeing Bo and Pitch with each other. His devout hope was that they might at last come together, and he had to admit that their meetings gave scant outward sign of that. But their rapier thrusts at each other, their almost instinctive conflict, were exhilarating always.

When the babies had come to Joy and George, this Bo-Pitch riddle had shown hilarious angles as well—a hilarity that masked deeper feelings. For Bo, from the first, had assumed a droll and affectionate proprietorship over the children. And Pitch had squeaked her delight when she could come to be, first with Hal, and then with Alma. She would rush to them when they called in their diaper dictatorship for service, and hold them, soggy as they were, close to her own immaculately clad body while she changed them.

George thought he could understand what it meant. Even while he laughed at Bo's inimitable scorn for Pitch's maternal attentions, he revelled again in the sweet, swift agony he had known while the babies were being brought into the world. It had been particularly so of Hal, the first; for when Alma arrived he had learned some of Joy's sureness, some of her matter-of-fact confidence in the face of things which terrified him.

He had felt there, in Joy's hours of labour with Hal, that he stood at last on the threshold of a mystery too profound for him, on a causeway into the unknown which he never could pass. For then, in the ancient way, his wife was sharing her mind and soul with the vigorous little being which was to be born. Just as the first cell of life had divided to make two cells, so now Joy seemed dividing.

In those hours, and in the hours leading up to them, she had seemed to be slipping away from him, intangibly, uncannily, into some different plane whence she beckoned to him but where he could not go. To this important atom which was to be Hal, she had imparted the stuff of growth, the native intelligence of her, the spark of her own self, the teaching and the ways and the lore of her fathers.

"Isn't it odd," Pitch one day had said to Joy, "that George should have run right into the arms of the very man who could do most for him? It seems the strangest coincidence that I should have met them through some of the Symphony people—Mr. Clayton was always a great supporter of our Symphony, you know."

Joy was thinking: "*Our* Symphony! In a moment the creature is going to tell me she got George's job for him."

"I'm afraid," said Pitch, who was not afraid, "I bored him once when we got talking about art. He said he thought music was the finest self-expression of all. Of course, that was just flattery, and I told him I didn't quite agree. Writing, I told him, seemed to me to give the mind and the heart more scope, for it was an outlet not only for the emotions but for the instinct as well."

"That in turn, of course, was flattery," said Joy, "since Mr. Clayton is a writer and a crusader."

Pitch ignored the thrust, though it was said sweetly. "And then I began boasting, I'm afraid, that I knew writers. I really had George in mind, because he has done so much and tried so hard, you know, to have things published. I used to read them years ago, and my heart ached for him."

She did not blush at this lie, and if Joy was impressed she did not show it either. Pitch went on: "That made Mr. Clayton curious at once, and when I mentioned that George was my cousin, he asked me all about him, and where he was serving overseas, and if I heard from him often. I told him, of course, that I did—and just think, all this time George was running away from me and all his friends—or so he thought—coming out here! I'm so proud of George. It didn't take Mr. Clayton long to realize that his guinea-pig experiment was a serious matter, did it?"

"Guinea pig? I don't understand," said Joy, although she did understand, and behind her smile her heart froze against the brittle creature who had offended her.

"He's such a man of impulses, you know," said Pitch, with careful innocence. "Always picking people's brains. A strange man coming off the train, a soldier with a soldier's reflexes, a soldier's opinion of the country he was coming back to—What more natural than to experiment? That was his first impulse only, mind you. But George's personality must have instantly shown him that by some queer good fortune he had stumbled on a genius. Don't you just *feel* it!"

"At least that's better than telling me she got the job for George," Joy thought. To Pitch she said:

"I don't wonder. I felt George's magnetism the first evening I met him, in Trafalgar Square. It seemed that we must have known each other before—we were in love almost instantly, I think."

Pitch suddenly uncurled one shapely leg off her knee, and leaned forward to arch her neck in a gesture she knew was attractive, because she had practised it before the mirror. It was a swagger that never failed to draw a man's attention. It would do no harm to remind Joy of it.

"I do think it's too, too wonderful, your meeting over there, and being married, and the baby coming, and you with such courage to come out here. Of course, you had Bo to look after you. But you are so capable."

Joy thought, with cold amusement: "If they took the first pronoun out of the language the poor dear would be reduced to warbling the scales." To Pitch she said:

"But George had dreamed for years of coming to the Pacific coast. He used to talk for hours when we were on leave together—" Pitch winced perceptibly, and Joy thought: "That was a bull's-eye!" And she continued: "—of how we would build our own home together, and we would own a boat so we could go for long trips through the straits, and tie up just anywhere as if we were explorers. Men love to dream—and so do women."

Pitch clasped her hands and rolled her eyes upward in pretended delight at the thought. "How perfectly wonderful!" she squealed. "It would be the ideal life—but, of course, realities, you know."

"Yes, realities," Joy agreed. "It's nice to dream about that sort of life, and of the sun always shining, and to forget that it rains about half the time—" she gestured toward the streaming window.

"This damp climate," she went on, deliberately, "is bad for bronchial affections, they say. Of course, that doesn't apply to me, after England, and since I'm a native daughter anyway. I do hope George will be immune, although it wouldn't be fatal to writers. But singers are different, with the throat and vocal chords so sensitive. I hadn't thought of that," finished Joy, who had just been thinking smartly about it.

"It's actually the other way around, I'm told," Pitch said at once. "The dry, dusty climates are very hard on the throat. But in the moist climates, such as here and in England, people develop a sort of protective phlegm—" Pitch thought to herself: "I hope I got that right!"

George found them smiling, but with lightning in the air, and he thought happily: "I'm betting on Joy. Wonder what it's about?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I wish you'd come home oftener," George told Bo Charlton. "Every time I talk with you I get all fired with ideas, and Clayton asks me what the devil is wrong with me I can't write that way all the time. And then when you're gone I run down again."

"What you need is a storage battery," said Bo.

"What I need is more intellect," George amended. "I've got such great hopes for things—if only I could get them into order and tell them. It makes my heart ache to think of the millions of people who have a ceiling just above where they have climbed to, and they can go no higher. Think of the eternal drudgery they face, always longing, always dreaming, always short of what they need."

"You ought to make a good reformer. All crackpots begin that way."

"Crackpot or not, there's a mighty human drama to be caught up in the story of the little people, and I want to write it. But I'm confused. I look at myself and think of what I've failed to do. Who am I to lead or even take part in the mighty crusade I dream about?"

"You're not doing so badly, old boy. Home, lovely wife and children, a car—"

"Not yet paid for! And when we get things, that I suggest, I always feel that Joy's gone without something she wanted, and that we needed a great deal more. She wouldn't complain. She's too loyal for that."

"Living over your means, of course. So am I. So are people everywhere. So why try to do anything about it? Why don't you give in to it and be like me—corrupt, conceited and content?"

"Because, in the first place, I can't. And, in the second place, you're none of those things. You're idealistic and you try to cover it up with a pose."

"Quite wrong, my cherub. Yours is a profession of protest. Mine is merely a business of blandishment. Your success depends on destroying illusions. Mine depends on creating them."

"A lot of rubbish," George said. "We're both trying to lift people up a little out of the rut and make them comfortable. They call this prosperity, Bo, but there's more heartache than heartiness about it. There always is. Always the little man gets less than he should. The chances are he's born in poverty, lives out his middle age clinging to some precarious sub-standard, and dies in want."

"There ought to be a law," Bo agreed solemnly, and George took the bait.

"You're damned right there ought to be a law, if you mean the kind of law that I mean. But it's the laws we have that build up this lop-sided economy, and that in turn leads to a lop-sided morality."

"I'm getting all upset!" Bo confessed. "Now, if you talk to me about the flapper complex or the short-skirt phenomenon, I'm at home. That reminds me. I'm having a party and I want you and Joy to come along, if you will. Pitch must be there, of course. Matter of fact, the party is for her. Some new diploma she's won, I believe. Will you come?"

"We'd be delighted."

"Good. I've decided it's about time I did something to justify my existence. And besides, we ought to have more mutual friends. I may have run into a few characters it would be useful for you to know. You've heard of Verne Fraser, I suppose?"

"Yes, but haven't met him."

"Then you will. He's a heel if ever there was one. Likes to play at art, makes his money out of political rackets and God knows what else, and has the most lascivious eyes I've ever seen. But he's still worth knowing, since you want to know all the types. And you've met Alice Packard. She'd be a good offset for him—she's got about as much sex appeal as the London *Times*, but she's full of fun. Then there's Mary Ralston and Tom; she's a social climber and they're both smug. And there's Evelyn Walsh, who had too much money left to her, and Jimmy Kirk, the only piano player I know who

doesn't make rings on the piano with his glass and lay his cigarette on the keys, because he doesn't drink or smoke. Wonder what he lives for?"

"I'm sure I don't know," George murmured, uncertainly, for the names Bo gave were famous.

"And my old friend, Bill Hamilton—reminds me of Gregory at a younger age. Then we'll have a few of Pitch's long-haired friends—that artistic Louis Duval, the phony Frenchman with his masculine wife—"

Bo made more personal history than he'd intended with his party. As he watched Pitch during the evening, he suddenly thought that this was the time to have a showdown with her, after their years of casual meeting, his half-serious approaches, and their old habit of conflict when together.

As the party broke up, Bo said to Pitch: "You'll let me take you home?" It was more a command than a question, and Pitch fought back quickly.

"Oh, I wouldn't trouble you. It's only a short way, and George and Joy will see me home, won't you, George?"

"The girl's not as clever as I thought," Bo told himself. And to her: "Nonsense," he said brusquely. "It's miles out of their way, and George needs his sleep, for he gets up at some primitive hour in the morning. Come along!"

Pitch went obediently, and sat silently and seethingly while Bo chattered, as if he had rehearsed the script.

"A great party," he said admiringly, with a fatuousness that struck Pitch's icy front like a solid blow. "I'd say it was well worth the investment for entertainment, let alone results. Wouldn't you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Pitch said.

"You have the very strongest idea what I mean," Bo echoed.

"Thank you."

"Please don't mention it. I never charge for these little services."

"Then you should. They're too precious to throw around promiscuously."

"That's a two-dollar word where I live."

"Oh? And where do you live?"

"Across the tracks, you know."

"Mentally or geographically?"

"Morally. Would you like to see it? Mentally, I have no existence. I like to be led. Geographically, I have no sense of direction."

"Apparently you haven't, the way you're driving," Pitch said harshly, but she watched him with an amused glint in the darkness.

"I was driving very pointedly, but you switched the conversation," Bo accused, with a low chuckle.

"I'm sorry, I forgot. These old—flames—die hard, don't they?"

"Harder than old soldiers, and they never die. They only fade away."

Pitch thrust again, thwarted but curious. "Old soldiers are very constant to a memory, aren't they?"

"Elephants are fickle, by comparison."

"For instance?"

"When old soldiers set out to find something, they keep at it till they find out."

"And what if it isn't worth knowing when they do?"

"What old soldiers find out is always worth knowing."

"And did you find out tonight?"

"Not yet, but tonight isn't over. Tell me, isn't there some more subtle way it could be done? Or are jealous women ever subtle?"

"I have no means of knowing. Are they? You've had some experience." Pitch was intrigued in spite of herself.

"I'm having experience now," Bo hazarded.

"Remorse? Did she reproach you?"

"No. But I always reproach myself when I've let a pretty woman slip through my fingers. Maybe I can make up for lost time now, thanks to your generosity in finding one for me—as an investment."

"I'm delighted to be of some service at least. Who is she? You haven't by any chance been trying adventures with that monster of Louis Duval's? Or was it just a little rehabilitation work?"

"Cat!"

"Cad!"

"Not at all. A cat scratches. A cad kisses and tells."

"I see. And you don't tell. So that makes it all right, does it?"

Bo jammed on the brakes and leaned over. "I won't tell a soul," he promised solemnly, and kissed the astonished Pitch on the mouth.

"Ugh! What the devil are you up to!"

"I'm up to my neck in love with you," Bo confessed cheerfully, and started the car again.

Pitch backed into the corner of the seat in blazing fury. This bantering, callous fellow with his clowning was outwitting her, and the knowledge enraged her.

"Don't be so crude!" she fumed. But her anger was fading as swiftly as it had flared up.

"Don't be so distant," Bo retorted. "I'm short-sighted. Would you like to go to some night spot?"

"At this time of night, Bo! Don't be absurd!"

"Well, when *does* your sort go to a night spot? At tea-time, or high noon? How about a bootlegger's, then?"

Pitch sniffed.

"Cold?" Bo asked elaborately.

"No, I'm not!"

"I didn't say *are* you—I meant, *have* you a cold?"

"I haven't, and I'm not."

"Then don't sniff. Blow. Here's a handkerchief, in case you forgot one."

"I have a handkerchief. And I'll sniff if I like. And this is not the way home."

"That depends whose home. I thought we'd go through the park."

"And I thought not. Take me home this instant, or I'll jump out."

"You're being childish. Nobody ever gets home in an instant—not even spoiled, pretty prima donnas."

"This minute, then! Do we go or do I jump?"

"The door," said Bo, "opens backward. Be careful it doesn't dump you over when you take off. Now, doors of all cars should really open forward, as any student of aerodynamics will tell you. But those with the latch in the front—"

"I'm not interested in your doors."

"—have the virtue of trapping the victim, since it is obviously impossible to jump out of a swiftly moving vehicle and preserve your dignity when the door gives you a scoop in the behind—"

"Don't be coarse."

"Coarse? I should have said the posterior."

"Bo, don't be a moron. Take me home. I'm tired."

"So am I—especially of ladies who threaten to jump out of cars and then don't because of their posteriors—"

"I could slap you!" Pitch gritted, but the gleam of amusement in her averted eyes, which Bo could not see, belied the compressed lines in her face, which he could see.

Bo stopped the car abruptly again, and thrust his face before her.

"Then slap," he invited.

Stung and off guard, Pitch did. She meant to be gentle, but her temper got the best of her, and there was warmth in her hand. She was not quite sure in a moment what had happened, for Bo's hand came from somewhere, palm open, and stung her cheek smartly.

"I never bottle up resentments, you see," said Bo cheerfully.

"You miserable beast!"

"Now we understand each other. Shall we shove off?" He started the car again without waiting.

She longed to choke him, but she doubted his next mood. Behind his derisive front there was an unknown lightning.

They passed parked cars, facing the sea embankment.

"Ah!" sighed Bo. "Young love! Isn't it stupendous!"

"I don't know," Pitch snapped.

"Why, you're young, aren't you?"

"I'm old enough to know my way home—the next time."

"How do you know there'll be a next time? And it's a grand walk around the park. Ten miles, I believe. Like to do it tonight with me?"

Pitch watched him from under sizzling lids, half cynically, half curiously, to know what was in his mind.

"Where do you usually park, when you bring your girls out here?" she asked frigidly, and could have bitten her tongue for her inanity.

"We just passed it. Why didn't you say so sooner? This is a one-way road. Even *you* must have known that."

"Well, at least the trees are romantic, and friendly," Pitch said, looking out of the window, steering cautiously back toward good nature and safety again. "They bow to each other, and link their arms together."

"They go further than that, out in this solitude. They embrace each other. Let's try it?"

"With certain people, yes."

"Will you embrace me if I take you home?"

"I'll strangle you if you don't!"

"Will you marry me if I take you home?"

"I'll be delighted, I'm sure!" She laughed harshly.

"Do you mean that!" Bo stopped the car again with a jarring suddenness, and his arm shot around her neck. Pitch thrust her hand against his mouth and shoved with all her might. Bo let go and thrust her hand away.

"Look out for my bridge work, my gentle little lamb! I hate being pushed around, and it's only fair to warn you, before you marry me."

"Marry you!"

"You have a nice melodious laugh. You ought to take vocal training. I bet you have a voice."

"Tell me," said Pitch sweetly, "how long this cheap vaudeville act lasts. Or did you read it in a book?"

"I'll explain the technique after the wedding."

"Then I'm afraid I'll die in ignorance."

"You mean you didn't mean it?"

"No."

"Then you did mean it?"

"No."

"Then you'll marry me?"

"No."

"Well, don't say I didn't ask you. Sure you won't change your mind? I long to take you away from it all."

"Away from what all?"

"Oh—all this, whatever it is. They always say that, don't they?"

"I don't know. In any case, I want to go home."

"Too bad! Well, you had your opportunity, remember—when you look back on what might have been."

"Oh, dear!" Pitch murmured, and beat her breast in tremulous mockery. "Be still, my broken heart! I shall try to find solace in my music."

"And I in my drugs—hic!"

"This is my block now—in case you hadn't noticed. Do you mind letting me out?"

Bo stopped the car and leaned over. "Is this the handkerchief I lent you?" he asked. And when Pitch bent to look, he kissed her suddenly, roughly, on the lips. Pitch's mouth compressed into a straight hard line. Bo sat back and grinned.

"Now that I've let you down," he said, "allow me to let you out." He went out of his door to come around, but Pitch leaped out of hers and was on the doorstep before he could turn.

Bo followed her up the steps. "You didn't kiss me back!" he accused.

"Sh-sh! You'll wake everyone in the house."

"Do I get kissed?" demanded Bo, slightly louder.

"Sh-sh! For heaven's sake—"

"Do I *get kissed*?" Bo stood on the step just below her, and their faces were even. "Or do I have to wake your whole damn neighbourhood?"

"You beast!" Pitch kissed him on the cheek.

"That's not a kiss. I want—" Bo's voice began to bellow, when Pitch clasped her hand over his mouth.

"Wor—wow—korss!" Bo spluttered under her hand. And Pitch slid her fingers away and pressed her lips against his, in an angry, volcanic gesture.

"Will that do you, you s-s-swine!" she hissed in his ear.

"Darling!" Bo roared with theatrical rapture. "I never dreamed you cared for me that way! I'll be around with the ring in the morning."

"Your kind wears a ring in his nose. Go get one!"

But Bo had already turned and was gone, and his laughter came back to mock her, and at last to torment her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bo sat in George's kitchen, his chair tipped back, and he balanced a glass in his hand and eyed it with relish. He had just come in from a long trip. It was again the Christmas season, and Pitch had come, like a wind-storm, in a sudden chumminess and gathered Joy and the children off to a picture show.

George paced nervously, and gestured with his glass.

"You're fidgety, George, old boy. Take it easy. This act of spawning a nation isn't your job—so why get morning sickness over it?"

"But, Bo, there's no morning sickness connected with spawning."

"Is that an assumption or an experience, my fine-feathered friend? Have you ever laid an egg?"

"Editorially, yes," George admitted. "Clayton says I'm the champion egg-layer. Maybe that's the trouble. Maybe I'm just one more misfit in a world of misfits."

Bo nodded. "The world's been cock-eyed too long. It wants to play and it's going to—two chickens in every car, two pots in every garage, and all that sort of thing."

"It reminds me of the heartache I used to feel when I saw those soldiers from the Great War going out on the farms. Fellows that did not know whether a crupper was a social error or something a horse wears, headed for soldier settlements. And here was I, a farmer, trying to punch a typewriter."

"But think of the great American novel. How could you ever have expected to write that, cleaning out cow stables?"

"Oh, damn the great American novel. I haven't written it, anyway. And when it comes it'll be full of realities, and we're not facing realities."

"Is that the sort of thing you're going to say about us in your book?"

"Us?"

"Yes, you and I and all the rest of us."

"But who would ever write a book about us? And why?"

"Because we're commonplace, George. If you were prominent, you wouldn't be worth mentioning. Neither would I. But we're typical of the herd, so we're good book material."

"But you've got to give people inspiration. That's all most of them have to live for. What's the use of telling them about themselves?"

"Because you can never lift your little man into the stars by making him feel like a palooka. He may be the poorest heel on earth, but there comes a time when he parts his hair and wants to stand before the crowd as a peer. Do I make myself clear?"

"As clear as mud," George confessed.

"What I mean is this. We have no national literature worth reading for the same reason that we have no national culture of any value, and no national traditions. We try to ape other people. Outside a few things on forests and streams, and bits about Indians who were here before us, the rest of our stuff is the same old slavish worship of the aristocracy, of which we have none, and of success, which we measure by the length of time it takes the hero to get rich."

"If you're right, Bo, Shakespeare was wrong."

"With just this difference, my old one. Shakespeare was the Gilbert and Sullivan of his times. He dragged out his tinhorn dukes and fake top-hats and exposed them for the cheap farces they were. We haven't conceded that yet. That's why any literature we have on this soil can't tolerate the little man, and anyone with perspicacity, like yourself, knows that no worthwhile literature anywhere can get along without him. We're too self-conscious. We're so afraid we'll be recognized

for what we really are, that we either dress up our little fellow like a god or we clown him and make him a boor."

Bo drank slowly, vastly pleased about something.

"But you can't throw progress into the ashcan like that, Bo. If you could, then all the fairy stories that form the golden thread of literature and music would go with it."

He stopped in front of Bo, and waved his glass excitedly.

"It takes a bold theme, Bo, to tell the story of this nation of ours. I sometimes feel I have it, and then it eludes me again. I think of it as the birth of a symphony."

"A lot of them shouldn't have been born, at that," Bo murmured.

"It starts in the primæval," George went on, unheeding. "There's a low rumble of the deep strings and the drums—it's more like something you feel than what you hear.

"And then a woodwind chirps out, shyly, exploringly, and hastens into silence again. Nothing happens. The cosmic rumble goes on, deep, almost toneless. And out comes the woodwind again. A little bolder this time—it repeats another note of the theme. And then the other woodwinds come out and join it, and each one mocks the other. They get away with it! They make a frolic of it!

"Just as they begin to scamper around, the percussion gives them a sudden clash, and they race for shelter. The rumble grows. They can't be bluffed out of it. They come in again. And then a new note—the strings take it up. The percussion again—the kitchen ..."

"Where we now sit," Bo assented.

"... But this time they've got their courage. And the tenor brass—they decide the woodwinds have got something. They sound the theme all over again. They like it! They repeat it. The strings mock them. And so it grows, choir after choir, till the full voice of the great cosmic orchestra lets go.

"It gets me excited, Bo! Always the little man, peeping out from behind a tree, suddenly darting over to a neighbouring tree—he's the man that starts it. That's the way I'd like to trace it out in my book. The whole idea is impractical, I know. But I get intoxicated at the very thought!"

"Take more water with it," Bo suggested.

"But don't you feel it like that?" George demanded. "That's the birth and the growth of a nation."

"Yes," Bo agreed, suddenly energetic. "But the only thing wrong with it is the first little man that ducks out from behind the tree. He's no little man. He's a giant, a hero, a superman. It takes a lot of courage to run across the clearing first—"

There were voices at the door, and Joy and Pitch and the children had come home.

Pitch's voice: "I told you this was where we'd find them—in the kitchen!" And she came to the door, while Joy sent Hal and Alma off to play.

"Can I pour you a drink of George's Christmas liquor?" Bo asked Pitch, and she shook her head.

"I never have it, really," she said, and George thought he saw a swift flash of challenge between them. There was the flutter of black lightning in Pitch's eyelids, and Bo's smile was too carefully careless.

"Ah, the price of art," Bo shrugged. "And what a price!"

"It isn't that. I just never learned to care for it."

"In the way that you care for me, for instance?" Bo suggested, and she looked at him with cold scorn.

George sat on the arm of Joy's chair and put his arm around her shoulder. Faced with the duel between Bo and Pitch, he felt expansive and complacent. He felt that, with Joy, he was at least on the way toward fulfilling Bo's prophecy. "You will be fat and prosperous, raise a family, and write the great American novel." Well, he would be at it soon.

Bo was asking Pitch to sing, and his voice was more a challenge than an invitation.

"But won't you sing instead?" she countered. "You and George sing a duet."

"The only song I know is Frankie and Johnnie," Bo objected.

"Oh, do you really? I'd love to hear it—such a dramatic thing!"

"Almost as true to life as your Italian operas, where the short fat tenor seduces the two-ton soprano," Bo smiled. "Thank heaven you haven't gone for it—yet."

"Oh, but I have! I'm studying—"

"I meant the avoirdupois, not the arias," Bo interrupted roughly.

"I'll be famous in ten years—and fat," Pitch said, with a smile that cut. "But Joy tells me you have a beautiful voice."

"Joy told you no such thing. I lost my voice years ago."

"Oh, that's too bad. Overstrained, making love to blondes?"

"For that you can sing 'The Last Rose of Summer.'"

"So I'm the last, am I?" Pitch sighed, tragically.

"That will be up to you," said Bo coolly. "It's beautiful, and there are fifty ways to sing it—forty-nine of them bad."

"You leave me so little choice," Pitch murmured icily.

"Do, please," said Joy impatiently, and went to the piano.

"For you, gladly," Pitch said. She stood by Joy, and George watched with the embarrassed sense of discomfort that descends on a small room when one is called to sing. But their nearness seemed not to worry Pitch. She smiled. Her eyes looked at all of them in turn, and had the caress of black satin in them. George saw her hands clasped lightly in front of her, saw her breasts rise.

Then her voice filled the little room, in such a wealth of tone that he gasped and felt his throat tighten. And he saw Bo's casual, derisive smile yield suddenly to a look of sheer astonishment. As Pitch sang, Bo leaned forward, his glass dangling unnoticed in his fingers, his eyes riveted on her with an intensity that was rarely there.

Perhaps, George thought, it was the liquor he had drunk, but surely Pitch was singing as she had never sung before. Her voice, subdued, searching, wistful, called to them like the haunting croon of a mother to her babe. She soared into the last high notes with an ease and flexibility that needed only the final catch in it to send a swift burning and welling into his unwilling eyes.

They applauded when she finished, and Bo rose, bowed and said: "Forgive all my vulgar wisecracks. That song, as you sang it, has made history. Never, never, has there been anything like it."

Suddenly in a panic, Pitch fluttered that she had overstayed, that friends were coming for tea, that she must run. Bo went with her and drove her home. He did not allude again to the song.

"If I were ever to fall in love with anyone," he told himself after he had left her, "I could love that creature for her voice's sake. Because she's the most beautiful cat in the world. Because she's spectacular. Because behind that stage front she's still a mere child. Guess I'm a sucker for egoists. They always use you for a springboard. Hm-m! Springboard for the little black devil. I might be slippery. She'll come to me the next time."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

There were people in the wild and swollen days of the late twenties who could not lose on any gamble. Among them were the Pitch Blacks, the Bo Charltons, the Bill Hamiltons, the Tom Ralstons, the Verne Frasers.

There were people in those same windy times who could not win on any gamble. Among them were the hosts of the George Battles, the people who were by nature, by habit and by impulse chosen to be consistent losers, and for varied reasons. They were self-appointed members of the "If-I'd-a" clubs.

There were people, too, who knew winners, only to become immersed in other affairs and cross the peak without realizing it. Among them were the Reg. Claytons.

The tempest that blew down through the canyons of Wall Street, in October of 1929, sent its backlash whipping through the brokerages and the exchanges and the homes of the Middle and the Far West with fury. The low-pressure area spread so swiftly that it created a vacuum here and there, and in them trapped the stragglers, who expired more or less gracefully, as one does who suddenly finds the air removed from around him.

"It will be over in a day or two, just a scare," said some.

"The market needs correction," said others. "Too many on margin."

"It will take a month or two," said a few, who were promptly classed as neurotics, unfit to be at large.

One or two madmen even said the balloon had burst, that we had lived in a fool's paradise, that inflation was over, that we must get back to sound principles, sound laws of supply and demand, back to anything as long as it had *sound* in it.

The roseate dream of the late twenties was to turn swiftly, angrily, inexorably into the nightmare of the early thirties. Nobody believed that, except the few Jeremiahs who gave everybody a pain. Hoover had called in his committee of the Chamber of Commerce—business summoned to end the crisis which business was blamed for creating. So it would soon be over, and the noonday cocktail parties could resume where they had left off.

But it went on down, down, down toward the blackness of nineteen-thirty-two. Many who had clung grimly and savagely on through the earthquake now let go one by one, when whitened fingers could grip the ledge no longer, and skidded into oblivion. Factories were shut, wheels rusting, and the banks were closing throughout America. The gaunt ghost of Depression walked.

George Battle's phone rang. He lifted the receiver, and said briefly: "Battle."

"Drop down, Battle," said Clayton.

George adjusted his tie, tapped out two words of an editorial in which he was saying, that the bottom might drop out of everything materialistic, but it could not drop out of men's hearts or out of the needed things made by men's hands. He went downstairs to Clayton's office, and on the way he thought:

"That's all fine, *if* there's any demand for what men's hands make. But we don't live *on* the glory of God, even though we might live *for* it."

The shallow thought gave him elation. He would discuss it with Clayton. What did the boss want? Probably to give him some inside information that the worst was over. Clayton had just been to a luncheon meeting, and all the big shots were there. These men, George felt, really knew. In spite of his years of writing to tell them that they knew nothing, they did know. They could be cynical with one another when they all rode the flood tide, but when they bucked it they rowed together. That was why they were Business Executives—with capital letters.

George had never lost his awe of them. He knew that they dictated policies because they fed the campaign funds and because they chose the front men. They leagued together when it suited them, plotted against one another when it helped them. Yet they were brothers under the skin, for all their intrigues, all their jealousies, all their hitting in the clinches. When they wanted something, they went together and got it. Governments obeyed them, lawyers served them, politicians took orders from them.

One man had defied them—Reg. Clayton. He laughed with them, drank with them, ate with them, but in his paper he fought them. He lunged out at them with lefts and rights, and if his crusades set them clucking about one another on the golf courses, these same crusades bound them together in a defensive brotherhood.

"Clayton's a likeable cuss, meteoric, clever, but he's dangerous. You can't fight him because you can't fight any man who thumbs his nose at you. But you can lick him if you take him into camp. If he kicks against watered stock, sell him some, or give him some—and if he won't take that, bequeath him some in your will. But don't let him know you're doing it. Load him up to the ears, make him rich, so rich he's got no time to fight, no stomach for it and no incentive, no wrongs to feel and therefore no wrongs to fight."

George bustled confidently up to the door. "I'll open up with this editorial of mine," he thought happily. "It's good, and I know it. Once he hears it he'll probably go front page on it."

Clayton was munching an apple from a bowl on his desk. "Sit down, Battle," he said, and pushed the bowl over. "Have one. Patronize home industry. It's the only thing we have left these days."

"Thank you." George took an apple, and munched.

He liked these summary, informal meetings in Clayton's office. There he had a new status, a brief place of equality with the dignitaries. The sharpest businessmen sat where he sat, the tycoons and the cabinet ministers and the satraps and the snobs—all shared the democracy of this chair across the desk from Clayton.

"Did you ever buy any stocks, Battle?"

George shrugged, as if it were nothing. "Oh, a few small ones. Some of the minor golds and cheap oils."

"Make any money?"

"No-o, I'm afraid not."

"Neither you should. No man can buy stocks and be a journalist, or any other kind of executive. As soon as you get them they warp your judgment. Never buy any more, even at bargain basement prices."

"I won't!" said George fervently. "As soon as I bought stocks they went down, and as soon as I sold them they went up."

"Have you ever been out of a job, Battle?"

"Why, no. I've been here ever since I came home from overseas."

"That's right. Too long, I guess. Then here's the chance for a new experience. I've got to let you go, George."

The sudden lapse into use of the first name alarmed George almost as much as the news. Amid the silent crumbling of the walls, and the noiseless thunder of his mind, he heard himself saying calmly: "Oh? Guess it's my work—Isn't it up to scratch?"

"It's got nothing to do with your work. It's this little affair of three years ago that was going to blow over in a month." Clayton smiled wryly. "Not your work, but the work of the international racket, Battle. Not work at all, but the illusion that we could live without work."

"But—but I don't understand. If my work's all right—" George's mind flurried off. Clayton had made the paper rocket past his competitors. He was trying out a guinea-pig experiment for a new editorial campaign, getting reactions. Maybe he'd ask this of others. Ha ha!

"Battle, you're well named for what's ahead of you. And you're young, you can take it. Remember what you said when you came home from the war? Well, this is it. The revolution that would have happened in another two years of war. That's what the fighting was all about. And nobody except fellows like you sensed it. Well, the revolution's here. They'll patch it up and get the old machine going again, for a while. But it's too fundamental. It's the shakedown."

"Then," George said, in awe as if at a revelation, "let's say so. Let the *Post* be the first to analyze it, and predict what's ahead."

Clayton waved in a way to take in all the world outside his window.

"I'm broke, Battle," he said, as casually as he had said, "Have an apple."

"Broke! Oh, everybody says that nowadays, I guess. That's a good one, Mr. Clayton! Thank heaven you're one man who can joke about it."

Clayton leaned back and laughed, deeply and uproariously. Suddenly he sat forward to his desk and scribbled on his scratch-pad.

"That's original, at least," he said without grimness, and something in his very composure scared George as he had not been scared in years.

"Battle, we all had too much. I have too much real estate, too many oil stocks, too many gold stocks, too many chemical and steel and railway and every other kind of stocks. I'm just like you and the other suckers. Everything I knew about the market isn't so. I can't sell my real estate. It's assessed at twice its value and the taxes are more than the revenue from it. Most of the stocks won't bring enough to pay brokerage fees, let alone what I put into them."

"It's a good job you have the paper," George said. "That part at least won't fold up overnight on you, like the stocks did."

"That's just what it has done." Clayton spoke slowly, and tapped his pencil on the desk. "We're in the tender hands of the banks, Battle. You know what that means."

"Oh, of course," said George, who didn't.

"It means we're on rations, financially, mentally and spiritually." Clayton poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher beside him, and drank it with a gasp of satisfaction. "That's even the last of the free water. Every drop out of the tap from now on comes with the bank's blessing, or it doesn't come at all. We're puppets—a free government in a conquered country, free to do what we like so long as it suits the people who own us, body and soul."

George listened incredulously. Nothing in the dry, good humour of Clayton's voice could give any idea of what the words cost him.

"But you will run the paper," George protested. "You'll soon buy it out again."

"If they let me. But remember, they've got us where they want us. And they're likely to keep us there. Fact is, they're paying our creditors right now, to keep us alive."

"That's nice of them," said George. "That shows they respect you."

Clayton laughed again, and for the first time there was a bitter note. "It shows they'd sooner pay it now than let the property—their property—run down. It's irony, isn't it, that we have them over a barrel? I don't know why I tell you this. Perhaps so you'll understand why you're through. Every news heading we write, every editorial we publish, every time we go to the washroom, it has to be with the sanction of someone. I can't keep you on those terms."

"But I don't want to leave."

"You can't live on air," Clayton snapped. "And our budget has to be trimmed forty per cent, if we're even to carry on, let alone get out. What am I paying you?"

"Sixty a week," said George.

"That means you'd go back to less than forty."

"Then I'll go back," George nodded. And suddenly remembered: "Good God! That's what I started at! I'm back where I was ten years or more ago."

"And I'm back twenty years. But that's my worry. Yours is to decide what you'll do next."

"I'm staying," said George. "I'd be a heel to walk out now. Will you make it forty?"

"All right, it's your funeral," said Clayton. He stood up and held out his hand. "I didn't tell you. Three of my faithful

executives have taken my advice and are going while the going's good—perhaps to the opposition. I'm not sure that you're the damndest fool on earth, but you're certainly the second damndest. However, I always liked damned fools. This would be a stuffy world without them."

George shook hands then, alarmed at the emotional note in Clayton's voice, shocked by Clayton's livid face.

"Got something good for tomorrow?" Clayton asked, suddenly brisk again. "Let me see them later on."

George backed out the door. As he was about to close it, he thought of his editorial, hesitated, and said: "By the way—"

But Clayton's gesture stopped him. A shrug, a swift frown of dismissal for editorials at that moment. He was looking out of the window, face half turned away, the shadow of a haggard smile on it. The fingers of his right hand, resting on the desk, were white with the pressure. The light from the window, playing on his features, gave them a bluish pallor, a look of strained and awful musing.

"I never noticed before how grey he's got," George thought.

He drove through a stoplight on his way home. Clayton had sent word by his secretary to leave the editorials and he would see them later. George's heart was heavy and numbed with a horror he could not define.

He must go in now and tell Joy, tell her that they must sell the house, get rid of the maid, sell the car, give up their ideas of school for Hal, abandon the hope of a trip to England for Joy, drop their expensive friends. And the new rug that they had just bought by instalments, it must go back, back to the dealer with one word woven for ever into its hateful pattern: "Failure."

"Hello, dear! You're home early," Joy said, and she came with her bewitching hop-skip to be held in his arms.

"Hello, darling! Thought I'd knock off. My, it's good to see you."

He kissed her, and held her hungrily, for in another minute something would go out of their lives, some element of trust, some sense of sureness that he would never let her down.

Hal was clattering his roller skates in the rear porch. Alma came to tell him her bicycle had a puncture.

"Who do you think has phoned," said Joy, "to ask if she can come over tomorrow night? Pitch! And she wants to bring Verne Fraser with her. I told them not to come. Is that all right? We can see them another time."

"Oh, sure," said George, with fake enthusiasm. "Haven't seen Pitch for weeks. That Verne hangs around her a lot, doesn't he? Never paid any attention to her till she spent those seasons in the East. And here was I thinking we were through with her for all time."

"She really had remarkable success, George," Joy said loyally.

"Too bad she didn't stay there," George grumbled. "Guess she'd sooner be a big toad in a small puddle."

"Bo always said her voice was too light."

"Guess he's right. Wish she'd marry him, instead of dragging him around all these years."

"I'm never quite sure who does the dragging, really."

"Oh, she gives me a pain. She's got to be a regular old maid," George complained. "I notice Verne only turns up when Bo's out of town. He's not content to be just a crook. He longs to be a giggolo as well. Just the kind she'd want, for her ego or whatever she calls it."

"Oh, I fancy it's harmless enough. Pitch is too fond of herself to let anyone take advantage of her. We can play some bridge if you like, or—George, is anything wrong? You look as if you'd seen a ghost, and pretending you haven't. Can I get you something?"

"No, thanks, I feel fine." And he thought: "I haven't even figured how to start. Should've had all the technique ready when I got home. Had plenty of time to think it out."

"Now—break it all at once, or stall along? Joy wouldn't beat around the bush. She'd out with it."

"Joy, darling, I've some awful bad news for you," he blurted out.

"You've lost your job."

"Oh, how'd you know?"

"The way your eyes were staring out of your face. Tell me about it."

"Well, it's only partly lost. It seems the boss has gone broke—too many stocks that aren't worth anything, too much property he can't sell, and too much overhead to carry on. So he—Well, he said he'd have to let me go."

"Did he give any reasons—I mean, was it something you did?"

"No—no, not that at all. It seems he's in a sort of receivership—in the hands of the banks, as he said. But he has to cut expenses forty per cent. if he's to pay them off."

"Well," said Joy calmly, "it doesn't seem very sensible to start by letting his best writer go."

George squeezed her hand for the compliment, but he stood aghast at this quiet way they had sat down to discuss their own fate. What sort of superhuman stuff was Joy made of anyway? She had taken the news without even the flicker of an eyelash, had even guessed it beforehand. The news he had been sick with anxiety about telling.

"Is he going to get along without editorials?" Joy asked.

"No—oh, no, he wouldn't do that."

"Well, were your editorials the cause of his failure?"

"Lord, no, I hope not. Oh, I guess we had a lot of nonsense sometimes about perpetual prosperity and more money for everyone. That is, when we weren't fighting for something. But it was the stocks that got him down at last."

"And this forty per cent.? Will he cut down his own expenses forty per cent., sell his house, move to a poorer neighbourhood, take his children out of school as we must, make Mrs. Clayton do without any new clothes, do without any himself?"

"Oh, yes! He'll have to," George said confidently.

"Did he tell you that? Did you ask him?"

George squirmed. Women have a funny way of going at things. "Yes—Well, I practically said the same thing. I said, 'Of course, Mr. Clayton, this means I have to sell my house and do without any new things for my family, and take the kids out of school, and I know how it will feel to you.'—You know, put it to him like that, so that he'd get the point. Always remembering he's the boss, of course."

"And will he resign from his clubs and sell his extra cars and reduce the wages all around?"

"Oh, I expect he will. Of course, he can't reduce the mechanical staffs. They've got unions."

"So you and others who are not in unions will have to lose more so that the boss and the unions won't lose any. That doesn't seem fair."

"No." George began to feel rattled. "But it's there, and I can't do anything about it."

"I know you can't, darling. I don't mean that. But I can't help saying what I feel, when you've worked so hard, and done so well."

George shuffled modestly. The conversation was taking an easier turn. "Oh, well," he said, "I guess we all worked the same."

"But don't the unions always get overtime pay if they work any extra hours?"

"Oh, yes. That's part of their contract."

"And did the unions get any more when times were good?"

"I'll say they did. Two raises."

"Then why shouldn't they take a reduction? How can they demand the same wages when the employer is losing money as when he is making a profit?"

"Well, that's the way unions do. I'm not defending it, dear. I only say that's the way it is."

"But you and the others, who are not in the unions, weren't paid a share of the profits when they were big. Then why should you have to suffer the whole loss when there aren't any profits?"

"Well, Clayton's treated me pretty well—I'm going to have a drink. Guess I need it. Let me get you one."

"I know he's been very nice. Yet it does seem to me that the unions gained at your expense. Their standard of living has gone up in comparison to yours, and yet it was your brains that made it possible."

"Well, not all mine," George said, but his self-esteem rose. "I did remind him, though, that lots of times it was my work that made him talked about."

"Oh, Georgie! You told him that! Good for you! And what did he say?"

"Say!" George was caught off guard for a moment. But Joy's ideas had given him confidence. "Oh, he said he realized that, but he said that from now on what he and I thought had to suit the bankers."

"But, then, why don't they write the editorials, if they know so well? I don't understand, George. They take over the property on mortgage, but what value has it without ideas? It seems to me they aren't very smart."

"That's just what I told Clayton," said George. He felt at the moment as if he really had. "I said, 'You know very well that these financial men haven't the ideas that you and—ahem!—fellows like me have. They've got money brains,' I said, 'but we've got word brains.' 'Yes,' he admitted, 'I hadn't thought of it that way, Battle, but you know how these fellows are. Got to put on a front to them, and what we do behind their back might help us all in the end.'"

George began to feel that he hadn't done so badly after all.

"So that's when he asked me if I'd stay at forty a week—with the understanding, of course, that I'd be raised again, soon as things picked up."

"You should go back and tell Mr. Clayton," said Joy, "that if you were worth sixty dollars a week in good times you are certainly worth more than forty when times are bad, because that's the very time he needs you most. Let him write his own editorials if he wants to when everybody is making money and being happy. But now you'd be working harder than ever, and getting less for it."

"I certainly will tell him," said George. "I just started to explain all that to him today when he was called on another appointment. And he said, 'We'll have to continue this discussion again, Battle, so call me tomorrow morning as soon as you're free and we'll go into it.'"

"I'll tell him, too, that he can't expect a man to do his best work for his boss when he's worried with financial troubles, and with having his home upset, so that it wouldn't really pay him even to let me work for a reduced salary. He'll soon see my point."

"I don't see how he could miss it," said Joy, and she was not smiling. "You put things so clearly. I just have crazy ideas and I can't express them, but you have such a choice of words. I'd like to tell that Mr. Clayton a few things."

"Oh, I'll tell him, all right," George assured hastily, his restored confidence shaken a little at thought of Joy telling the boss the unvarnished truth of the situation as she saw it. "And if he doesn't come through then, we'll just have to tag along with him long enough to get something better, and I won't forget to tell him why, either."

"But, Georgie, seriously, where could we get anything better? Oh, darling, don't let's do anything reckless, just because I

talk as I do. We have the children. If it were only ourselves—"

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I think I have him right where I want him. I could even talk to the bank about it. You see, between the boss and the unions, we fellows who aren't organized get it coming and going. You see that, don't you?"

"Why, yes, I think I do!" Joy applauded with a straight face, but with eyes shining with enthusiasm. "You think these things out so well, Georgie. You simply must tell him, just as you've told me."

The phone rang, and Joy said, "I'll answer it." As she went, she was thinking: "If only I could say something that would help."

Then she called to George: "It's for you, dear."

Mr. Clayton's secretary said to George: "Mr. Battle, will you please discuss the editorials with the managing editor in the morning? Mr. Clayton has been taken ill."

"Oh, won't he be in tomorrow?"

"No, it seems very serious. He has been taken to the hospital. The doctor says it's a stroke."

"Lord! But he's seemed so well lately!"

"It's his heart. Confidentially, Mr. Battle, the doctor says it's been acting up for years. He's been under constant treatment, you know."

George hung up the receiver slowly, and his eyes, glaring past the telephone, idly registered on the top number on Joy's phone card. It was labelled: "George's office." He walked uncertainly back to Joy. Not without a sense of the dramatic, George said: "Clayton's gone, dear."

"Gone? You mean he has gone out of town?"

George shook his head. "I guess it's more than that."

He thought of Clayton standing there in his office, an indefinable smile on his lips, the haggard lines on his face as he looked musingly out the window, the fingers of his right hand pressed on the glass top of his desk.

At three o'clock in the morning the phone rang, and George fumbled his way to it, his mind dull, for he and Joy had sat up late to talk. George said: "Yes?—Oh,—I had a curious feeling—He never recovered consciousness!—What's that—Five, you say? Yes, I'll be there."

As he tiptoed back to bed, to tell Joy, he thought:

"Guess I might as well dress now. Can't sleep anyway. Last post for Reg. Clayton—I wonder if it really will be the last *Post!*"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

George Battle was early, and his footsteps echoed after him when he went into his own office in the *Post* building to wait for the others. He looked at Clayton's door as he passed, and he had a curious feeling that it would open, that he would see Clayton there with his inevitable question. "Got something good?"

"Here is my life," he whispered to himself, "reaching another chapter, another clean break-away from the past. Always breaking. Is there anyone whose life has been connected all of a piece, who can look back down the little lane of his years and say, 'This is my life.'—No, that is not so. Our lives are fashioned out of separate links, all foreign to one another, and only memory and sentiment can weld them together. There is no other welding."

He said that to Joy as they had coffee before he left, and Joy sat near him.

"You simply are not going to face all that grief without eating," Joy had said.

George had replied: "I couldn't bear the thought of eating." And thereupon ate what Joy had prepared.

He remembered reaching out for her when she stood by him, bringing his plate of bacon. In her warm, capable little body held close to him he found some measure of courage, some sense of confidence.

"There was always a thing that dogged me, and now it's caught up with me. I always felt it would."

Joy patted his shoulder and kissed him on the forehead. "You're worried, dear. Don't let it get you down. Find out what the others say—and remember that you're as important as anybody."

Here alone in the office, thoughts came clear, sweeping in a parade out of the past, up to the vivid reality of the present, and vanished into the mists of the future that dropped like a curtain just beyond his desk.

"This thing," he kept repeating, "this *Thing* that has dogged me. When I was to go to college it hung over me, and told me that something would happen to keep me away. And then that adventure overseas, strange lands, the sights I had dreamed about, these I was to see. I was to fire a cannon as I longed to do in childhood, and the Thing told me that I never would.

"I lost a year of happiness because the Thing told me I would look uncouth and funny to Joy. When I found her at last the Thing came again and told me, 'Ridiculous, chump, no such luck as that for you.' And when I came home I was in a panic, because all the fellows knew how to start in again in civilian life where they left off. I alone had not left off, so I had nowhere to start again; and the Thing said my troubles had begun.

"Can I take it? Can I go home night after night, like these poor numbskulls of the streets, and say there was no job to be had today? No, I can't do that. I can't do it because I have no build-up even for that. No experience in success; none even in failure. I don't know how to go about it.

"It was not a life. It was a few broken chapters of a life. No one of them related to the other. No one of them leading into the other. No one of them preparing for what came next.

"Are the children—Joy's and mine—are they to go through the same thing? 'Once we lived in a nice house, and then my daddy said we had to move here because—' Because what? What does a man say to the accusing eyes of innocent trust? What does a daddy say to his kids when he can no longer get them the things he wants to—the things that they believe in their souls he can get for them?"

George's fingers flew on the typewriter, they flew inspired in an ecstasy of grief and bewilderment. George wrote:

Leading Editorial. Set Two Col. 10 pt.

LAST POST

Reginald Clayton is dead. The light that burned in the gloom of war, in the disillusionment of peace, and in the hectic storm of the Boom, has gone out for ever. There will never be another Reginald Clayton, because he obeyed no type and served no pattern, but was the gallant torchbearer for the Little Man down all the long road of his life.

We say, "Vale, Reginald Clayton! May you, in that great Unknown to which you have returned, find the Utopia of

your dreams on the other side of Time."

Through this grim valley we stumble as we march. We see a sign dimly and know that another before us has graven it. A soldier of adventure has gone ahead, peering and thrusting into the hidden places, for that was Reg. Clayton's way, to blaze his own path.

He who scorns precedent and safety carries a risk, a ghostly presence that rides always behind, leering over his shoulder, seeking either to beguile him away from duty and reward or to egg him on into perilous ground to be destroyed. Reginald Clayton took those risks, but with an uncanny wisdom he eluded the traps.

He strode the hills with an insatiable craving for the truth, for he had a rugged and open mind. "If you find you are wrong," he dinned into all of us, "admit it and publish it on the front page; then go ahead again. But never try to hide a mistake."

Such was the almost childish honesty of this man who is gone. So they called him abrupt. And they called him moody and changeable and uncertain. But we who knew him and loved him feel this well: That Reginald Clayton saw the far horizon and went steadfastly toward it. He would amend, he would retrace, he would try again, but he knew not the meaning of fear or ever had learned how to retreat. His eye was clear, his vision of a better world undimmed, his sense of a cosmic direction in great things and small unfailing.

Such men are rare. Such men are lonely, because they are a pace beyond the foremost. It was thus that Reginald Clayton lived; it was thus he died, spiritually alone in the still hour. He met the supreme moment of decision with that abrupt impetuosity that was inexorably, incurably his.

Well, in some far measure of space and time, he has found his valhalla, where there is no "yes—but," or any "you can't do that," neither stupidity nor cowardice, to plague and distract him. There the clamour is arrested, and all the harsh discords resolved into harmony by the divine magic of a master symphonist.

We bid a traveller God speed on his way.

Farewell and hail!

Hail and farewell!

George was surprised and gratified when the managing editor nodded after reading it, and patted him on the shoulder. It was the nearest thing to outright friendliness he had ever had from this hard-fronted executive who had always, he felt, regarded him as an intruder, "one of Clayton's brainstorm." The same thought as Pitch had once had, "a guinea-pig experiment." And now the experimenter was dead, the experiment was ended, the guinea pig was turned loose to forage for himself.

"How far," he thought, "is that away from life? By what amazing miracle wasn't I a guinea pig to Joy? Or were Joy and I both a guinea-pig experiment to God? Are we all guinea pigs to God?"

"I must go home and tell her now—tell her that the first phase of the experiment is over. That Clayton's will says the paper is to stop. That the laboratory has to be sold and the guinea pig thrown out."

On the way home, the words of an almost forgotten song he had sung in boyhood were dancing in his thoughts:

But then, the stars grew dim and cold,
The moon grew pale, my heart grew old ...

Outside his home a shining new car was parked, and he thought excitedly: "Bo's back in town!"

In the house he found Verne Fraser.

He's a handsome brute, George was thinking as he put away his hat beside Verne's. He hadn't needed Joy's exasperated gesture when she met him in the hall to tell him Verne was a nuisance. "The beggar's been coming around a lot, though," he recalled. "Says he's lonesome for congenial company. Always makes it a point to come when he knows I'm there—tells me women are delightful, but give him a man for a real talk. Pretends to side with me in these discussions about

food and drink and styles. The fellow even mowed the lawn for me. Can't hold that against him.

"But it's those infernal eyes of his. They undress people. Can't get over the idea there's something lecherous about him. And yet he hides it. Language always proper when women around. I know he respects Joy. Goes around with Pitch a lot—too much for her own good. Maybe that's why Bo has such a high contempt for him. And yet Bo doesn't seem to care."

"Guess you've had a trying day," Verne began, and George's reserve began to melt. "Thought it'd be a nice idea for you two to come out to dinner with Pitch and me."

"Lovely, thanks," George said, trying to be casual. "But the kids—"

"You haven't fired the maid—yet."

"That's right," said George, ruffled to think a fellow like Verne should remind him. And his anger returned. Damn the man! The day above all when he'd wanted a quiet talk with Joy.

"To help you make up your mind I wanted to pour a drink," said Verne. "If you'll pardon me, I'll fix them."

"Pardon him!" George muttered to himself. And to Verne: "Why, yes, but why the devil do you have to bring liquor to our house? I could—"

"My dear man!" Verne protested. "How often must I tell you that mere tolerance of me is more than an average host's duty. Without you two I'd go crazy. As the price of sanity—" His voice faded as he slid into the kitchen, "—what's a mere drink?"

"Too much—for yours," gritted George. "Hope he doesn't try to goose the maid," he added to himself.

He knew that Verne had already been drinking. It was an infallible sign, when he started telling you how much he liked you. There were many who did that. Some laid their hands on your shoulders. Verne did.

Joy met him in the living-room doorway, before Verne had come back. She put her arms around his neck swiftly and drew him down to her. George, looking over her shoulder, saw her knitting where she had laid it.

"My poor darling," she mothered. "You've had an awful day, and I know you're exhausted. But he insisted he had a date with us, and that Clayton or no Clayton we must keep it."

"He's a liar," said George, and kissed her hastily. "Guess we'd better go with him. Easiest way to get rid of him."

"Gangway for a bartender," said Verne, carrying three glasses without a tray.

George thought, as he looked at Verne: "Strange bird. One of these fellows who can live without working. Always plenty of money, no visible source. Town's known lots like him. So has every town. But Verne's different. A crank, a sophisticate, a prophet of that gaudy intellectualism we used to rave about in college. Only his is adult, with an alcohol breath, good clothes, and wealth. It's all a blind—and behind it he's a crook."

He began, to Verne: "Nice of you to ask us. Guess I won't be very cheerful company. But Joy will make up for me."

"I'll go on one condition," said Joy to George. "You must come home early and go to bed. You can't be up night and day."

Verne Fraser grinned, and drawled to George: "What do you think will become of the paper?"

George shook his head. He knew, but not for Verne's ears just now. "No telling," he hedged. "All depends on Clayton's will, I guess."

"Or on the banks," Verne suggested.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," George's voice had a touch of frost.

"Clayton was a great boy in some ways," Verne mused. "For a capitalist, he had advanced views. Might almost have made a good socialist. Too bad he hadn't joined up with us."

"And what would 'us' supply?" asked Joy sharply.

"Why, the motive, and the public, of course," said Verne easily.

"And Clayton the paper, the money and the brains," Joy added.

"A newspaper is a public utility, and should be owned by the public. No one person should have such a power, merely by circumstance," Verne said, and his eyes slithered quietly over Joy.

"Circumstances be damned," said George. "It was brains and ingenuity and initiative. Just because a man has ambition, and works sixteen hours a day while you chumps sit around spraying yourselves with your socialistic mouthwash, you call it circumstance. I call it alibi."

Verne shrugged, and stood with his back to the fireplace, eyeing his glass speculatively. "What was it killed Clayton?" he asked coolly, "Mouthwash?"

"A bad heart," said George, with rising energy. "It's men like Clayton, working themselves to death, that make it possible for fellows like you to sit around telling what's the matter with the world and with men like him."

"It wasn't work that killed him. It was the gang he travelled with. The something-for-nothing gang, and you know it. They put Clayton through the wringer. He tried to hob-nob with the same people he was trying to run down, and they called his bluff."

George was on his feet. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Verne rolled his eyes upward. "Simply that he couldn't take it, that's all."

George set his glass down and advanced on Verne in a swift rage. "You can't say that in my house," he told Verne angrily.

"Oh, is it yours?" sneered Verne good-naturedly. "Like the *Post* was Clayton's—till he reneged on his creditors."

"That's an insult!" George shouted. He was unaware how he had become so suddenly enraged. But now all the questioning and hidden resentment of Verne Fraser burst into his voice in a torrent, and he knew he hated the man.

"And neither can you take it, my dear fellow," Verne said quietly.

"Get out, I say!" barked George. "Get out, you blathering—"

He did not finish, for, to his own amazement, he found his left hand clutching Verne's arm, his right hand gripping Verne's coat collar. In a sudden second of wrath he visualized Verne being pushed headlong through the door, his hat thrown after him, and George Battle wiping off his hands as if from something unclean.

But under his furious lunge Verne seemed not to yield. It seemed instead that his hand slipped, that Verne's shoulder twisted quickly, that somehow George was whirled and plopped into his favourite chair by the fire.

Flying between them, Joy's hands tore at Verne like a tiger's claws, and Verne's arms went up to guard his face. And Joy, in a strange and shrill voice, was crying to Verne: "Keep your hands off George! Do you hear! You heard him tell you to go, didn't you! Then why—don't—you—go!" In some incredible way Joy had got the fire shovel, and as Verne fled across the room she beat on his hunched shoulders with it. Verne regained his poise on the doorstep, and grinned.

"You'll soon be needing a job," he told George mockingly. "Come around to one of our pep meetings and I might get you a job as a bouncer—if you bring your wife."

"Bah!" said George, mainly because he could think of nothing else, and slammed the door. He turned. He saw the maid, wide-eyed in the hall, heard Joy tell her quietly: "Don't be alarmed, Mary."

George followed Joy into the living-room, and suddenly she dropped the little brass fire shovel, turned white, and reeled. George caught her in his arms.

"My—that's—heroic of us!" she gasped. "That's one of them."

"Oh, darling, forgive me for being such an ass!" George begged her. "I didn't mean to get so mad."

And then he realized what she had said. "What did you mean, Joy—'that's *one* of them'? Any others been bothering you?"

Joy laughed weakly. "Sometimes. But you couldn't hit *her* with a fire shovel!"

"Pitch—you mean? I suppose she'll be here next, to remind us that the guinea-pig experiment's over."

"You remember that, after all these years," Joy said with humourless patience. "Why take these stupid remarks so seriously?"

"I'm not taking it seriously, and I never did," George defended.

"But it's trying—to bring it up on such a day as this, just because *she* happened to say it once."

"Well, I'm sorry to be trying." And George knew his voice had a persecution sound, and he hated himself for it.

"I didn't say you were, dear, and please let's not talk about it. We've had enough to worry about today, without quarrelling."

"Who's quarrelling? I merely made a simple harmless remark, and you picked me up on it."

"George, dear," Joy said, dangerously sweet, "say no more about it, or I'm likely to scream. I'm fed up with it."

"No wonder you're fed up. Work for years and then my job slides out from under me. Then I make an ass of myself against big windbags like Verne Fraser, and you have to rescue me. All right, go on and laugh."

"Dearest," said Joy coldly, "I hit Verne with the fire shovel because he said you couldn't take it. Please don't go out of your way to show me he was right."

Joy was gone, and George glowered and sulked alone in the living-room. She'd be sorry she'd said that, he self-righteously told himself. "Catching a fellow like that after the day I've had. No wonder I blew up. It's a good thing I didn't take the fire shovel. I'd have killed him."

He stared moodily at the shining little weapon. And all at once the thought of Joy fighting his battles for him with it, struck him like an avalanche of remorse.

"Oh, what a baby I am—fighting like a school kid. A contemptible cry-baby, afraid of my own shadow. She's right. I kept thinking of that guinea pig all these years because that's what I am—grateful to have somebody else experimenting on me. And Joy's been loyal and everything to me, tried by example to inject some backbone into me, and look at me!"

He went where Joy was, and found her nervously filing her nails. He dropped on one knee beside her, put an arm around her, and hoped she wouldn't repulse him.

"I'm sorry, lovely," he said.

Joy drew his head against her breast, and he heard her heart beating. "That loyal and beautiful engine," he thought, "what a steady rhythm it has! It beats on, unflinching, unafraid of anything. She's a real Britisher, this wife of mine. And I'm a sap—a real eighteen-carat sap."

He had listened often to Joy's heart-beat, never able to outgrow his amazement at owning it, never quite free of apprehension that some day it might stop; always sure that if it ever did, that would be the end of them both.

"We don't fight very often, darling, and we're both tired," Joy reassured him. He knew she had forgiven him, but he could not forgive himself. And he was thinking:

"Why doesn't she give me what I deserve, for the narrow, miserable wretch that I am. All these years an exile, from her parents, her home, everything, to be with me. Puts up with all the silly plotting and cheating and sheer meanness of my cousin. And then, just because some lewd-eyed swine like Verne Fraser comes around, I get sore and pretend I'm mad at his theories and his insults. I know well enough what I'm sore about—and Joy does, too, and that's what hurts.

"It's time I grew up. My wife has always been miles ahead of me. And now even my children are outgrowing me."

Chapter Thirty

George sorted out the incredible mixture in his desk, and kept his waste-basket beside him. Old memos, early notices of bills since paid, receipted bills, parts of editorials, newspaper clippings, a book on memory training he had forgotten about, income tax forms, tax notices, three worn-out cigarette lighters, two pipes, fifty pencil stubs, two tickets to a dance, notebooks with dates now obsolete, a half-completed reference file, pipe cleaners—

He looked up in annoyance when Verne Fraser came into his office.

"Hello," George said, "I seem to have seen you before."

"I didn't come to apologize," Verne grinned, with amiable insolence.

"Who asked you to?" demanded George. "Maybe you think I'm the one who ought to do that, and I haven't got around to it yet—mentally."

"Your intention is accepted."

George snorted. "And don't ask me to keep any of your rotten scrapes out of the paper, because after today there isn't a paper to keep anything out of."

"So I see," Verne shrugged toward the last edition, lying on the desk. "So you agree now that neither Clayton nor you could take it."

"Listen," George began coolly, "you wanted to see me about something. Now say it, because I'm busy—or else get out."

"Before you throw me out?" Verne smiled tantalizingly, and then raised his hand in self-defence as George half-rose. "Now keep your shirt on. I've come to talk business."

"I'm not interested in book-making, white slavery, dope running or any other racket," George snapped.

"Neither am I, and if I were I wouldn't come to you."

"You were glad enough to come to me before, when they—What is it your intellectual world calls it?—the bulls were turning the heat on you, and you wanted this and that kept out, and this and that emphasized, to make your own rotten rôle look a little better!"

"I got off," Verne said simply.

"Yes," said George with dry sarcasm. "Cost you five G's, as you say. Well, what other rackets are you running, outside of these plug-uglies you pal with, under the guise of reform?"

Verne's eyelids flickered, but his eyes never changed expression. They looked at George with a steel-grey nonchalance that made him envious. He himself was clutching the desk, out of Verne's sight, to support his own belligerence. He was remembering Bo's advice:

"Verne's a rat, but he's too shrewd to play it openly. Treat him like one and he'll back down every time. Don't look down your nose at me because I have drinking colleagues like that. You can't beat the rat menace by covering up the rat holes. You've got to study the habits of the rats themselves. That's what I tell my conscience before I drown it with liquor."

Verne said to George: "You're being low-down." And George retorted: "I don't need a step-ladder to lace up my shoes, like some people I know."

Verne said smoothly: "I've been picking rackets for ten years, and I haven't picked a dud yet. This recent lamented shakedown in the capitalist world—you've heard of it, I suppose? What do you call it—a drop in the stock market? Too many short? Too many on margin? The sucker public hooked for instalment buying so far that they can't keep up with the Big Board?"

"All that's wrong with the sucker public is—too many bloodsuckers calling them the sucker public."

"Don't be childish, George. This is the end of an era."

"Cooms da ravolooshon," George sneered.

"Exactly. We're out of the boom era, but not out of the boob era."

"Well, come on! What is it? Do we turn on the heat, or put them on the spot, or muscle in on something, or just what major reform have you in that cesspool you call a mind?"

"You recall what happened to Hoover's Big Business programme?" Verne purred as if he had not heard George at all. "Just another fly-speck on the dung heap of the old order, my boy. We are now into the age of experiment and expedient. And the suckers will be told, as I'm telling you, that there can't be any more of it, that it isn't in the cards for one man to get rich by speculation and no work, while the next man starves on work and no speculation."

"Verne St. Fraser!" George mocked. "The human fly—speaking of fly-specks."

"I may kill you some day for that—please remind me," Verne grinned. "But in the meantime, try to be at least a receptacle for ideas, even if you've none of your own. As I said, nothing but a shuffle of the deck is going to satisfy the boys now. The guys with money drum-majored the last something-for-nothing era, and look at it! Now the guys without money figure to engineer the next one. The poor dopes imagine that if you divided what the wealthy have they'd all be in velvet. You and I know that isn't so."

"Thanks for the compliment," George said. "I hadn't thought of it at all—having all I need."

"So why let them start first?" Verne continued, as if never interrupted. "Right now, my money makes me a turn-over of forty per cent. or more."

"Loan shark," George said.

"Call it what you like. People want the accommodation, without the capitalist tag. Later, when the old gang sees which way the wind's blowing, it'll come out of the storm cellar and try to rook them again. The suckers might stand it once more, and they might not. If they don't—" Verne shrugged.

"But if they're going to lose, what the devil are you doing, hooked up with this?"

"Organizer, my dear simpleton!"

"A fine saviour you'd make! Look, Verne, I'm gullible, or I wouldn't have gone this far believing people have some good in them. But you can't make me believe this country is ready for gangsters yet. Imagine, Premier Verne Fraser! Who'd you have in your cabinet—Spike McClutch, Pug O'Grunty, Dead-Eye Dan, Slinky the Horseface—*your* pals, with tommy-guns instead of portfolios!"

"You mistake me," Verne said. "I said organizer. There are lots of saps—like yourself, for instance—to be front men. Why should I stick my neck out, when the real pickings are on the inside? Do our political heroes wind up millionaires? Like hell they do. Most of them die in a nursing home, broke. But the boys who back them—that's another story. Play human nature short, George, and you can't lose."

"You should go to Germany," George snorted. "Over here, we still have the guts to come out in front of people."

"You are not going to tell me, of course, that you're still innocent enough to believe political leaders set the policy of the country?"

"That's exactly what I would tell you, if I wasted my time telling you anything."

"But think back," Verne argued calmly. "Who picks the political leaders? Who pays for the lobbies? Do you know that about two hundred men share the directorships of this country's industries—and that about an even dozen control them? Do they go through the mill in the back benches? Are they cabinet ministers, working their fool heads off? Do they stand out to invite the public to knock them down, like so many African dodgers at a midway? Does the nigger collect the dough for dodging the balls you suckers throw at him?"

"You're smart, in a low sort of way, even if your ideas of a midway are dated a bit," said George slowly. "But if you're right, we're still in the primæval slime. Well, stay there if you want to, but I've still some faith in ideals. You'd lead these

poor deluded people into new agony and charge them for it. My job is to tell them you're wrong."

"Have it your own way." Verne settled back with ostentatious patience. "But they'll only resent you. Ninety-nine per cent. of the people will never enjoy these ideals you talk about—in other words, the money value. They want to have that fed to them. It's like a circus without elephants or lion-tamers. They'll pay to be fooled. They'll be damned if they'll hold still for the truth."

"You ought to know," George murmured.

"I know what I read in the papers," Verne retorted. "Political big shots change, governments change; but the old gang behind them never changes, and it's the gang that writes the country's ticket."

"All very interesting," George pretended to yawn. "But outside of a lecture on skullduggery, I don't see how this shapes up as a business call."

"Because you're to be one of the front men. Don't be alarmed. I've got the messiah picked out. You can be a fairly good disciple."

"Me! But I don't believe in your rubbish about one man's right to another man's property."

"Who said anything about believing in it? You don't believe in half the garbage you've written and published for the last ten years. For the first five of it you didn't know where you were going, and for the last five you didn't know where you came from—isn't that so? All right! Anything can be a movement. But if it wants to be a capital-M Movement it has to have a voice. All right again. I've got control of *The Leaf*—"

"That rag!" George jeered. "That cheap weekly, with its dime-store wisecracks and high-school essays on breaking the chains!"

"Exactly what's wrong with it!" Verne agreed enthusiastically. "And that's why you, as its editor, will lift it to a high plane, and put yourself in the limelight, and become one of our public figures, and go to Parliament!"

"Me an M.P.!—making speeches! I never made a speech in my life, unless I was too drunk to know what I was saying."

"Don't be alarmed. You won't even have the chance, until you want it yourself. When that time comes, you'll be ready for it, don't worry! What were you getting with Clayton?"

"None of your business," George burst out wrathfully. "Look here, Fraser, it's bad enough for you to come around and insult me in my home, and show off your jiu jitsu when I try to give you the garrotting you deserve. It's bad enough to come here with your slapstick intellect and your cheap gangster politics. But when you—"

"All right, let it ride. Let it ride!" Verne pawed the air in tolerant resignation. "Don't tell me. Tell the cashier when you draw your first cheque. Whatever it was, we'll make it the same. Let me know when you've made up your mind to come to work."

Verne got up, threw his coat over his arm, picked up his hat.

"Now that that's agreed, when do we have that dinner party?"

George was standing, his hands clasped to the side of his desk, his eyes glaring at Verne, his mind working furiously. With all Bo's advice, with all his front, he was being elbowed around so that if he accepted he was yielding to Verne; if he refused, he was in the false position of having backed down because his wife said so.

"You fool," he got out at last, and was surprised to find his voice was normal, quiet and—to his intense gratification—cold. "Do you take me for a sap, to tie up with a rotten bunch of crooks, and take crooked money, and cheat people, and drag my family into notoriety?"

"I knew that was all that would worry you." Verne was grinning widely, and George felt the repulsive intimacy of his naked eyes. "Why not talk it over with Joy?"

"Leave Joy's name out of this!"

"Okay. Talk it over with your wife," said Verne, in a tone of careful insult. "By the way, we're moving the office out of the skidroad, coming uptown. Be sure to tell J—your wife that. It makes a difference, you know, if you're one of these fellows whose wife comes to collect the pay cheque."

George had the sense of being out-fenced, of being pricked on all sides; most outrageous of all, of having his thinking done for him.

"If it were something worth considering, which it isn't," he said, "that would make a difference, yes. As it is, you can set it up in the sewer for all I care."

Verne laughed, like a man sure of himself. "That's one place where there's no class distinction."

"You filthy swine," George thought. To Verne he said: "Well, now that's over, I'll finish packing my stuff."

"Don't bother," Verne advised him. "You see, we've leased this building. Your office, in fact, will stay right where it is. I won't be your boss, if that's a factor—that is, directly. You'll be your own boss, as long as you do your stuff."

He went to the door, and George in all his rage envied the easy swagger of this polished lout, who was always so sure of himself.

"Remember this," Verne shot back, "the guinea-pig experiment's over. From now on you're the experimenter." And he was gone.

"Now, where did he get hold of that!" George wondered.

Chapter Thirty-One

George's heart was heavy and sour. Verne's offer raised an entirely new set of ideas when he was least ready for them.

"It's like this," he told himself, "I'm reconciled to being out. Joy's reconciled. We've figured out how we're going to lie to the kids, until we get going again. I've got the notes all laid out for the book I've been going to write for years and never got at it. I've even got my alibis fixed up for Bo and for Pitch.

"And now, this blasted intellectual crook comes along and catches me off balance. I can't say I'm afraid he'll go broke. Verne knows where his money comes from, even if I don't. It's all a racket to him. And he knows all the ins and outs of rackets, especially the pay-off.

"Dope running, rum running, alien running—what a fine record! But he's too smart to be in it himself. He pulls the strings. These Japs pay him thousands, I fancy, to get them into the United States. And here he sits, hides behind this ideological front, and poses as a reformer. 'Some day,' he says, 'we'll take over.' But he isn't after socialism—he only uses that as machinery to set up what he wants. It's a crazy, mad dream, but he's as cold and calculating as they come. He sees a long way ahead. It's bad and it smells and I don't like it.

"But if I refuse, what then? We lose the house. We go poor, without enough to eat, maybe. We confess to Joy's mother and father that I'm a failure, after all these years. Collapsed like a pricked balloon—and they have to send us help. No, there's no alibi for that. Not with Wendell Yorke there isn't. Not with my love for Joy and Hal and Alma.

"I'm a heel no matter which way this turns. If I say no, I'm a parasite, a psalm-singing failure, a pan-handler. A man who can't face his children. A man who slinks out of his house and lets his wife lie to them. 'Daddy's gone to work.' And if I accept? Then I'm a crook. I'm tainted, spending tainted money, never able to pass a cop on a street corner without a feeling he's looking down my neck.

"What a brothel of a world, when it's a choice between being paid by bootleggers and gangsters and fences and other bloodsuckers who prey on society from underneath—and being paid by gangster governments who prey on it from the outside. But now I should have the double and dubious honour of collecting from both, and being damned by both."

Clear-headed at last, George saw the attractiveness of the shame ahead. He knew that Verne had caught him off guard when his mind, fermenting and rebellious, was fertile ground; when his scruples were shabby and his security shaken.

The newer life was being spawned. No barker at a country fair in his childhood had ever had a more eager or gullible sucker list for his quacks and his snake oil than had these seductive wheedlers of the early thirties. New panaceas and "ways out" were born overnight, and those ebullient prophets and seers who had not yet read a book borrowed ideas from those who had.

It was the time when most people were finding out that everything they had known wasn't so. It was also the golden age for the crackpots of abundance. Hushed and ignored in the roaring days of the Great Boom, they were now out in full cry with their cheer leaders. An era of new insanity and hysteria, to be looked back upon with amazement.

Like a harlot hawking her dreadful wares, the siren of state control had brought her strip-tease act from across the tracks, and the queue put on white collars. The world, thought George, was in a plush-lined hangover from the big spree. Ideology was elbowing integrity aside, and the lure of leisure outbid the boredom of labour.

Joy was out when George reached home, and he found Pitch there, immaculate and sinister. He had seen one bad omen today; here was another. It would mean nothing when Joy came home to find them together, for Pitch was often there. She was sprawled gracefully and enticingly on the rug, lying on her stomach, playing double solitaire with Alma. She did not get up, but he hoped she would before Joy arrived.

She leaned on one elbow, and said: "We've made a bargain—Alma and I. We're going picnicking tomorrow if it doesn't rain. We'll make sandwiches and take cake and cookies, and everything."

Then Alma told George excitedly about the plan, and he thought: "Maybe it's just as well. I won't have to tell her why I didn't go to work. How to handle Hal—Oh, well, I can talk to him."

When Joy came, Pitch waited carefully on the floor until she looked in, and then climbed to her feet with a long, elastic,

loose-jointed motion that was in odd contrast to her theatrical colouring, and the faultless, obliging embrace of her form-fitting dress. Alma left them together.

"I do hope you won't mind me dropping in like this. But I couldn't wait. I feel so badly about the *Post*, and I simply had to come and talk to you and George. I wish there was something I could do."

"You could say nothing about it," thought George spitefully. But Pitch was so evidently sincere that he reproached himself.

"I guess you haven't the slightest idea what you're going to do," Pitch said. "Of course, stupid of me—you've been too busy even to think of it."

"I wish she'd talk to Joy, and not me," thought George uncomfortably. And vengefully: "I think she's putting on weight. All these singers do." He got up and turned on the radio, not because he wanted it, but because it was something to do. It was a local station, and to his intense embarrassment it was playing one of Pitch's own records.

He was stumped. He could not politely turn it off. He could not politely leave it on and interrupt everyone. The coincidence was too complete. What would Joy think, finding them together, and then to have Pitch's voice turned on from the radio.

"But there I go, forgetting what Joy is, putting her in the same mental class as myself."

Joy solved it by saying: "Dear, I wish I had a voice like that!"

"But that's all I do have, darling," said Pitch sweetly, and swung herself into a chair with one of her long-legged gestures. "And even that will leave me about the time your children leave you."

"You make so many records," said Joy. "How do you get time to do it, with so much travel, and keep up your classes and your appointments and your compositions. And now the radio. Only the movies are left—and a husband."

"I don't make many records, really, not more than fifteen or twenty a year," said Pitch, and George knew it was said with careful carelessness, as if only incidental. He knew that he and Joy were to protest that that was a lot. Joy knew that George was to feel sorry that he had married her, and missed this colourful and romantic figure with the liquid voice and the relentless revenge.

"You'd think," George contributed, "that you'd want to live in New York, where the big contracts are. That's where the opera scouts are, too," he finished, and wondered how mean he was. For Pitch had had her trials with the opera. Always a little too light in voice, a little unconvincing in dramatic quality. And to his mind came one of Bo's irreverent comments: "These women with scads of talent are often sterile."

That was what ailed Pitch. Sterile. Sterile of heart because she had fixed her mind on hate, sterile of body because she had made an armoured temple of her affections. Too bad she hadn't married. He could think of this impersonally now, forgetting the years gone by, the years no longer real to him, any more than school days are real.

"But I'd sooner live here," Pitch was saying, and if she felt his irony about the opera she didn't show it. After all, she could have no complaint, a girl still in her early thirties, beautiful beyond reproach, with black eyes that picked up the footlights and flung them in a cascade of sparks, a girl who was always in demand, who had sung by viceregal command, the gorgeous creature who had once waited and plotted for him while he fought in the war—

This was Pitch Black, spreading her superb body full length on his rug, playing games with Alma, aware that he must be aware that her faultless chassis had lost none of its allure by its maturity.

"All my friends are here," Pitch said. "The little bit of career I can have—" she flung a hand out, "—has been forced on me, I suppose, because I went out and asked for it in the first place. But to be with you kids, and to see your lovely family growing up—"

She did not finish. And George thought: "Language is a funny thing. Can be made to mean the opposite of what it says. Pitch had something on her mind. Bo's coming home, or she's got some surprise of her own—something to make Joy feel badly. She knows she can't touch me any more—Why am I saying that!"

"Tell me, George, what on earth will you do? It's all in the family, so we can talk frankly."

"The guinea pig outlived the laboratory," said George, and he meant it lightly, and was angry to feel his face muscles tightening on his grin.

Pitch laughed without embarrassment, and turned to Joy. "George is being cynical. I can't talk to him. But I can tell you honestly, George has helped me in the past, with publicity when I needed it most—"

"Shucks," George said, more vexed than ever. "I did nothing. We simply used stories about a singer who happened to live here. We do the same for others."

"Just the same, you've given me special favours," said Pitch, in a way that George knew she hoped would make Joy's hair roots stiffen.

"If I were Joy, I know how I'd feel," he thought wrathfully. "But Joy sees through this byplay, just as she sees through lily-covered slime like Verne Fraser. Pitch came to make us feel cheap, and for no other reason. Why doesn't she out with it?"

Pitch did so, in an unexpected way, as he expected she would.

"Won't you please let me say it?" she suddenly pleaded, and her handkerchief went to her eyes which didn't need it. And now she looked luminously at George. "It seems such a mean little thing to ask, but won't you let me help? You will have to make sacrifices for just a little while, till you get started again. I know there's no doubt that you will be better off—finally. But in the meantime, it's such a shock for you."

"We can take it," said George grimly.

"George!" Joy's face was smiling, but her voice had a note of warning in it, so stern that he blushed. To Pitch she said: "I know what you're trying to say, that you don't want to see friends whom you've sponsored go down and have to confess they've slipped. That's pride, dear, and I know how it is. I feel the same. But all we could do is accept help that we'd have to pay back."

"Never!" cried Pitch vehemently. "You've paid me back a thousand times. Just to have friends—people I love. To be natural with. Oh, what that has meant to me. Times when I've been frightened, and then I draw courage from the calm, strong confidence of darling you and George."

George thought to himself: "Joy's too polite to let her lip curl. But how she must loathe this sort of stage play. Where have I heard it before—Verne Fraser, of course. Verne when he's been drinking. Less emotional, just plain lewd and maudlin. But the same thing. What a contemptible thing to compare my cousin with a louse like that. But it's there. The same theatricals, the same posing."

"It's very nice of you," Joy was saying. "But we'll come through all right, I'm sure. We'll give some sort of account of ourselves, shan't we, George?"

"Yes, yes!" he heard himself say, like some ventriloquist's dummy. "Guess we'll get along. Mighty nice of you, Pitch. But we have one or two things in sight."

Too suddenly Pitch smiled, and her voice had lost all trace of tears. "How stupid! How obsolete! I come like a country preacher, to pray with you and comfort you, and now you're bucking *me* up. Oh, dear, it's too droll, too droll!"

"What does she mean, droll!" George fumed to himself. "She created the scene herself. What kind of an act is this, anyway?"

Pitch sprang up and pulled her furs around her shoulders, walked nervously over to Joy and put her arms around her.

"Bye-bye, darling," she said affectionately, "I do beg you, forgive me for such a silly scene." Then she threw a kiss to George, impulsively turned her back to Joy, and called up the stairs to Alma: "Bye, sweetheart; don't forget our picnic tomorrow."

And Alma came tumbling down the stairs two at a time and threw herself into Pitch's arms. "See Diana!" she said

triumphantly. "The new dress fits!"

"Yes, darling, it's lovely. And I'll come to get you at ten. And do you know, Uncle Bo is coming home tomorrow night. Won't that be grand!"

"Hooray! I wonder what he'll bring me."

"He'll bring you a big hug and kiss, you darling," said Pitch, and to George, again ignoring Joy: "Please don't come out."

But Joy and George went arm in arm to the driveway to see her climb into her car. Pitch did so with exaggerated grace.

"Bring Bo around, if you have a spare half-hour," said Joy.

"See you in the morning!" cried Pitch, and backed her car out.

"She's as skittish as if her girdle pinched," Joy said to George.

He nodded. "She's got something on her mind. She's up to something. I wish she'd marry Bo, but I don't think he asks her any more."

Joy said thoughtfully: "Now tell me what you have on your own mind. I felt sorry for you, bursting with news of some sort, and couldn't let it go."

George told her, shamefacedly, half afraid she would be furious at his even thinking of it, half afraid that he seemed silly with his scruples about a venture in which he, at least, would have an honest front.

Joy listened with her pretty brows puckered, and George thought: "Nothing like a wife who understands. Joy's always about two jumps ahead."

Joy said, when he had finished: "How do you feel about it yourself? Suppose you were single, only yourself to think about?"

"I'd tell him to go to hell."

"Then tell him," said Joy decisively. "Don't worry about us, dear. We can always get along. I'll get a job myself—at something. I can scrub floors. We don't need to keep the house. Let's sell it."

George's heart sank, and his look held agony. "But we can't do that. I'd be putting my fool conscience first and you second. I won't do that."

Joy came and sat on the arm of his chair and put her arms around him, and he felt the swift rush of reassurance, of competence, that she always brought with her. He had often wondered: "Is it pathological? Is there some chemical affinity? It seems so real."

"You've always wanted time to write," she said. "Write the things you wanted to write. Write your book. My heart aches for you when I think of it. You have half of it stuck away and you never get at it, because you're always busy working for somebody else. Let's work for ourselves for a change."

"But the things I write, nobody wants to buy. I'm on dead centre in the book, can't seem to get going either backward or forward. Can't decide whether the world is to be thrown to the wolves or move ahead."

"You dear, crazy lover, worrying about the world! Why don't you write about pots and pans and men's worries and women's gossip?"

"I know. But I don't seem to be able. I feel self-conscious when I start at them—"

"But why don't you sleep on it, George? Might look different tomorrow."

"Yes, maybe I could. He wants to know right away, but I can wait."

"Trying to rush you into a decision—his decision?"

"Well, if that's the way he feels he can—"

"Now forget about him. We'll have dinner, and I'll fire the maid for a start. Dear, would it do any good to talk it over with Bo?"

"That's an idea. But it depends on how Bo gets along with Pitch this time. Usually comes around here fit to be tied after he's been with her. He's really in love with her, Joy. Can't imagine why."

"She's a very lovely girl, George, and you were in love with her yourself once."

"Yes, maybe, but that was before I knew you."

"She's still in love with you, the wretch!"

"Oh, nonsense, Joy. She just pretends—to be ornery."

"Well, I'll be glad if she ever marries Bo. Then I'll feel safe!"

"Oh, you crazy little minx!"

"Then we'll have Bo and Pitch for dinner, and I'll keep her away while you talk to him."

Pitch met Bo at the station, after her picnic with Alma.

"Hello, Lonesome," said Bo. "Have you missed me?"

"Yes," said Pitch sweetly. "When I thought of it."

"Don't tell me! What did you do with the other two hours a day?"

"Oh, I slept, and went over to play with Alma and Hal."

Bo looked at her sharply. "Is that the reason for all the service tonight? Remember, I'm the uncle of those kids."

"I could be their aunt, couldn't I?"

"Not unless you were married to their uncle, since you're already their cousin."

Bo sat beside her, and Pitch started the car with a jerk.

"The gears work better since you got them fixed," Bo said sarcastically. "Did you ever try driving a tractor?"

It was their usual snapping, but Bo sensed something was wrong. He looked again, close, and saw her face working strangely, thought he saw a tear glisten in the eye that was next to him.

"If you don't like the way I drive you can get a taxi," Pitch said.

"Hold on there!" Bo cried aghast. "What's going on? Here I come home from the wars on the commercial front, tickled pink to see you, and you up and cry. Does that make sense?"

"Nothing makes sense—very much," Pitch said, in a small voice. "And I might as well be a taxi driver, for all the affection you show."

"I really believe you *are* glad to see me!" Bo marvelled.

"I could be, if you weren't such a beast."

"Anything wrong?"

"No—nothing. I guess I'm out of sorts."

"Well, we have another line here just as good," Bo began professionally. "Oh, yes—" He fished in a pocket. "I'm still carrying the ring, so please consider the usual question as asked."

"And please consider the *un*-usual answer as given."

"Is that a trick answer? Or do you mean what my common, horse sense tells me would be the wisest decision of your life?"

Pitch turned on him with what she meant to be a laugh, that ended in a sob.

"Yes, I mean it. Whatever it is you're asking me, yes! Yes, *yes*! Is that wise enough for you?"

"You mean you'll marry me, after all these years?"

Pitch had recovered her composure as suddenly as she had lost it. She smiled demurely, aware that it raised the black arches of her eyebrows. Bo, leaning forward, saw the light shining in her eyes as she looked straight ahead through the windshield.

"I'll marry you," she said, with a quiet fury in her voice. "Yes, I'll even go that far to punish you for treating me as you do."

Bo drew a long breath, and whistled.

"Well, I'll be damned! When?"

"Tonight, if you like."

Bo looked at his watch and sighed. "Too bad, can't get a license now, and tomorrow I'll wake up and the dream will be over. Not much, young smartie. No sneaking away to a preacher's house for an elopement, and besides, I'm awkward on a ladder. No, we'll make a show of it. I want to lead you down the aisle and have everybody stare at you. It'll be the last time I'll ever get ahead of you."

Pitch laughed nervously. "I couldn't stand it!"

"You've sung lots of others into bondage," Bo said. "Now you'll hold still for the manacles yourself. See what it feels like."

"I want you to put your arm around me," Pitch said, musingly. "No, not here, silly! I'm driving."

"Here's a stoplight," Bo suggested. "Alas, that I have but one arm to give, and even that's on the wrong side!"

"We're going to George and Joy's," Pitch said. "As soon as you're unpacked. And bathed. You smell like a traveller."

Bo sighed gustily. "Ah, it's great to be young, and in love for the first time!"

"Can you remember that far back?"

"Aha, indeed! 'Twas on a summer's night, these many winters ago—Say, why aren't you melting on my shoulder?"

"I'm driving," Pitch said simply.

"Then quit it. Park the car and we'll get a taxi."

"I have more respect for my property than that, even if you haven't."

"It'll soon be ours, dear! I hope it's paid for," Bo sighed happily, and patted the dash. He grinned at her with exaggerated complacency.

"So that's why you've been so insistent about marrying me—to get my car? Let me tell you, it would be cheaper to buy one."

"Not to mention the wear and tear. I was afraid of that," Bo agreed. "I'd have a trade-in value, too."

Pitch bit her lip. Bo carried his horseplay so far that she was never sure of him. And she wanted to be sure.

She drew up in front of Bo's apartment block. "I'll wait in the car," she said sweetly. "And hurry, dear."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, dee-ar," Bo mimicked, getting out. "If you insist on sharing up the car with me, I share up the flat with you, stale smells and all. And let it be clear that I'm never to be told to hurry. I'm allergic to haste. Here, hold out your hand—your left one. No gloves, please."

He slid the ring on, and kissed her sedately. "Now come in."

"But not into a man's apartment—"

"You've been in men's apartments before." He was still smiling enigmatically. "Do you come or do I call the janitor?"

"I'm not coming," said Pitch firmly.

"Okay! My number's 401, remember. I'll leave the door unlocked. I'll be in the bathroom and I'll be half an hour. You'll find some sex magazines and a filthy book or two in the shelves."

Bo strode in without looking back, and got the elevator. In the flat he blew in disgust when the stale air struck him, opened the windows wide, took off his coat and hat, dug in the cupboard of his kitchenette, poured himself a drink, sipped it reflectively, then carried it to the bathroom along with his travel bag. When he was ready to shave, he stood a moment looking at himself in the mirror.

He grinned at himself. Then he made weird, grotesque faces. He tried a three-quarter profile, stuck out his chest, put his face close to the glass and looked suspiciously into his own eyes.

"You anatomical error," he leered contentedly. "You're sticking your neck out and you stand there and do nothing about it!"

He shaved, and stopped in the middle of lathering himself to drink from his glass. The liquor washed off a ring of soap from around his lips, and the soap floated in a thin film on the drink. Bo laughed, and the bathroom rang. He laughed louder. And then he started to sing, but stopped when it interfered with the razor.

"Stop it, you fool—I'm shaving!" he rasped at the image in the glass.

As his razor descended in silence he heard a stealthy sound of a door clicking.

"Make yourself at home!" he shouted.

"There's nobody here."

"All right, Nobody. Pour yourself a drink."

"I don't drink."

"Then don't make a virtue of it. Come here a moment."

"What do you want—a drink?"

"No, silly. I have a drink. I want to kiss you."

"I don't kiss."

"Liar. Don't try to come in. Just put your face up to the crack in the door. Ready?"

"I have no desire to see you in your underwear, or out of it." But her voice was just outside the door.

"You won't. I'll turn out the light. Hurry!" He saw her nose and chin come past the door, in the shadow. He leaned out suddenly to kiss her.

"Oh, you pig, Bo! Ugh—Soap—Why, you beastly—"

But with a roar of laughter Bo swung the door shut and turned the catch. "Sorry, you can't come in. Papa's bathing!" And he turned the taps on full to drown out her angry sputtering.

Later that evening, with Joy and Pitch upstairs, George cried:

"Gad, but it's good to see you! Just think, you kids going to be married! I can't realize it."

"Nuts, old man. You've been realizing it for years. And it's jolly good of you to say so. But look here, what's wrong with you?"

George widened his eyes. "Wrong—with me?"

"Don't pretend, old boy. Something's on your mind. Why the portentous wink from Joy when she galloped my bride-to-be off? Why the long face? You look about as hilarious as an undertaker."

"Oh, that!" George pretended to see light. "Oh, just a little personal matter. Maybe you can help me decide it. It's my conscience, to tell you the truth."

"If it's atrophied, only one thing to do—have it out."

"Verne Fraser has a blackmail sheet he calls *The Leaf*, and he wants me to be the editor of it."

"Want to?"

"No. But a family has to eat."

"Inconvenient habit. So it's scruples or steak? Who are the objects of Verne's present blackmail?"

"Everybody—your firm, other firms. Everything that has a stake in anything. Racket, you know. I'd be the sound effects when he puts the B on people."

"And you want to keep your amateur standing. If you had money, would you take it?"

"Not at all."

"Then don't! I've got lots to see us through."

"Look, old man, you're the noblest soul in the world, but there's no sponging. I didn't mean it that way. Besides, you're getting married."

"George, I'm not offering any sacrifice. I'm well off, and I'm not boasting. Having got out of the market before it broke, I am now the custodian of a large amount of sucker money, which is safely and untouchably invested in the drug business. I couldn't go broke now if I tried. Why shouldn't I help you? Who has a better right?"

"Don't talk like that, Bo, because it's unthinkable. I can always get some sort of a job. It was spiritual, not economic advice, I wanted."

"But why give up what you have here—until you must? That's not economic, George. All I do is to lend you a little money, and you sit back here and finish the book you've stalled off for years, and it makes you famous, and you pay me back."

"Bo, you're trying to make me believe this is still nineteen-twenty-eight, and it isn't. That era's gone. If I took your offer I'd be dishonourable, just as if I take Verne's."

"Then, if you feel that way, take the job. You'll see the other side, and what is life but experience? Trouble with us all is, we don't take it that way, as an adventure. We go into it like a landlubber steps into a rowboat."

"Not you," murmured George, in envious admiration. "You see what you want and dive in after it."

"Yes, with a towline and all the help on the dock, George. I never got anything in my life by my own efforts. Always used someone's pull to get me there, and from then on by crutches—cupidity and stupidity. There's nothing permanent in my way of life; there is in yours. You're trying to get at the truth; and I'm trying to keep away from it."

"You're the most charitable liar this side of Europe."

"So is anybody who pretends we can get back to where we were. We're in a spiral, George, a spiral of revolution. There'll be more fighting pretty soon, and you and I'll be back in there, if we're not too old. But that isn't solving your problem."

"We're in the phobia stage," George said, "and I'm trying to pattern my life to it. I'm trying to fit my vanity and my honesty together, and they won't jell. I keep telling myself, 'What are you going to say when Hal and Alma ask why they can't have this and that, as they used to?' I keep thinking of letting Joy down, of leaving her to lie to them for my sake, while I go off to look for a job that I can't get or try to sell manuscripts that nobody wants. It isn't the job I'm afraid of; it's the asking for one that I can't face."

"But suppose I am working for Verne. How can I come home at night and face my wife and family and say: 'I've just put in another day destroying all the truth and purity you stand for, all the honour and square deal that your father and mother lived and fought for'? Can I look our kids in the face and answer that? Can I look at you and call you my friend, and cheat like that? And know that, in the guise of some crackpot reform, I'm really duping people into this rotten fascism of Verne and his plug-uglies? A cell, they call it. And when they get enough cells through the country they'll have a putsch. The whole thing is ramshackle and mad—but it's ugly, Bo. I've no right to play that game, even on the dishonest excuse of exposing it."

Bo grinned cheerfully. "You're talking about ideas and scruples to make people uncomfortable, while I deal in panaceas and pills to enable people to go on living as they are, in the great pretence. Anything to avoid giving that up. Anything to keep 'em in the rut, that's my business."

"Better rut with your medicine than rot with Verne's," George said miserably.

"That's where you're wrong. Getting people out of the rut is exactly what Verne doesn't want to do. Ninety-five per cent. of people live and die in a rut. They make enough to get by, they look enviously over the top, but they never find the way out. If they did, fellows like Verne would starve to death. No, the fascist wants to keep them there, lulled and seduced with the idea that some day, somehow, someone will knock down the sides and make everybody equal. It's still a rut."

"That's the very thing I've been trying to pin down, Bo!" George cried excitedly. "You gave me the key to it."

"No charge for the higher knowledge," said Bo ironically, "since it was yours to begin with. You forget the fine, enlightening arguments we've had in our cups, old boy. You gave me all the ideas, just like my chemists give me all the formulæ. I merely sell the stuff back to the customer. Merely remember this: It doesn't matter which rut a man is in—to vermin like Verne. Theirs is not a revolution, it's just a debauch of the brainless, and people end up worse than they started."

"You talk like a revolutionist and a tory all at the same time. I feel that I agree with you, but I'm not quite sure what I'm agreeing with."

"Simply this," Bo waved a cigarette. "Smart, lecherous fellows like Verne Fraser convince the herd that they can all be leaders. In some unknown fashion those who are the worst failures will be the greatest success. It's a sort of profane distortion of the Christian heaven."

George drew a deep breath. "D'you know, Bo. I'm going with Verne. I'll get an insight into this screwy business that will help me upset it."

"You wouldn't think of cheating, would you?" Bo asked drily.

Alma raced in and threw herself into Bo's arms. "Remember that story you used to tell me about Stumblebum and Horsefeathers?" she demanded. And George knew that the fate of the world was to be left in abeyance.

"Let me see now, how does it go—" Bo fished in his pockets, as if for notes.

"You know right well how it goes," Alma insisted. "Stumblebum was going—"

"Mr. Stumblebum to you," Bo said.

Alma's hands patted Bo's face impetuously, "—and he fell over Horsefeathers—"

George thought: "Look at the mischief in her eyes! You'd swear she was eighteen!"

Bo's outlandish fairy stories had entertained the children since they were knee-high. In some manner of his own he had embellished them as Hal and Alma grew, to keep pace with them. George longed for that ready gift, the gift that Bo and Joy both had. He alone, the father, felt an ultimate shyness with his children, the old, pervading fear of boring them. The fear, he sometimes thought, that they'll think I'm an old fogey.

What fabulous people they were, in Bo's stories. Stoopentakit; Scissorbill with his palace; Stupe and Dupe, the weird little people who never understood each other; Tenapenny, the three-legged horse; Whatsit and Whosit, the little Eskimo princes; Hoobajar, the flying whale; Swankface the butler, with the gold knob on his self-folding umbrella, and Openface the footman; Great Toe the colonel and Little Toe the mascot; Dingbat the long man whose joints kept falling apart, and Whifflebat the dwarf with his step-ladder, who was always putting Dingbat together again; and Squinty the moose, whose tears ran crosswise over his face—and a host more of these grotesque people who had been so real to Hal and Alma through these years.

George thought, while Bo was talking with Alma: "He'd love to have kids. So would Pitch, if she got them the easy way. But Bo comes here instead, and pours out all that feeling of his on ours. Sentimental old dog, and yet he's always so cynical. In some ways he's closer to my kids than I am myself."

He rejoiced inwardly to hear Alma correcting Bo every time he departed from the authorized text. Alma still remembers the story better than Bo does, he reflected. But he's got to tell it, so that she can live it. She wouldn't live it so well if she told it herself. Maybe that's what's wrong with me, why I can't get my life straightened out into a sequence, why the tide always bears me on around some new corner.

"But there's more than that to it. Bo's for ever slipping in some new angle or character. That's the adventure. That's the way Hal used to be. Bo's like Hal, and he's always bringing Hal back to me from the grave. Some gesture, some word, some sure quick stroke into the vitals of a thing, while I hover and hesitate on the outside."

Upstairs Pitch was in excitement over some new or old thing that Joy showed her. She was waiting for the chance to say what was in her mind. It was crazy, impossible, and she loved it.

"It would be such a pity," she said at last, with a wave around the room, "to have to leave it, wouldn't it? Oh, I'm so sure that George will be able to get something else, just as good or better."

"We're not so sure," Joy said, with composure. "But if it comes to that, we've lived in rooms and flats before, and are quite ready to do it again."

Pitch was thinking: "Conceited, complacent wretch." And to Joy: "But there's never any need, my dear. Bo would never let George do this." She thought vengefully: "That should hold her. Bo's her old sweetheart, even if she won't admit it to herself." She hastened on: "They have been such friends, you know."

"Loans always break up friendships," Joy said, with a touch of coolness. "George would never accept it, even if I agreed, which I wouldn't."

"But, darling, we're both so anxious, and you're our best friends, so why shouldn't you let us share our home with you? Just think, we could be one happy family, until George gets back on his feet again."

Joy listened to what Pitch was saying, with the cold impersonality that one eyes a spider on the porch. There was a fine web being spun, and it had a purpose in it, the purpose of humiliation. And she told herself: "I must look at it that way, as an impossible joke. I simply must. If I don't, I'll scream at her." To Pitch: "It's awfully sweet of you to think of such a thing. But you couldn't do that. Bo expects to have his own home, and so do you. Besides, George will be able to give a good account of himself."

Pitch said to herself: "You English people are all the same—insufferable. Even Bo, after all his years in America and here. Well, we shall see."

For there was in Joy's friendly and even affectionate tolerance of her some indefinable thing that enraged Pitch Black to

a fury that no contempt or open hostility could ever have done.



Chapter Thirty-Two

As guilty and self-conscious as a man at a corset counter, George Battle marched down the road in the Parade of the Isms. It was a motley crew that tramped along, there in the junior thirties, spawned in the Great Depression, and sharpened in the New Cynicism.

Here were men awed and humbled at the revelation that everything they used to know was not so. Here were crackpot intellectuals who knew that their hour had struck. Here were the satraps of Laissez-Faire, who said it would all come out in the wash. Here was the Forgotten Man, tortured between his new notoriety and someone's Realization. Here were the Red, the Sit-downer, the Jungleer, the Box-car Tourist, the Abundant Lifer, the Soft Money prophet, the Jeremiah of the Debt System who had never got out of debt himself.

Like so many psychiatrists around a murderer, some using a set of symptoms to prove him insane, others using the same symptoms to prove him sane, they clustered and chattered around the Body Economic. The man who could not get a job at eight hours a day walked in the Parade beside the man who could prove, with any given set of statistics, that everybody could have the equal of five thousand dollars a year and work only four hours a day for twenty years, then loaf the rest of his life.

It was the great day of the Expert. They sprang at you from every corner. They talked in strange idioms, had a thousand diagnoses, and they agreed on only one thing—that everything you spoke about had to start with a Capital Letter.

George grew accustomed early to the fact that his new job must rest on hatred of everything. Stupidity and rapacity were inherent in the System and in the Capitalists, and Purity began east of the tracks. No matter what any employer did, no matter what policy a government formed, it had an ulterior motive—to cheat the masses whom he himself had set out to delude and mislead.

He drove himself to work with an artificial bitterness that he loathed and despised. He thought to himself: "How can I hate the system that did me no harm, that brought me through the boom without enriching me, yet thus far into the Great Depression unscathed? Was it anyone's fault, save my own, that I made no more while the making was good? Was it any credit of mine that I have not begun to suffer now as the others are suffering? Bo wanted to make a position for me in his company. But I know nothing about his business, and he knows I know nothing. It would be plain stealing in front of his eyes. Yet what is this? What is it to stir these people into rash revolt with the shabby mirage of a New Order? Well, at least I know this, that if I didn't do it someone else would, and more poisonously, more treasonably, more crookedly than I shall—if that is possible."

He threw off the mental and moral miasma of his new calling when he went home to Joy and the children. He went into the garden with rake and hoe and shears and spray, mowed the lawn and dug his ground and pretended with exaggerated energy that his other self did not exist. Not here.

And yet it did exist. Still it pursued him home, in the scum and the scalawags who harassed his telephone and sometimes came in person. These he shooed away, but it became gradually harder to live two lives, to meet Joy's friends and his in the old way, to shrug off their inevitable gossip about his job.

He began to feel the talk behind his back, to sense that contempt and cynicism among the couples they knew less intimately; and those others they had party'd with, played bridge with, and with whose wives Joy had traded gossip at their teas and auxiliaries and clubs.

Hal came home from high school with a bruised cheek, a bloody hand and a torn coat, and before Joy could ask a startled question, he shouted:

"Don't bawl me out, Mom, till I tell you. Johnny Gilmore said Dad was a Red. He isn't, is he?"

"Certainly not, dear. Dada's just trying to help people, and to right some of the wrongs."

"Well, that's what I told him, I guess. Sumpin' like that, anyway. And then Bill Montgomery ups and yells, 'Heck, he's no Red. He hasn't got guts enough to be a Red!'—He said that, Mom. I'm only repeatin' what he said. And then I let him have it."

"What did you let him have?" Joy asked gravely, careful not to let Hal feel the sudden storm inside her. "Come into the bathroom and I'll sponge you. You can tell me there."

Hal held up his bruised fist, and Joy saw the blood on it.

"Dear heaven, child!" (Hal was taller than she.) "You mustn't go around hitting people just because they say silly things. It's most likely Johnny heard someone else say that—"

"But what about Bill? Guys ain't gonna come to me and tell me my dad hasn't got guts enough—"

"You mustn't use that word, Hal."

"I'm just sayin' it like Bill said it."

"Did Bill hit you back?"

"Yah! He tried to, and I tripped him. And then Johnny sailed in. That's the only way guys like that will fight. So I tied into both of them."

"Who was it hit you on the cheek?"

"I think that was Bill. I knocked him for a loop, and just then Johnny jumped on me, and I kicked him."

"That was a mean thing to do. You should fight with your fists—" Joy caught herself. "That is, if you must fight—in self-defence."

"Sure I fought with my fists. But when a guy kicks you, you kick him back, don't you?"

"He kicked you? Where?"

"Oh, on the shins, I guess. 'Snothing, though."

"Nothing! Let me see it."

Hal reluctantly hauled down his sock, to disclose an angry blue swelling above the ankle.

"Don't you worry, Mom. He's got marks, too. Think I'd let a coupla sissies like that push me around!"

Joy forced herself to say, without excitement: "I'm afraid your father will have to decide about this. It should really be reported to the principal."

"Oh, gee, Mom—then we'll get detention. Besides, it wasn't near the school. It was on the way home."

"We'll see what Dada says. In any case, you must make friends again tomorrow."

"Sure, I'll make friends. But they better not try any funny business. Say, Mom, what's a Red, anyhow?"

"A Red is—Oh, a Red believes that everybody in the government should be thrown out and a new government take control of everything."

"Well, gee, then, the principal's a Red himself. I heard him telling one of the teachers that we'd never get anywhere till the old party gang were rooted out, and he said these strikes were just a symptom. What did he mean by that, Mom? Who did they strike?"

"He just meant, dear, that he thinks there are smarter men who should be governing the country."

"Smarter than the King?"

"No, no. Smarter than the men who are elected to Parliament."

"That's where they pile the dead wood, isn't it?"

"Dead wood? What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, I heard the principal say, 'dead wood in parliament.' That's what he said, Mom."

"Oh, Lord!" Joy gasped to herself. "I mustn't laugh. I really mustn't. But I *shall* tell Dada. Poor Dada—worried sick about it, and he tries to hide it so. And George can't hide anything and never could!"

To Hal, she said: "By deadwood he meant men who don't try to think very hard for themselves, but just repeat what they read in a book."

"That's what school teachers do. And that's what they teach us to do," Hal objected.

"But it means more than that," Joy hastened on, and wished George were home. "It means—well, it means men who don't work to make things better, but do just what they're told."

"Who tells them, Mom?"

"Their party leaders, I guess. The men who give them their orders."

"Johnny said Dad gets his orders from Moscow. Does he, Mom?"

"Silly nonsense! Moscow never heard of Dada. You must understand, dear, that some people say that about everyone who isn't satisfied and tries to make life better for the common people."

"Are you satisfied, Mom?"

"Certainly I am. I've a fine big boy and a lovely girl, and we have the best father in the world, haven't we?"

"I'll say we have! And I can lick any two guys that say—"

"Now, never mind, dear." Joy patted him hastily. "You've done enough fighting for one day."

"Heck, that wasn't a fight, Mom. That was a pushover. Why, I could lick *three* guys—"

"Now run along!" Joy finished her doctoring of the shin. "Nice people don't always talk about licking someone."

"Just the same, they can't say that about my Dad, can they?"

"No, dear." Joy's head began to whirl. "They certainly can not."

"There!" cried Hal triumphantly. "You agree with me, don't you? You'da licked them yourself, Mom. Gee, it's bad enough to call my Dad a Red. But when any kid says he hasn't got the guts to be one! Why, the dirty—"

"Harold! This must stop! Now, do get the paper and run along and look at the funnies."

"I s'pose I could. Heck, I don't like these funnies, though. I liked *The Post* funnies. Why doesn't Dad print *The Post* any more, Mom?"

"Dada didn't print *The Post*. He wrote articles for it. Someone else printed it."

"Well, why didn't they keep on printing it?"

"Because Mr. Clayton died, and the men who owned the bonds called them in, or—or—something of that sort."

"Ha ha! That's funny. We get bonds in arithmetic. Well, they're welcome to them. But they called them in! Called in the bonds! Ha ha ha! Gosh, that's funny, Mom!" Hal raced off to the chesterfield with the funnies, and Joy with a great relief heard him burst into a new spasm, as he said it over and over:

"Called in the bonds! Hey, bondie! Ha ha!"

Joy knew that he was lying flat on the chesterfield with the paper, with his feet on the arm, and she didn't care. She fled thankfully to the kitchen, and because they had no help any more, she began feverishly to prepare dinner.

But a vague, elusive anxiety was gone from her mind, and her heart beat happily. "If only I can make George feel it," she thought. "The school principal himself is a socialist. Probably as red as anyone. What harm can there be in working for

them, then? Or—" she paused in doubt, "—in pretending to work for them?"

Alma rushed in, threw her beret on the nearest hook, dumped her jacket on the back of a chair, and raced for the kitchen.

"What have we for dinner, Mama? Lord, I'm hungry!"

"Alma!" Joy pretended a horror that her singing heart could hardly sustain. "You mustn't say such words, darling!"

"But you say it, and so does Dada!"

"That's different. It's a grown-up word. Dada smokes a pipe, but you wouldn't want to."

"I would, only I tasted it and it made me sick. Say, Mama, Doris Cameron said her mother was the best cook in the world, and I told her she lied!"

"What! Another!" thought Joy. And to Alma: "But that was very naughty, telling a little girl she lied."

"But she did! She knew as well as anything her mother isn't."

"I don't think she did, dear. She knows about the nice things her mother makes."

"But I just told her," Alma explained patiently. "That's how she knew. I made it very clear, Mother," Alma added with dignity. "You're the best cook in the world, so what's the use pretending?"

"Oh, help, somebody!" Joy gasped inwardly. "And doubtless I'm the oldest and biggest and fattest! These children!"

And all at once she thought she knew how George felt, and what he had meant when he said: "It's this terrifying loyalty that makes me feel so cheap, Joy. The children's loyalty—that unbeatable, unbreakable thing that we build up ourselves. And the way you believe in me—at least, the way I always hope you do."

"You know I do," Joy had said simply.

"And then I feel so big and important—until I look at myself. Trying to tear down all the real and true things. And I say: 'You heel, you cheap cheat, you small hypocrite. It isn't because you attack the people who can take it. Maybe they deserve all you say. But it's the way you delude and mislead the masses who believe the rubbish you write. The people whose only weapon is passion, who have no shield against the wounds of disappointment. To these you lie.' I'm sorry, Joy, to bring this grief home to you. But I have to unload it somewhere. I wish I could see the way out."

"If you're in doubt still, why don't you throw it all up, dear?" Joy had asked. "There are other jobs. We'll get along somehow."

"And let you and Hal and Alma face your friends and the kids at school and be humiliated!" George had blazed in anger at himself. "Here in this country, where it's a worse shame to be a failure than a crook? Oh, I wish sometimes I'd never had any scruples, be a swine and stay within the law, like Verne. Should have studied law, as he did."

That night when the children had gone to bed, he talked with Joy of what Hal had told him. It was after he had patted Hal and said, "Well, you had it forced on you, Hal, and you had to fight. When that time comes, give them the works. Good old boy, sticking up for your Dad!"

And in spite of the tormenting thought that he was so talked about, his heart thumped proudly at his ribs.

"It's something to feel good about, after all," he said to Joy. "Your kids fighting for you! And then the school principal, and the university profs—Why, they're as red as anybody."

"Does that make it any better?"

"No, it doesn't make any difference. They're a parochial lot. Always talking socialistic principles, but about as socially minded as hermits. Experts of the split truth, all of them. Laboratory and theorist, and no way to bring the two together. But at least *they* can't turn up their noses at us."

"But don't you think it's rather dangerous, teaching children those ideas when they're not ready for them? When we were young we were taught to say our prayers, and we said them. There were no ifs or buts, either about the prayers, or in

them."

"And ours have to do the same, thanks to your good training. Gad, sweetheart, it isn't right to feel that way, but I can't help feeling thrilled about that boy going out there and fighting for me."

"I'd never forgive him if he didn't," said Joy. "He's a chip off the old block, after all."

"Chip off the little block, you mean."

"No flattery, now! I'm afraid of my shadow. And speaking of shadows, what shall we give Pitch for her wedding?"

George said: "Yes, after all, these are the things that matter. I hope she makes good old Bo as happy as he deserves to be." And he knew he was only making words, for Bo would decide that for himself. Just how, George was not sure.

Alma was to be their flower girl, and Iris Packard was Pitch's maid of honour. Bill Hamilton, perennial bachelor, growing more bald and more red faced every year, would stand beside Bo.

A man, thought George, should be nervous, distraught, absent-minded for at least the last week before his wedding. But never once could George find him the least discomfited or excited.

While Joy took Alma to the final wedding rehearsal, Bo dropped in on George.

"Welcome, my lad," said George briskly. "In a couple more days you'll be one of us. How does it feel, after all these years of freedom?"

"Bit of a chore," Bo said. "I need a drink."

"I have some beer," said George. "Going plebeian, you know. I'll get you one."

And they went together to the kitchen, as of old. "Just think," George said, giving voice to a thought that troubled him, "this is one of the last times we'll have a chance to do this. When Pitch has you all tied down she'll make a society man of you."

He tried to say it lightly, but he had the foreboding that Bo was slipping away from him, away from Joy and him and into the way of life that Pitch would decide for him. Bo would resist and rebel for a while, but from sheer force of importunity he would drift into it and be gone. All men did eventually as their wives designed for them, if they were to amount to anything.

Bo shrugged, ignored the glass George offered, and drank his beer reflectively from the bottle. He dumped ashes from his cigarette into the sink.

"A woman," he paraphrased, smacking his lips, "is only a woman, but a good bottle of beer wets the whistle."

"A good cigar is a smoke," George corrected sedately. "And that's another thing, this cigar smell on your clothes that Alma always talks about. You'll come home and find all your clothes gone to the cleaners to take that out. I hope you won't reach the ultimate depths and become a secret drinker."

"Alas for your jests," Bo mimicked. "You're hiding some anxiety, old dog. I can always tell—when you make fun of something. You have the same sort of gaiety as a mortician. Is the conscience still nagging?"

George frowned. "That's what bothers me. It's letting up. I'm getting calloused. It's this confounded national election. Everybody gets either completely frenzied or stays completely cold about an election."

"And how is the Cause? Got any candidates?"

"Oh, yes, planted here and there. Bound to make this country a laboratory for their damned theories. And if we're off-colour with the national government you know what we'll get."

"Caught you that time! It's the spoils, and not the messianic urge, old horse. Say, George, why don't you go down there yourself and stir things up?"

"They haven't offered me the job of Prime Minister yet," George grinned wryly.

"You can always be a Back Bencher. There's not so much work, and they can't blame you for anything. You might even carry a gun, and be ready for the putsch."

"You mean as a candidate?" George demanded. "You're fooling. 'The doomed man had a jest on his lips.' Ha ha!"

"Never was more serious in my life."

"There's the trifling matter of someone to nominate you."

"Nominate yourself."

"As a Red? No, it won't do, Bo. I'm too pale a pink to get the tough vote, and too deep-dyed to get the church crowd, and Verne's gang wouldn't trust me. You'll have to design some other future for me."

"You can create a party overnight," said Bo. "Anyone above the mental level of a hoptoad can follow somebody else, but it takes a smart man to form his own. These Ism fellows are fooling themselves. Any clever fellow like you could pick their arguments to pieces with his bare hands."

"I could, too, if you stayed around to kibitz," George said ruefully. "But you'll be a benedict, and as busy as—"

"A one-armed paper-hanger," Bo finished for him, and patted his own empty sleeve.

"A cat on a tin roof," George amended. "Every time we get together I get fired with ideas, and by the time I reach the office next morning they're dissipated."

"It may be the liquor," Bo said. "We should try a discussion some time without a drink. This country's swinging leftward now so fast one of its legs is outgrowing the other. They're all trying to beat one another to some sort of shakedown, but they go gibberish when you mention socialism. Tell them that! Tell them it isn't socialism at all. This rotten thing is anti-social, it's fascism, a vision of legalized looting. Real socialism is not a process of taking, but a condition of mind. Grandpa used to finish out his years and die with his boots on in the chimney-corner. Now he goes to the old folks' home while his grandchildren, having kicked him out, bawl for the government to do something about him. That's Ism today, my lad. First thing they know Grandpa'll be back in a home of his own again, keeping the youngsters who can't work with their hands any more, and then it'll start all over again."

"Bo, you pretend to be clowning. But you have a habit of reaching down into the heart of things and hitting the nail on the head," said George earnestly. "I wish—"

"I wish," Bo interrupted sternly, "you would keep your metaphors straight. But to get back to your friends the anti-socialists. They want to freeze everything where their imagination reaches. They want to divide up what someone else has achieved, earned or stolen, and live on that till it's gone. That's mere coveting. You can't found a social order on it, but your Verne Frasers can set up an anti-social state and be the chief gangsters, simply by masquerading behind the upholstery of socialism. Tell them that, George."

"Yes, but they wouldn't believe me, and I'd be left square behind the bag—"

"Holding the eight ball, you mean. Do remember the metaphors."

"Don't talk into the neck of a bottle," George grinned back. "It gives your voice a sepul-hic-chral sound. It's all right for you, still a bachelor, to have those ideas. But I've got a family."

"My sepul-hic-chral friend, be yourself, and family matters will look after themselves."

"Ah! That's where you're wrong. No married man, least of all a father, can be himself any more. No matter what he tries, he's really living out the lives and ideals of other people."

"As he interprets them, yes," Bo said. "But did you ever hear of a Captain Bligh paying alimony, or a Drake or a Frobisher, or a Vancouver or an Æneas or a Livingstone—"

"You do get around a bit!" murmured George admiringly.

"But when you come down to these modern he-man times," Bo went on, flourishing his bottle for emphasis, "where the

sexes are growing closer together, and the man is absorbing some of the effeminate, and never goes away without the pervading suspicion that he must find his way home again—that's when the divorce curve started.—Where was I? Oh, yes! He that seeketh to save his soul shall lose it, or words to that effect. So step out, my boy, and I'll vote for you."

"That's all right, but I can't get anywhere with one vote."

"I'll vote twice."

"I've got to have a lot. Whose? What party do I form?"

"Easy! There are Reform parties, aren't there? A Prohibition party and a Socialist party? Make a clean sweep. Challenge everything and everyone. Be an all-out rebel."

"Alas, this free soul marches to the altar shortly," George commiserated, to hide the excitement that Bo's words had roused. "I might get the school teachers and the university profs to go with me, at that!"

"Well, take them under protest," Bo advised.

"Handle this right, and we—we'll not need to rely on teachers," said Bo. "You'll have every small business man who is hanging on to a little strip of property trying to make a living. He knows he can get nothing out of the old gang, and the new ones want to take away the little that he has. Tell them they're saps to go in for a new deal where they do all the paying and the have-nots cash the tickets. None of your high-falutin' editorial language now. Get down and talk to them in their own words."

"But the ideas are yours," said George morosely. "It sounds grand when you're here. But two days after you leave town I run down."

"We might," said Bo, "be able to get around that. They've made me a vice-president of the concern—about the same as a lance-corporal, and I had to buy my way into the company to get that. But it means I'll be home more, except for twice a year or so across the country."

"Gad, man!" George cried in excitement. "I knew it! I knew you'd get anywhere you wanted to. Congratulations, Bo. You deserve it."

"Not so fast there, old soak. It was money, not merit. I happened to have a bit of change, and put it into the firm. They didn't have much choice, you see."

George whistled low. "You've come a long way, Bo," he said slowly, with the ache of honest envy in his heart. "A long way since we threw paper bags in the college corridors and set fuses together in the old gun pit. You've got everything—everything I haven't got—personality, courage, aggressiveness—"

"Acquisitiveness, you mean. It's no credit to me. I didn't work for what bit I've got, and you did. I can sell them a few pills to help them get along without exercising or eating the right food, and the odd cosmetics instead of soap and water. But you have been raising their standard of living, because you raised their standard of thinking. You sat up clawing your hair while I was inhaling a drink at some far-off bar, or pursuing some reprehensible pleasure at a night spot in the morning."

Pitch and Joy and Alma came home in Pitch's car, and all were excited. Alma's cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining, and she went volubly into her experience in the big church while the organ was playing.

Sometimes, George reflected in awe when she talked, certain inflections of her voice, certain gestures and mannerisms, were no longer Alma's alone, not his child's, but Joy's. The girl who had come to meet him in Trafalgar Square, with so many of the bewitching traits and that startling sort of beauty he had idealized in his dreams. The incredulous amazement of those times belonged only to yesterday, not to years gone by. And now Alma was inheriting what he had worshipped. What an imponderable thing was charm, that a girl could bestow it on her children and still keep it herself.

He said, with sudden emotion: "None of this, Bo, except for you. Not Joy, nor Alma, nor Hal, nor this home we have—"

"By the way, where is that old boulder?"

"Away with the team. Aren't kids hopeless, the way they race ahead of you! Diapers, rompers, rattles, electric trains, roller skates, bicycle, Cubs, Scouts, Cadets, and then the team. They're finished playing store games, and into football and baseball before you know it. That boy's up to my shoulder now, believe it. A few more years and he'll be in college—At least," George broke off, blushing, "he'll be of college age."

"And he'll be in college," Bo repeated calmly, deliberately, and his eyes fixed with a swift intentness. "There'll be no argument about that, old fried egg."

"It's unbelievable, Bo," said George, and pretended there was no mist in his eyes. "Born almost in the echo of war, that boy—"

"Just in time to be of age for the next one," Bo snapped.

George brushed it aside with a gesture. He was used to Bo's talking about the next war. There wouldn't be one, of course, he told himself, although they decided there must be, every time they got deep into argument over the scramble of strangled exchanges, sky-high tariffs, angry nationalism, depression that no one seemed able to understand or solve, the ominous signs in Germany and Japan, the tumultuous outpourings of class hatred even in their own country.

"How can you tell it's going to rain, if the clouds are the same day after day?" he'd demanded.

"Speaking of Hal," said Bo, "where do you expect to send him? Foolish question, I know, for he's crazy about flying."

And they both thought of Hal's workshop in the basement, where he had all the known models.

"Not hard to answer that," George grinned, following Bo's glance toward the basement door. "We suggested the California Tech, but Hal says: 'What's the use of going there to start pulling engines to pieces? I want to pilot the darned things.'—So it looks like Kingston. Hal insists that it be the army, and we insist that it won't, so the army it will be. No future in it, though."

"I think Hal's right," Bo argued. "War, as I predict on God knows what grounds, or peace, as you predict on similar grounds, the solution of whatever ails us has to come from the skies. When we fight again it'll be with machines, just as machines are fighting the battle of peace. But only the man in the sky can look down and tell one screwy element from another. Yes, Hal's right. He's got his mother's incisive way of seeing clear through a thing, his father's idealism, and his uncle's daredeviltry."

Pitch came in, stunning and startling, and kissed Bo on the cheek.

"What, drinking again, you bad boys!" she scolded, and though her eyes were smiling, George thought he heard a metallic click in her voice.

"Not again, darling—still," Bo said with a casual grandeur, and George silently applauded. "George is drinking to my long life, and since it's my life, I'm drinking, too. But for a long life you can't have a short drink, hence the attenuated character of this melancholy middle ground between conviviality and connubiality. I hope you get me."

"I've got you," said Pitch, and placed her cool cheek against his. Bo held his beer bottle as if waiting to drink from it. And beyond her smile, and in the deep black pools of her eyes, George saw vexation, veiled but tigerish.

Joy came with a gesture of hospitable horror to see them standing, one foot thrown over the other, leaning on the sink, with the empty beer bottles standing beside them.

"George! And Bo! What do we keep furniture for! You must both be exhausted. What an impossible host you are!"

"Bo said we had to have a long drink to toast a long life, so we're longer standing up and—" he kissed her—"here we are."

"Remember that, Bo," Joy said, "and when George goes to see you, on no account give him a chair. Stand him up in the basement."

And she said it very innocently, except that she winked with the eye which was away from Pitch.

Chapter Thirty-Three

George sat between Joy and Hal in the church while the organ played, and he sat on needles. They were at the front, and so he would have to imagine the scene as they came up the aisle. First there would be Bo and Bill Hamilton. Then the rector, and Alma with the flowers, and the bridesmaids, and Pitch beside Uncle Jim.

How old and bent and frail he looked now, against the memory of that burly man who came out of the East and conquered the wilderness. Aunt Sadie was not able to be with him for this trip. Her long and active life was near the sunset. And so Uncle Jim had come alone, and meeting him with all the hero worship of boyhood days struggling through the mists of memory, George felt ashamed of even an impulse to superiority when the bent old man came off the train.

Quaint and wrinkled he was, with his old-fashioned collar, his wide, outdated moustache and his queer-shaped hat. He peered at George almost unseeing, and, when he saw who it was, he seemed so shy and glad and proud to greet his nephew that George reddened with embarrassment.

They had been rich, Uncle Jim and Aunt Sadie, back in those roaring days of the early settlers, and gone down in the pre-war slump. But by the sheer iron of the man and the courage of his wife, Uncle Jim had gone back and recovered his fortune, regained his lands and reigned once more the squire, the dean, the big man of Westview. The gaunt, rambling house had wakened from its silence, and once again was the neighbourhood centre, where scarcely a Sunday went by without ten to twenty guests for the noonday dinner between church and Sunday School.

Then into the rocketing days of the great boom, when farmers grew all the wheat they could find land for, and sold all they could grow. When Uncle Jim's herds fattened and he could write his cheque in five figures and maybe six. Those were the times, as they had been a generation before, when prairie farmers took their wives to California for the winter, with the joking remark that it was cheaper than buying them fur coats to stay at home.

But the rains had come and the rains had gone, and the sun rode a harsh, clear sky above those plains again. The lush fields withered and the world's great granary had almost overnight become the dust bowl of America. Sprawled down through a continent it lay, its mined and fibreless soil a plaything of the winds; its people slaving with the unquenchable optimism of the spring, and retrenching again in the inexorable disillusionment of the fall; its cattle slaughtered and their bones hauled out to bleach in the barren fields; its bills unpaid and its lands thrown into the unwilling teeth of the tax machine.

Where the treacherous, untamable pressure areas still brought rain, farmers grew a pale, sick image of their one-time crops. And these were devoured by the tempests of grasshoppers that rose literally out of the ground.

These noble old families, who had come into their own in the new country half a century before, were left stranded and beleaguered on the skinny skeletons of their own greatness. After a lifetime of work, aged people were back from the heights to where in more sturdy times they had started. Their children had left them and gone to happier, lazier or seamier lives, until the rains should come again.

And yet men and women lived, and tore a stingy living out of the ground. The scrawny towns that had stood high and proud in the fabulous morning mirages of the plains now lounged in the ghostly glory of the past. To frontier town and farm had gone the pioneers to live out their thankless lives and raise their thankless families, and there they would remain to die. Above their graves the sky would darken again in the not-to-be-hurried cycle of Nature. In God's good time, they told themselves in their little dilapidated wooden churches, the Wheat would grow once more, and the green hymnals would be opened, and the clamour of voices would rise again,—

"We shall come rejoicing,
Bringing in the sheaves..."

Of such, against this homeric backdrop, was Uncle Jim, with the genial gleam in his tired old eyes, their pupils set too small in their watery and unnatural blue; those eyes that from a lifetime of habit looked through and beyond you to the far horizon.

And Uncle Jim had come to give his daughter away, to give away his black-eyed girl whose voice had been trained for fame with Uncle Jim's wheat. Could he see now, thought George, over the distant hills and could his ears detect again the

tramp of an onrushing nation? How far could he see and hear? To the unknown way of this wilful girl, who, in her grim obstinacy, had tried to wreck his home and now was bent on making one of her own for the satisfaction of wrecking it, too?

"Who giveth this woman?"

That was the way it went. George's breath caught and strangled when the organ broke into the strains of the wedding march and the slow, stately parade began. He saw things blurred and distant. He knew all at once that Bo was there, by the altar, standing straight and tall, with Bill Hamilton beside him—Bill with the shining bald spot on his head. In his impeccable black coat Bo was magnificent, like some wounded prince from a fairy story, with the eloquent empty sleeve folded and pinned where an arm had been.

Gone were the slouch and the exaggerated gesture now, and the devilry that was Bo. He was a man waiting for the woman who was to vow herself to him. And in the aisle George could feel the nearness of their coming. Alma with the flowers, the radiant and happy Pitch Black with the startling contrast of her black eyes and hair against the shimmering white of her wedding veil. And the tired, glad old arm of Uncle Jim, buttoned as he was against his will into a frock coat.

George looked left and right apprehensively. At Joy, so intent and pretty—what was going on in that busy mind of hers? Was she dreaming of the formal wedding she would have liked, of the moment that never had come in her life? Did it hurt, this envy, and did she ever resent it? Who had he been, a mediocre soldier, to cheat a girl of that one supreme moment of triumph?

Mediocre, that was it. How often had he dreamed of escape from it, from that dull and deadly trail of mediocrity. How he would create, and then exalt his own creation, find vent for those hungry longings of his childhood, of his empty and frustrated years on the farm, of those emotional onrushes he had so often felt since he knew Joy! There had been times when it had swept him on with incredible force. Oh, if there were some vehicle for sudden, irresistible expression, to build a monument of deathless words which would transcend anything ever written or spoken. Words that would tell this girl his worship for her, and what she had done for him and meant to him.

By his other side was Hal, and George looked shyly at him without turning his head. What were Hal's thoughts, now? Not this wedding, perhaps. More likely the slithering earth beyond the wing, and the reeling sky, and the roaring symphony of the engines in full song. The awful bellow that assaulted your ears and set your heart racing to meet the shock of it.

He remembered again the longing in the boy's eyes when he watched his first air show, the troubled shouts that tumbled from Hal's lips, the blurted-out question, the grave, grim compression of the young mouth when he was told that "some time, maybe," he might go for an airplane ride; the tumult of excitement when George and Joy had discussed it and said yes, he could go now. George closed his eyes and shook when he remembered the flimsy crate that had carried them up, there at the air show.

Delighted, Hal was, but not satisfied. George knew that as they later watched the Siskins of those days power-dive over the airdrome, starting as specks far above and rip-snorting down like three winged grey devils. The boy's chest swelled with a tremendous breath, and from him came a long, rapturous "Gee-ee-ee!"

From then on, although Hal had played at other things, worked at his lessons, given casual attention to the normal process of growing up—he had eaten, drunk and slept airplanes.

Well, those that were to be married, they were at the altar now, Pitch standing there queenly, challenging, commanding. And there was the little fairy vision in pink, and the bridesmaids, strangely similar and impersonal in their pink and mauve and their brave flowered hats.

"How do I feel?" George thought. "I see my great friend going part way out of my life. I see him happy, proud as a showman with a jewel, but somehow changed, enmeshed. Bo, the free soul, the supercilious, kindly, soft-hearted, brilliant old buddy. Yet I can't help feeling sorry. They are so sophisticated, so well used to each other and to life and its thrills. How can she give him one-tenth the wild happiness that Joy brought to me?"

"No! They have realized too much. Too sure of themselves. Too suave and wise and able. The confetti and the childish

vulgarity of the good wishes and all the suggestive innuendo are only a few minutes away now, but can they mean so much? Can they be a blessed embarrassment beyond endurance, as they should be? Can they be an indelible record, to live and dwell with those two for ever and ever?"

And he told himself again: "There are interludes in my own memory so sacred, so astonishing, so unbelievable that even now I approach them on tiptoe, afraid they will be gone, amazed that they are still there, pristine, shimmering, beautiful."

In his emotional excitement he prayed: "God help me get out of the rut. God help me to do something overwhelming, to be worthy of the little lady who gave me her heart to keep."

On the sidewalk they stood amid the excited cries of friends and threw their confetti. They saw Bo and Pitch ducking, laughing, escaping into the car that was taking them away. They heard the hasty, shouted good-byes.

On the curbside, waving vaguely at the retreating car, his bent shoulders looking even more shrunken, stood Uncle Jim. The forgotten man, George saw with a pang of futile regret that his waving went unanswered. He had given his daughter away in marriage, he had seen her go away again out of his life. There was something sombre and symbolic in its very abruptness.

Then, when the wedding car had turned the corner, Uncle Jim's hand came down, he stood uncertainly on the curbside, seemingly undecided what to do next, now that his little rôle had been played. What a contrast to that great man of yore, whose broad shoulders were braced for blizzard or blessing, his powerful frame limned against the next frontier he would tame and conquer.

A taxi driver approached him and spoke to him. Uncle Jim looked at him a moment as if unhearing, and then he was walking after him.

"Don't let him away!" said Joy suddenly. She and George raced after him and called, "Uncle Jim! Uncle Jim!"

The old man turned at his name, and George and Joy came up with him. His eyes lighted with pleasure.

Joy was beside him, and her little hand was in his great paw, gnarled as it was like the branch of an aged oak. She was smiling up at him. She looked so absurdly diminutive beside this tall faded figure which was the wraith of a giant.

"Were they going to send you off all alone in a taxi!"

"Oh!" Uncle Jim laughed shyly and with obvious relief. "That's all right. I'm to have the whole house to myself."

"You'll be staying a while, though, won't you?" George asked, cautiously.

But Joy exclaimed quickly, with a motherly, proprietary affection: "All alone in that house, with a housekeeper! We wouldn't hear of it. You must come home with us. We've hardly had a word with you, and we have thousands of things to talk about."

"But—" Uncle Jim hesitated. "You have enough on your hands. Your family, and—"

"But you must. Please do! George, will you send the taxi away?"

"Sure!" George suddenly found words. "Sure! You bet you'll come, Uncle Jim."

"Why—I guess I could," Uncle Jim said, and George was at the taxi already.

"Good Lord!" he was thinking. "What a dumbbell I am! If it hadn't been for Joy I'd have let him go off alone to that morgue of a place! Enough on our hands, he says! And he found time to look after the whole family of us, and his own besides! Pitch, his own daughter, just married, and he'd have gone off to that place alone, with nobody to talk to!"

Joy bundled Uncle Jim into the back seat with her, and George took Hal and Alma into the front seat with him. As he drove home he heard Joy talking as if she had known Uncle Jim all her life. It seemed as if George were the stranger, shut off from Uncle Jim by that barrier of restraint, of old and forgotten familiarity, to find that his boyhood hero worship was now turned, in spite of himself, to pity.

And why? he asked himself savagely. In the gaunt shell of that fine old man there still was more of greatness than he

would ever know.

From the back seat, Uncle Jim's guffaw burst out with some of the heartiness of old. George heard again his mellow boom come down the years, he heard again in memory those stentorian tones that once had challenged the hardness of the wilds. It thrilled his heart and gave him courage. He, too, would rise to the heights, borne on by the memory of Uncle Jim.

Chapter Thirty-Four

When George Battle came out of the rut he abhorred, it was like being blown out of a trench. It was unplanned and unexpected. Some hidden wrath simply seized him and propelled him. In his bewildered memory of it he was never quite sure what force it was, that clutched him and catapulted him into a notoriety that stunned him. It was no less explicable because he leaped to the defence of the man he theoretically hated, the man he actually admired, the man who needed him least.

Ryan Elwood Stuart needed no help from George. His name was streaked across the headlines of a continent and empire press. He was lampooned, ridiculed, admired, hated, hailed and damned as few other men. He was one of the loneliest men in the world and one of the most successful. He was bigoted, broad, brash, iconoclastic, reactionary, idealistic or hidebound, according to his friends and foes.

As a theorist Stuart was a knockout, but as a humanist he was a washout. He could build a tower of ideas, but he dug an abyss of misunderstanding in the process. He was big, he was beetle-browed, he was a bachelor. He was a fiend for work, a fool for luck and afraid of nobody living. He shook hands with kings, called presidents by their first names, scorned history and made it.

He had come by eminence the hard way and he had no sympathy, no understanding and no mercy for the quitter, the crackpot or the crank. He inherited the drought, the depression and the disillusionment of a country and of a generation.

He had a soft heart for pioneers, a bitter hatred for panaceas, and a scornful but powerful pity for the masses. He was a tory and a diehard, but he swept his country leftward at a pace that left it gasping.

He had an utter and brutal contempt for politicians, reds and stuffed shirts. The first he tolerated for their inevitability, as one tolerates adolescent blackheads, middle-age girth and the change of life. The second he denounced, defied and shyly envied. The third he swept aside with a brusque disgust and an honest lack of diplomacy that earned him hard names in which he revelled.

He was as vain as a peacock, as stubborn as a mule, as astute in his executive ability as he was primitive in his psychology. He was the most successful failure in the history of his country.

He was also the most inscrutable man ever thrown up out of the human maelstrom of a young nation. He was the target for George's bitterest editorials, and for *The Leaf's* most libellous lies.

He was austere, aloof and abstemious. He was devout. He was sincere. He was cruel with the cruelty of a man who fears his weakness, and kindly with the kindness of a man who understands his strength.

He was the Prime Minister.

The election campaign brought Ryan Elwood Stuart across the country on a boisterous, barnstorming tour that would have killed an ordinary man. The stage was being set for him with all the cunning that Verne Fraser could mobilize.

The Jungle was being combed, the platoons were drilling. The Forgotten Men were on parade, hearing and rehearsing their instructions. It was to be a packed meeting. It was to make political history. It was to see the spectacle of a strong man going down, broken, beaten and humbled, before the angry assault of a mob while the nation looked on.

This, said Verne, was to be the "big blowout for the suckers." It was to prove for once and all the formidable power of the masses, and these junglers were the torch-bearers for the revolution. If they got out of hand—Verne shrugged significantly.

"All you need," George joked unhappily, "is to pick out what colour of shirts they're to wear."

The great man was coming at the end of August, in those crackling, hatching days of the middle thirties. In honour of the coming every big shot from Montreal westward was joining the party. The railway was giving them a special train, and was throwing in its directorate for good measure. Senators, directors, tycoons, secretaries, a corps of newspaper correspondents and photographers—Here was royalty indeed, travelling as royalty never travelled.

These were the facets of billions of dollars, of business, industry, exploitation, vested interests, banks, financial

empires. Every mogul on this golden train, every extravaganza of this triphammer tour, was made to order for the great assault of the affluent. And George went into mental training for it with more vigour than ever.

"This," he thought, "is the march of the magnificent, the damnedest fool didoes on record. This is the abysmal stupidity of a capitalism which is modern in everything but conscience. The whole argument of the masses, the whole distortion of that argument by this miserable sheet for which I write, is that the interests have ganged up on the poor man.

"What a chance has this man Stuart, to come striding in here with a single bag, and to shoo this glittering, silly retinue back where it belongs. I don't agree with his views, but I could stomach them a lot better if he brought them out for what they are.

"Instead of that he heads into this bonfire of Verne's, decked out in tinsel like a financial Christmas tree. There'll be a fire, and God knows who will be singed. What do these poor herds out of jobs know or care about trusteeship? How expect them to realize that each one of these bigwigs is a custodian for their jobs, their insurance, the future of their children? What do they think about that, when they have presently none of these things?

"They're wrong, of course. They've been seduced and bedevilled with this cruel, crooked utopianism that Verne's gangsters are preaching to them. Stuart could reach them and convince them. But he can't do it through the diamond dust of these millionaires he has draped around him. It's a crude and vulgar exhibitionism that people won't forgive, even if they envy it. And what they envy, they hate, no matter how good it is."

He talked his thoughts over with Joy. "Darling," she said, "it's simply your job. You've often done things you didn't agree with before. And this new cross-current of emotions can't help but be an experience for you. I know how you feel, and I get furious because you work so hard and others get so much from it. Is there any chance of them winning?"

"Not a chance. The old crowd's too strong."

"Then don't worry. You say yours is a profession of protest, but if you lost your target what would you do?"

"Pick a new target, and change colours again," George grinned sourly. "Isn't life a rum thing, Joy? Seems like the only honest things in it are inside the home."

The biggest auditorium in the city was secured. The campaign was nearing white heat. Verne Fraser's legions were ready. There had been strikes, pickets, parades, local pep meetings, every known way of drilling the dupes, George reflected with melancholy.

There were to be key men with their platoons planted in the audience. Platoons of men and women angry with want. The key men had their signals. It was to be a demonstration such as never had been known. For the first time in his life Ryan Elwood Stuart was to be thundered into defeat.

The Stuart forces were ready, too. It was no secret to them that this was a fight to the finish. The hall would be patrolled with police. Stuart would not know, but he would have a guard such as no political leader ever had. They would inconspicuously line the route by which he would gain the platform; they would be planted around the platform itself; they would be at the doors and in the audience.

The Stuart managers were careful to advertise none of this, lest it inflame the people they wanted to pacify. But George knew it, and Verne Fraser knew it, and for weeks *The Leaf* had been roaring its warnings to the Leafers, as this strange new political sect was to be known.

Joy had decided she would not go. "I'll listen to it on the radio," she said. And George agreed thankfully. He did not want her to be there, he knew. He did not want her to see what Verne Fraser's people would do; what he as *The Leaf* editor was supporting. He would feel ashamed and angry enough to be there in the impersonal and impartial anonymity of the press tables.

But Bo Charlton cried: "Miss it! I wouldn't miss this show for all the drug business from here to China. We'll all go. George has to work, Joy, so you come with us."

Pitch said at once. "I think I won't go, darling. Political meetings would make my head ache. Take Joy."

Bo eyed her speculatively and impersonally. "I'd never look at Joy like that," George thought. "Guess the honeymoon

was over before it started."

Bo said: "Okay, dear, but don't be surprised if I pick up some new fighting technique. What say, Joy. What say, George, old bean, old horse! Can she come?"

George said quickly. "Sure, if she likes." And to Joy: "I really don't think you'll be bored, dearest. In fact, it may be rough, but Bo will look after you."

Pitch saw that her play had missed, and she took it gracefully. "Such roughnecks," she murmured. "But run along and have your fun."

George thought no more, as Pitch had meant him to think, of the fact that Joy was going because Bo had asked her. They went early, a full hour before the meeting was scheduled to open. There was a clamorous crowd already gathered, and, passing them, George recognized some of the Leaf leaders with their armbands. It was Verne Fraser's crowd, there to take their pick of the seats before the public arrived. They yelled, stamped, whistled, filled the air with Bronx cheers at everyone who passed. The roar from them echoed for blocks.

"Dumb, asinine," grumbled George. "Why don't they let them in? This is just what they want to make them good and mad. Open the doors, let them find their seats, and they'd be bored in half an hour."

George had been promised easy entrance, with his press credentials. But the masses were packed tight around the door, and a shout of protest greeted his first timid gesture to elbow a way to the door.

"We could make a flying wedge," suggested Bo coolly, looking into the face of a longshoreman's picket who barred his way with a snarling, "Who d'you think you are, anyway!"

A woman pushed George aside roughly, and yammered at him to take his turn.

Joy plucked George by the arm. "Do let us stay back. We shouldn't have come so early. They have just as good a right as we have to get in first."

"Nice gentle playmates you have, old dog," said Bo, and the woman who had elbowed George glared at him with a livid hatred that was clear even in the pale glow from the street lamps.

"You're early, I see," said a voice. "Here, gangway for the editor!" It was Verne Fraser. He pushed the woman unceremoniously aside and snarled at the longshoreman: "Let these people in to the door. They're from *The Leaf*. Don't you want an honest, fair story about what happens tonight? Make way!"

The longshoreman promptly pushed and passed the word along. "One side, there. Let *The Leaf* editor go in. Gangway, you mugs!"

The jostling leaders shuffled each other back and made a path swiftly as if by magic. The crowd nearest threw good-natured jests at George and Joy and Bo. "Where's your camera? Gonna get a picture of the knockout? See that you get us a good story! To hell with the capitalist press."

In a shower of good wishes they reached the door. Two gigantic bluecoats stood by it, facing the crowd.

"Doors aren't open yet," said one, stolidly.

George presented his signed press card, and his ticket to the press tables. The constable looked them over. "Okay, you can go in, but not the other two."

"This is my wife," said George with dignity. "And this is my assistant. He's going to spell me off."

The officer grinned with unbelief, and pushed the door open wide enough for them to squeeze through. Instantly a roar arose from the crowd behind. "Come on!"

George pushed Joy and Bo ahead of him and half tumbled, half rushed through the narrow opening. The officer pulled the door shut as calmly as if nothing were happening, and George thrilled with admiration for these two silent men who, by their very restraint, seemed to reduce the crowd outside to a yammering mass of futility.

"Authority," he thought, "that's what Stuart has that these people haven't and never will have. That's what makes them yowl."

Joy laughed, a little breathlessly, "Heavens, I wouldn't want to have that policeman's job."

Bo said casually: "I'd sooner have his than the front rank of that mob when they start barging through the door."

The great room was thinly peopled, with some platform attendants, little knots of men here and there, and a few policemen lolling at the aisle posts. The platform had a battery of microphones for the loud-speakers and radio. Behind the speaker's table, with its chairs for the Prime Minister and his immediate party, were two dozen chairs for the platform guests. There were water pitchers and glasses on the tables. The press tables were directly below the platform, and photographers were busy disposing of their camera cases and flashbulb boxes. Two or three newspapermen were already writing.

George found Bo and Joy chairs close to the press tables, and picked his own table, laid his notepaper on it, hung his hat on the chair as mark of possession. He thought: "This is the only really democratic place here tonight. The only place where you can go and say, this is mine, and no one will brush your rights to one side as if they didn't exist. The speaker's platform is only a matter of geography. That crowd's here to see that that platform loses all its privileges."

He had known a show was coming. Verne had promised that. But he was not prepared for the thunderclap as the first of the organized crowd rushed in when the doors opened, and ran at full speed for their chosen spots. They all knew their sections, and they jumped over chair rows or dived down aisles without ceremony to get to them. All the time they kept up a continual bellow that grew and grew the more of them came in.

George sat with Joy and Bo and watched the great building fill up. The noise was incessant and almost unbearable. It crashed at them, magnified and belligerent, from the steel rafters and the gaunt arch of the roof. Every second it grew more intense, until finally their ears were numbed. It billowed at them from afar, more like a great shudder of the air itself than an actual sound. Now the peaceful, unorganized public were streaming in, weaving crazily here and there among the organized groups who kept up their enormous din, mostly about nothing intelligible, but now and then punctuated by group-shouting, under signals from their leaders:

"Bring on Stuart! We want Stuart! S-s-s-stuart!"

There was a fenced-off runway to the platform from the special entrance. From here would come Stuart and his political guard of honour. A derisive explosion from the crowd greeted every head that appeared in it, and some bashful attendant would duck out of sight.

George kept his eyes glued on the place. He knew that all that had gone on before was mere whispering to what would happen when the platform crowd appeared. His nerves were tensed for the onslaught of sound. But just as the first man came into sight there was sudden and dramatic proof that the Stuart managers had also done some organizing. Out of the loud-speakers crashed the opening bars of the National Anthem. A hidden band was playing into an unseen microphone, and the thunderous chorus of the horns rolled through the building with a colossal force of command that made human voices puny and helpless.

The crowd scrambled to its feet, the shouting groups were hushed and beaten for the moment. In the midst of this smashing accompaniment the guests of the speaker's platform filed in, self-conscious or brazen, whatever their nature.

Ryan Elwood Stuart led his own party in. He waved grimly and derisively at the hostile crowd. Their jeers fell around him in a flood of invective the moment the music stopped. They booed, cat-called, whistled, stamped, yelled every form of insult. George sat appalled at the volume of sound they kicked up. Verne's platoons formed no more than a fraction of the audience. The rest were quiet, orderly people who had come to listen or to watch. About half of these joined in the uproar from sheer infection, the other half looked uneasy or cautiously amused, uncertain what would come next.

The platform guests found their chairs and sat down, some in an agony of self-consciousness, others with sarcastic grins, thankful that it was not their fight. The candidates moistened their lips and twitched nervously, aware that they had a thankless and purposeless rôle, that no one would listen to their carefully prepared speeches, that any applause they won would be formal and polite, or that the jibes and invective would be aimed through them at their chief.

George Battle, at the press table, choked down his anger and wrote his notes while the chairman and the nonentities

spoke their pieces. The loud-speakers carried their words, and the heckling had died down to sporadic storms, timed by the key men to drown the scattered bursts of hand-clapping.

Between his notes George stared in fascination at Stuart. The nation's leader sat there impassive. He smiled, frowned, stroked his chin, leaned back and studied the roof, but mostly kept alert eyes here and there on the audience. Steel-grey eyes they were, that swept in an unperturbed, uncompromising, impartial stare.

He knew from the ominous overture what was coming. He knew that here was a mass war on himself, an organized minority bound to tear his speech to tatters and rags. But if he did he gave no sign. No moistening of lips there, no sign at all beyond that tolerant, fleeting smile, that massive, placid chest with his rugged chin jutting over it like a ledge of rock.

The chairman was introducing Stuart now. The first words were the signal for a stampede of noise, suddenly started as if by the pressing of a button. An unremitting, unmerciful blast that shook the roof and continued unabated for a full three minutes. Then it died down almost as swiftly as it had started, and the perspiring chairman began again. His words dripped and splattered through the ironical cacophony.

"... honoured to have ... the man all Canada is watching ... great leader ... one of the ablest statesmen in our history ... message for ... pleasure to introduce the Right Honourable Ryan Elwood Stuart, the Prime Minister of Canada ..."

As one who had been under wraps, saving his wind for this final spurt, the chairman shouted it into the microphone with all his strength. His red face and bulging throat testified it was a stretch run, taking all he had.

George jotted down in his notes: "Chairman, like pile-driving with toy hammer ..."

Stuart stood up now, mighty-shouldered, steel-eyed, four-square against the hurricane that burst about him.

"My friends—" he said, and waited, the half-smile, half-sneer on his wide face, and the slow sweep of his magnificent eyes the only signs that he recognized the army of hoodlums who had come to challenge him. He stood impassive and unshakeable until they had worn themselves down by sheer lack of breath.

"I see you have a welcome for me," Stuart said.

George sat by the table, electrified and fascinated by the sublime composure of the man, by the terrific sonority of the voice that rolled over the turbulent audience like a rumble of thunder. His words started the other four-fifths of the audience guffawing, and the next few moments of bedlam were a relief from the hostility and organized hate of the beginning.

Stuart waited, and began: "My friends—" This time the uproar was sharper, higher-pitched, broken into distinct cries: "Who said so!" "You flatter yourself!" "Try a new gag!" "What about the Jungle!"

"Just where you belong!" bellowed Stuart. And one half of the audience out-roared the other half. "You had better listen," Stuart shouted. "I came here to speak and I will speak if I keep you here all night!"

The applause momentarily drowned out the uproar of the hoodlums. The words came on: "There are serious issues to discuss here tonight—"

"We'll say there are!" "What about the Forgotten Man!" "Tell that to Sweeney!"

"I am telling that to Sweeney!" Stuart thundered. "And if Sweeney is half as smart as the men who mislead and incite him he will listen."

This brought a new tempest of protest. Verne Fraser's orders had been: "If you think of a new wisecrack, yell it. If you don't, just open your mouth and yell anyway."

"You don't want the truth, and your men who delude you and train you in hooliganism don't tell you the truth, but you're going to get the truth tonight!" roared Stuart, and his grim grey eyes swept the crowd again, into the farthest rafters, with a disdainful glare that invited them to do their worst.

"Rats!" "Same old lies we always get!" "What about work!"

"My friend says work," Stuart drove in, as swift as lightning. "Let me tell him, and let me tell you good people of British

Columbia and of Canada, that *he* would be the most aggrieved man in this country if it were offered to him."

This shot brought the response it was meant to bring. It toppled the organized groups off balance. It made them furious, and the result was an incoherent bellow, just what Stuart wanted.

On and on it went, and George raced his pencil on the paper, trying to catch up where his fascination had driven writing from his mind. Quick chills were racing up and down his back, his heart was thumping with the excitement, his nerves were tingling, his mind coruscating with inspiration. He was fired with a great new hope, a great new dream, under the appalling spell of this man who could stand up to a multitude and shout them down. The defiant diapason of that voice had a power that shook him in his chair.

The uproar was crashing and thundering all about him. But—he could hardly believe his senses—it was growing more scattered, more hysterical, less and less of the tidal waves now, more like choppy breakers churning and smashing against the rocks. And against them the voice was growing, getting more command. Stuart was just warming up; the Verne Fraser legions were wearing down. In half an hour he had them tamed. Not silenced, but he had them where he could talk, where the intervals of his voice were longer and more vital than the intervals of their yelling.

Here, George knew, was greatness, and his breath came fast. Here was no mere master of drama, giving melodious voice to the lines of another. Here was the outpouring of a great wrath, the anger and the benevolence of a master.

"You who have come here to strangle and gag free speech in this country, listen to this!" Stuart would roar. And when they had exhausted the limit of their fury he went on, quickly, with all the forensic scorn that had made him famous.

His strategy had been superb. Here was a general, a man who did not know fear, a leader with a trigger mind, a stage presence, a voice that had all the terrible sonority of an airplane motor gunned. A man who could be cold, biting, sarcastic; and in a moment could be friendly, confidential, intimate, smiling. A man who would stop to pound home half a dozen words in heavy, measured beat, and suddenly let go with a drumfire that cleared everything before him.

Rugged, capable and hostile, this was no mere politician defending himself, no apologist giving the traditional and hackneyed account of his stewardship, no demagogue come to wheedle and seduce a public trust which he could later assault and destroy.

No, this man was a fire-eater from Olympus, on a rampage among the infidels, with an Olympian majesty about him, a voice with the horsepower of a foghorn, a strange and stimulating mixture of the streets and of the organ utterance of the great Elizabethans. He was of the old and the new, a nimble-witted fighter in his element. He stole their sarcasm from them, flung it into their faces, and reduced them to an impotency of rage.

"Down with the capitalists!" roared one section under a particularly able finger-man. "Jobs or relief!" yelled another group. "Soak the rich!" "Vested interests!" "Share up the loot—away with privileges!"

"My friend says, away with privileges!" jeered Stuart, mimicking the voices. "I say *No!* Not even his privilege to come here and make a fool of himself. Even a tom-cat has his right to howl on the back fence."

This brought a tempest of laughter, and a wrathful new barrage from the hecklers.

"And my friend wants jobs or relief, but *which* does he want? I say to you with your ringleaders, all of you need some of the backbone of the ancestors who brought you here. For you would never have got here under your own steam. Look back, then, and hasten back to the iron will and the stern sacrifice of the pioneers—"

This brought the shrill, angry torrent it was meant to bring, and Stuart thrust in again:

"Your fathers and mothers—the men and women who built this country—did they squat down on the wind-bitten prairies, and in the lush valleys among these mountains, and bawl as you are bawling for relief? I leave that thought with you, my friends, while we discuss the more important issues before us tonight."

The worst of the storm was over, and George knew it, and he could see that Stuart knew it. Feet apart, he stood to the microphones and gave them his address, and the hecklers saw that they were beaten. Some of them were awed and impressed in spite of the frantic coaching of their finger-men. Others had tired of it. And still others were plainly so hoarse that they could yell no more.

Toward the end they were almost suspiciously quiet, and it was only when Stuart paused to solicit their support for his party's local candidates that the groups blew up again with invective. Stuart finished with a thunderous peroration, and the great crowd came to its feet to applaud.

Then it happened. A sudden, accurate barrage of ripe fruit struck the platform, some of it hit the speaker's table and splashed harmlessly against the Prime Minister's coat. The chairman, standing by Stuart's side, hastily grabbed his handkerchief, and as he bent to wipe it off Stuart's sleeve he received his own quota fair in the behind. The platform guests ducked and shielded their faces with their arms.

Stuart did not even blink. He raised his eyes into the galleries whence the fruit appeared to have come, and a supercilious smile was on his face.

Looking up, George saw police in the aisles of the galleries, saw the sudden commotion amid the seats. "Verne Fraser—the dirty rat!" he swore to himself. "He promised me there'd be none of this. He's disgraced the whole thing tonight. This is the finish. By God, I'll—"

Suddenly his mind was whirling, and in a dizzy way he knew he had vaulted over the press table and was rushing to the corner of the platform. Above the tumult he heard a shrill cry:

"George, come back!"

But George had hold of the platform, had jumped onto it from a chair, was advancing on the microphones. The chairman gave him an alarmed look, saw the wild look in his eyes, and tried to push him aside. George ignored the trembling man, and for one tremendous instant he looked into the impassive face and the grey eyes of Ryan Elwood Stuart. And then he was shouting into the microphones:

"Ladies and gentlemen!" And he was delightfully appalled to hear his thin, excited voice go rolling sonorously through the building. "This is the most shameful night in the history of politics in this city. I repudiate—"

"Come now! Come now!" the chairman pulled his elbow, and two of the platform guests were coming toward him. A policeman had vaulted the corner of the platform.

"I have something to tell you that you do not know!" yelled George, gaining the microphones again. And he looked in panic around him. Words came tumbling into his mind in a nerve-wracking deluge.

The policeman had him by the arm. "Come on, Battle. Your buddies have kicked up enough hell tonight."

Wildly George twisted in his grasp, with a passionate gesture to the Prime Minister. "I appeal to you, sir! It's desperately important. I am—I mean I *was*—the mouthpiece of this rabble. I—"

Stuart shrugged, nodded to the policeman and the chairman, waved them away and spread his five fingers significantly.

"Thank you!" George cried, and lest he change his own mind, he whirled to the microphone and yelped. The audience swam before him like a vast, uneasy sea. And with one hand, for the sense of reality, he grasped one of the microphone posts.

"I am the editor of *The Leaf*," he yelled. "Many of you don't know what that is. It's the weekly rag of the gentlemen who organized this horrible thing tonight. Its job—its whole function in life—and in mine—is to twist the truth until the last dribble of decency has been wrung out of it.

"They will sue me for libel for that. Let them sue! The Prime Minister was right. We came here tonight to strangle and gag free speech and make an end of it. We came, I thought at first, to heckle and disintegrate every argument whether it made sense or not. We came instead, I have now found out, to prevent the leader of this country speaking at all!"

He slashed at his brow with his handkerchief.

"This was a contemptible and organized revolt against all public decency. It was a plot to commit a foul nuisance before you. It was a deliberate, callous intention to flout you and outrage you, through the vilest sort of insult to your Prime Minister whom you came to see and to hear—"

There had been sudden outbursts of catcalls, shouts and whistling. But the vast majority of the audience soon hissed them down, and by this time the public's temper was so high that the Verne Fraser groups of Leafers began to sense their own personal danger.

"These groups were organized, drilled, instructed, made letter-perfect in methods that would shame a savage."

"Shame! Sha-ame!" bawled voices.

"But I will not fight with those soiled and shameful weapons of your finger-men. I come to tell you, friends—for you *are* friends, even you hecklers, deluded, duped and dense as you are—that all your talk of a new order based on the Jungle morality we have seen here tonight is a muskeg and a rotten swamp that will drag you down and stifle the life out of you —"

"Aw, shut up!" "Hire a hall!" Shrill cries came at him from over the great room, and George paused for sheer lack of breath. His eyes swept the crowd in a wild gesture to stave off the panic that he felt catching up to him.

"I'll shut up!" he cried. "Yes! I'll shut up for ever the shameful chapter of my life that associated me with this intolerable mob-baiting. You will see, as I now see, a great light, and all this lying whoopedoo about your new order will stand out in its naked shame for the cruelty and blasphemy that it is.

"What will you do with these men and women to whom you have tried to deny the right to think and talk and listen? What will you do with them when you set up your fantastic new order? Will you purge them for being human? What chance have you, the gullible puppets and stooges of mischief-makers, under the army of spies and gangsters who would set up your mythical new state? Would you obey them, too, under a Swastika? Will you follow these men, who are smarter than you, who can only gain their ends by using you as their dupes? Will you howl them down, as you tried to howl down a man tonight, when they stick a bayonet in your ribs?

"I think not, my friends! I think you will find you have made a ghastly and tragic mistake.

"You are fond of shouting 'Down with capitalism!' What you mean is, down with the men who own the machines and the factories where you work. But you will always have an aristocracy—an aristocracy of intelligence or an aristocracy of force. Be assured, we cannot all be bosses. Some of us must take orders. Throw your passions aside now, and *think!* It won't hurt you. Forget this pitiful nonsense until you're sure within yourselves that it really is what it seems. You're not voodoo worshippers, you're not European peasants, you're not docile, or dumb, or doomed! You're Canadians! God save the King!"

Bereft of words, George turned from the microphones and started to grope. He saw Stuart give the chairman a swift sign, saw the chairman making frantic signals, and thought: "Well, officer, I'll go quietly. Was that really me talking!"

A sudden fright swept him now, as the mingled torrent of applause and abuse struck him like a solid mass. Then the unseen band again crashed out, taking him at his word, and George understood the chairman's signals. Face to face with the Prime Minister as the music stopped, he saw Stuart's fathomless grey eyes on him, and heard Stuart say: "Well done, my boy! Very irregular. Unforgivable. But damned well done!"

Stuart was holding out his hand, and George shook it, and murmured in a flustered, embarrassed voice that came apart like cracked ice. With neither grace nor politeness he fled the platform, pawed his way blindly among the press tables amid the good-natured shouts of newspapermen and camera-men. He remembered only now, their flashbulbs popping and blinding him while he had elbowed his way to the microphone, while he had talked, while he had shaken hands with Stuart.

The whole ghastly business was over, the price of an impulse, and he was done for. He had jumped off the cliff. He gathered up the sheaf of notes he had made at the table, and he could hardly see them in his emotional confusion. He would find Joy and Bo, and get out. They would go to their car somehow, get into its blessed oblivion and then into the kingly peace of his home, and there he would apologize to Joy.

A thunderous slap on the back. "Well, here's our Edward Blake, damned if it isn't!"

And Joy was saying: "Darling, you're superb! You frightened me, and then you thrilled me so!"

George looked at her in misery of self-consciousness and unbelief, and into Bo's grinning face. "D'you really think so?" he said dully.

"Come on out of here, you big bully!" Bo cried. "This is no place for a hero. We'll escort him and make the most of the big moment, eh, Joy?"

One on each side, they steered George down the aisle among noisy people who laughed and booed and cheered and reached to pat him on the back and snarled and gave way to every sort of emotion.

"Never again," said Bo earnestly, "let me hear your modest bleats about mediocrity, old horse. You were tops. Your future's made! Like it or not, you're in politics now, my little introvert. You're going to Parliament. And what a start!"

"Aw, Bo, don't rub it in. I made a fool of myself and you know it. And the devil with politics."

"Too late now, old pump, old pail. You're as good as nominated, and after what the papers do with this you'll win holding back."

"Nominated—win! What are you talking about? Who would nominate me, even if I did run!"

"Nominate him!" Bo chuckled happily. "He asks who'd nominate him! Why, man, they'll be around you like flies. You could be elected on a nomination from the I.O.D.E., or the Elks or the Bartenders' Union. You can't miss!"

George laughed, a bitter outburst at first, and then a roar, as the humour of it struggled to him. He looked incredulously to Joy, and hungrily studied the happy, excited light in her eyes.

"Does he really mean it?" he asked her. "Do you mean it, too? You're not just trying to—cheer me up?"

"Dearest, I haven't been so proud of you since we met at Nelson's monument."

"I can't understand it," George admitted, completely mystified. "Here I go and do the silliest thing imaginable, and you both should be bawling me out. It doesn't make sense."

"But it made a good show," Bo said.

"Show! I only meant to say a dozen words, and then run, and instead of that, look what I did! The public must have thought I was an awful ass."

"Leave that to the public. They liked it tonight, and they'll read every word about it tomorrow."

"Red Editor Turns White!" George said glumly. "Just another crank getting the limelight. Like a fan-dancer horning in on an Einstein lecture."

They found Pitch reading, yawning, waiting for Bo to take her home.

"Did you listen to it on the radio?" Bo asked her.

"The radio was on," Pitch said with a bored air. "It all seems so stupid, doesn't it? Who was the silly moron who started yelling into the microphone at the last? I couldn't stand it. I shut him off."

"That, my dear," said Bo acidly, "was our good friend George Battle, M.P. to be. If you haven't heard of him, you will."

George hugged Joy long and anxiously in the hallway, out of sight. "Did you really mean what you said, darling?"

"I really did," Joy whispered, and her eyes said more than her words.

The phone rang, and George strode to it.

It was Verne Fraser. Verne said in cold, languid tones: "You're fired!"

"You're crazy," George said. "I quit an hour ago." And he hung up.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Five polls out of fifty give Johnson 860 votes, Millet 683 votes, Battle 487 votes."

"Aw, heck, Dad, you'll never make it that way. Wish I'd had a vote," grumbled Hal. "I'd have spent the day of it and voted at every poll."

"My daddy's being elected today," Alma had told her girl chums at school. She said it with confident pride, as a child might say: "My mother had a bigger operation than your mother."

"I'm coming down to your party headquarters," Joy had said. "I simply can't stand the strain here at home, while they count the votes."

They were dining together, at Bo's; their election dinner, Bo called it.

"And so am I!" Pitch had cried, as excited as Joy.

Pitch had had her brief, angry scene with Bo after the historic speech that George made. But Pitch was the one who had finally spurred George into taking the plunge, after Bo had worked night and day on him.

"We'll have a torchlight parade, old battle-axe," Bo assured him.

"Wish I could share your optimism," George said, secretly thrilled almost beyond endurance. "All this time, and mostly at your expense. But I'll make it up to you—somehow."

"Chump! What do you mean, my expense? The party put it up."

George smiled wanly, for their party was here, they four. He had run for election at the last minute, a dark horse, an independent, spurred to it by their enthusiasm and insistence, most of all by Joy's cool confidence that he would win.

"You invented your own title on the platform," Joy had said, quite seriously. "The Guinea Pig candidate. Why not?"

George stared aghast, began to smile, finally laughed out loud. And the Guinea Pig candidate he had been. It made no sense, he felt, but it made the headlines, following the deluge that had fallen over him after the Stuart meeting.

Campaigning had been a torture the first few days. "I can't face it, Bo, it's no use!" George had cried before the first meeting. "You're a prince to put up the deposit and the expenses, and underwrite this crazy thing, and hire the offices, and all that."

"By gad, if I can't gamble a little on you I'd like to know it! Once wade in, and we'll have the fun of our lives!"

"You will, maybe, but I'm afraid I won't," moaned George, "I'm—I'm scared stiff, Bo. My knees are knocking. I—I f-feel like a burglar with hay fever, I've got the jitters so bad."

They were in the campaign office then, and had just finished rehearsing the notes George had prepared. Bo reached into a lower drawer of the desk. He brought out a bottle and two glasses.

"Nonsense, old digger," he scoffed. "A stiff beaker of this and you'll soon forget the jitters."

"That c-can't do it," George shook his head nervously. "You never felt the jitters like I've got them."

"And you never had a beaker like I'm pouring," Bo soothed. "Here, down the hatch!"

"I'll forget what I was going to say," George objected, when he got his breath again. "I won't be able to read my notes."

"All the better. You'll make a real speech then. Now, you toddle along to the meeting with your secretary, and I'll go pick up the wives. We'll lead the cheering section."

That had been the first campaign meeting in his whirlwind of speeches. He had gratefully thanked Bo in his mind when he stood before them and found, that the tremble had gone out of his voice, the wobble out of his knees, and the frightful pounding against his ribs had ceased. As he swung into his subject, the soothing power of Bo's beaker had begun to wear

off, but by that time he had no need of it. He saw, amid the sea of faces, Bo Charlton with Joy on his right, Pitch on his left. Joy waved at him, and he was saved.

The audience had been stiff and awkward at first. They had come for a show, and were obviously disappointed at George's sedate beginning. He had dreaded hecklers, but he felt almost relieved when the first of them began to break in. It broke the strain of boredom that he could feel in the crowd. They sat up, alert for excitement, and they got it.

And now the fight was over. The next few minutes would tell. The votes were being counted.

"Well, I guess it was an insane idea, but it was fun." George smiled miserably, and Hal, operating the private telephone, shot back at him:

"Nerts, Dad! Johnson and Millet will stand each other off and you'll go in—just you wait! These few polls don't mean a thing. They're in Johnson's strongest corner—Oh, oh, here comes another! Eight polls give Johnson 1,211 votes, Millet 785 votes, Battle 801 votes. There y'are, Dad, what'd I tell you! We're just around the far turn now, aren't we, Bo? Why, you haven't even started to run yet."

"It's the stretch that counts," Bo agreed, his feet on a desk. "Sit down, George. You're wearing out good shoe leather. Make him sit down, Joy. And Pitch, you're no help, fidgeting around the window. You'd think it's you being operated on, instead of George."

Joy, with tabular result sheets in front of her, was keeping count of the votes as Hal called them out from the phone. She looked up from the figures with a frown of concentration. Pitch walked over from the window deliberately, and took George's cheeks in her hands. Bo, sitting lazily by the other desk, watched her sharply. He thought:

"Tantalizing, crooked creature that she is. Catch a man in a crisis, when every sense is tortured. Have him remember those cool, soft hands touching him reassuringly at a moment when he was sick with worry. I wot not of it—this way of a maid with a man."

He thought lazily of their honeymoon now for a moment. Of his easy assumption that the sheer fascination and pride of ownership of this beguiling chattel would make up for the fact that he did not love her. Of his conceited belief that their pose of sophisticated nonchalance could ripen into a sort of tolerable friendship, that their liking for each other as incidents in the lives of George and Joy could become a richer companionship.

Bo snapped out of his thoughts, for Hal was at the phone again:

"Thirty polls," Hal sang out. "Hey, Dad! Johnson 6,231, Millet 5,477, Battle—Hooray! Battle 6,114. Going up, Dad! Wha'd I tell you!"

George's heart began to thump. He came over beside Joy and stared unbelievably at the poll list. What he had persuaded himself not to believe was happening. They had marked "B" opposite polls which ought to be his, and he began against his own modest will to wonder if they were right.

The thirty-eighth poll put him in the lead, which he kept from there in leap-frog fashion with Johnson, to the forty-eighth. And then, because the two remaining polls were marked with a "B," Bo sprang up and seized George by the hand.

"George Battle, M.P.! First Guinea Pig candidate ever to enter Parliament! Get ready to come out, George. The crowd's gathering!"

"Crowd? What crowd?" George demanded uneasily. He had thought of somehow going home quietly, the four of them together, and after Bo and Pitch had gone, he would talk about it with Joy, and plan what he had refused to plan lest they be disappointed.

The final poll brought George sharply ahead, and Hal fairly shouted the figures: "Johnson 9,045, Millet 6,764, Battle, 10,893!"

Before he could protest, he was in the centre of a ring, and they were dancing around him. "F'r he's a jolly good fellow!"

There was a parade, and George and Joy found themselves in the big open car following the band, and they had to go to see the campaign manager, who had done in public what George had refused to do. Then George had to speak on the

radio, and he felt Joy's warm little hand reassuring his, and his heart swelled nearly to bursting when he saw her shining, excited eyes, and the photographers blinded them with their flashlights. He felt gratefully that their eagerness for pictures was centred on Joy, for never, he thought, had she looked so lovely.

Two hours of delirium, of unreality, of a trying triumph, of speeches, of handshaking, of going here and there, and it was Bo who broke him away from one place or group and shepherded him to another. It was Bo, finally, who told him that was enough, and it was with Bo that he and Joy and Hal went home, George thankfully, Joy with a host of plans, and Hal with vast reluctance.

Only Alma, thought George, is sensible. She's sound asleep. And he recklessly tipped the woman who had sat up with her.

And now Joy was saying to him: "You'll make a name for yourself in Parliament." It was not a boast, not an extravagance. It was merely matter-of-fact—correct because to her it was unknowable that it should be otherwise.

"And here I go to champion the cause of the Little Man, who has never known success but won't bow to failure. The poor, happy, confident little guy! Half the time he's fighting on one knee because that's the way his father fought, and that's the way they push him around. How can you blame him if sometimes he worships rubber money or abundance for everyone from the cradle to the grave—or all the snake-oil of the cheats and the astrophysicians of economy. What defence has he got against them?"

It was with a shamed sense that he might let them down that he sought out Bo to map his House campaign, to get a clear understanding of what he must say there, before the awful bar of the public.

"Come right over," Pitch cooed into the telephone when George called. "Bo will be here in just a few minutes."

George was amused but not surprised to find no sign of Bo. The uniformed maid who admitted him led him over thick rugs into the subdued splendour of Pitch's private sitting-room. There was an austerity about the house that fairly sniffed, George thought. No wonder Bo had his own little corner in the basement, with its polished log walls, hunting tokens, fireplace, leather chairs, oaken tables, pipes, radio, and its trick bar. Here Bo might steal for escape from a musicale, or a stuffy crowd who stood so heavily and strangled so solemnly in Pitch's suffocating drawing-room.

"Above stairs, pose; below stairs, repose," Bo would say.

But beneath his deprecation, George found a deep note of satisfaction. He and Joy agreed that Pitch was making Bo a good wife. She was living her part, glittering, beautiful, brilliant, a startling woman by any standard you could set. A woman who set men's eyes gawking when she passed. A perfect foil for Bo Charlton's pretentious grumbling, his airy assumption of squirehood, his premature and outlandish sophistication.

A young man, Bo Charlton, successful beyond George's imagination. But still young, with all the superiority of youth, who liked to come into Joy's kitchen and get in her way, and lean on the kitchen sink while he examined the complexities of sociology with George. Or better still, who sank into a big chair with a sigh of vast satisfaction, and enjoyed his borrowed hours with them both.

Never had Joy taken him otherwise than as for granted, as one takes a brother. She would tell him when to go home, or where he was to meet Pitch—who was Mrs. Frederick Charlton socially but still Miss Margaret Black professionally. To Joy, but never to George, Bo would say: "This is Mister Margaret Black speaking."

Not to Bo's leather-upholstered den with its weird assortment of Aristotle, cocktail books, Shakespeare, Anatole France, Churchill, baseball guides, Cabell, Shaw and *Esquire*—Not there, but to the perfumed loveliness of Pitch's own little sitting-room off the sunroom, went George behind his black-eyed cousin. In a vague way he knew that what she wore was a ravishing business of some sort, that she was queenly and comely in it, that she was taking him here for effect, that he was to be properly impressed.

She gave him a cigarette out of a jewelled case and lifted a crystal lighter for him. The ashtrays were dainty and useless, and the chair he sat on was satin upholstered with lace overthrow. Pitch threw herself, with studied carelessness, on cushions near his feet, and he remembered how she had flung herself on the grass on Uncle Jim's farm to pick crocuses or to weave a chain of dandelions. How close that seemed, and yet how far from this gilded life of hers.

Pitch was happy, he thought. She was happy because she had all that could be wanted to adorn and glorify her home. Because she and Bo had come together, each with independent means, and she held her husband in that amiable and tolerant contempt achieved of long acquaintance. She was happy because, by the persistent doggedness of her nature, she had out-scorned the scorn of low-brow childhood friends who had sniffed that she thought she was somebody, had been a slave to her art until now it was a slave to her, had elbowed the uncouth and the rustic out of the way.

She was known for her restraint rather than her indulgence in her career. Pitch had, thought George, come to her eminence by her own determination. There was no way for him to know how and why the unappeased hunger of her girlhood had come now to be the carefully nourished inhibition of her womanhood. All he did know was that Pitch's willowy streamline was maturing into a more formidable, more voluptuous perfection of her thirties. Pitch's body was a perfect thing, with the sensuous mastery over its own gestures as thorough and flawless as the mastery over her voice.

George realized again that he was in a trap of Pitch's own making, and he despised her for it. Bo, he knew, would find them here, as Pitch had ordained he would. Just as in those far-off war years her letter to Joy was ordained to reveal herself in prior possession. Not, he shrugged, that she wanted George any more, but that there should be no other goddesses before her, with either George or Bo, and that they both should be made to feel the danger of her.

"You'll have a drink, won't you?" Pitch asked. "I'm sure there must be something down in that wretched little bar."

George refused, because the Scotch and soda that might have been down there would be vulgar and foreign to this seductive little alcove.

"Besides," George reminded her, "Bo will be here in a minute, and I can't stay."

"But you came to go over your House speech with him, didn't you?" And Pitch laid a friendly hand on his knee, with an easy, possessive familiarity that put him on a flattered defensive. "What shall we do with you, Georgie—with all your fame! You've worked so hard, and achieved so much for yourself."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he fenced. "Got to thank Joy for that, and Bo—and you and Bo. But I'm not really anywhere yet."

"You're being modest, George," she said impulsively, and her black eyes flashed with an intensity that made his waver and turn aside. "We mustn't let this—any of this—come between us. You and Joy, and Bo and I, have been so close, and now it seems near an end. Maybe I'm just foolish, but I can feel changes, big changes coming."

She smiled reminiscently, and made a stage gesture. "Wouldn't it be glorious for all of us to go back to our childhood and be so natural again! Remember the time you lay with Hattie in the haystack, and I was so angry—"

"We never did lie in the haystack," George said. "We sat up."

"And you drove me home, and we fought all the way."

"We didn't fight quite all the way," George corrected sullenly. "Besides, it was you who did the fighting."

Pitch laughed, a deep-throated, tuneful laugh that ended with a sharp intake of breath. "I was an ignorant little cat," she mused.

"You were old enough to know better," George reminded her severely.

"Georgie, don't be so proper! I bet you had many an adventure you never told anyone about."

George squirmed. It was illicit ground and she knew it, and she knew that he knew that she knew it. And that was why she invaded it. He was relieved when he heard Bo's cheerful voice and his tramp down the hall.

"We're in here, dear," Pitch called to him. And George made to rise. Pitch held her hand out.

"Help me," she said. George unwillingly supported her as she unwound her legs, just when Bo came to the door.

Bo smiled broadly. He was pleased with himself. More pleased than George was in his own predicament. He was provoked at the simplicity and the perfection of Pitch's timing.

"Ah, my honourable colleague," said Bo. "What's this, lesson number one in Parliamentary procedure, House Rules and Regulations?"

"I came to talk politics with you, and your wife leads me into this," said George, happy to be in an honest atmosphere again.

"I was trying to flirt with him," Pitch said. "But if he doesn't catch on in Parliament any faster than he did here—" She made a gesture of resignation, and George wondered if he had seen a glint of insolence in the smile she lavished on her husband with his empty sleeve.

"A fine place to bring the Little Man's champion to teach him lessons," snorted Bo. "Come, my friend, to more bohemian surroundings. What we need for this job is a bottle of ale and a toothpick."

George was not surprised that Pitch, after a few acid pleasantries, suddenly remembered an appointment, and floated out of the room. They went thankfully to the basement.

"Well, old horse," said Bo, "I trust you have your solution all worked out for the sins of the world?"

"That's just what I came to see you about. I'm not quite sure what the sins are."

"Simple. Just remember the planks you were elected on."

"But I'm not quite sure of them either. It was all about the Little Man, but how to put it across! After all, I'm only a Little Man myself."

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked Bo. "Now cool down," he went on when George bristled. "Don't misunderstand me. If you are truly a Little Man, then you are mighty. You are the voice of the people, indeed. It is only when men fumble their way out of that blessed state that they become mediocre. So put your Little Man on a pedestal."

"I realize that. But it's only in his mass power that my Little Man has a voice at all. The machine rules his job. How to keep it from ruling his mind as well? So here I am, looking for light."

"No, you merely came to me to confirm something you've already conceived. The mass always projects a giant, and you may be he. You can be, if you insist that everyone remain an individual."

"How do you explain clowns like Mussolini then? Or this kingfish over in Berlin?"

"They are the creatures of revolution, not the creators. They originate nothing. History will forget them. History wants men who make people either laugh or cry. These men do neither, because humour would unseat them, and because in their cruelty they have strangled all emotions save lust and fear. They have committed the unpardonable error; they have robbed the Little Man of his heritage."

"And what might that be?"

"His freedom to loaf, to love, to sing a little, to be a failure, to grumble, to be himself. That's where democracy shines like a star. Its incidental strength is that it offers free competition for the man who wants to get ahead. Its basic strength is that it doesn't force that competition on the man who wants to lag behind. It feeds him instead, and lets him rot in comfort."

"It's easy for you to say that," George protested, wishing to be convinced. "You've made a success. Everything you touch turns to money. What about a chump like me, half my life gone, and still groping?"

"The difference is that I'm complacent, you're discontented. I can only eat so much, wear so much, drink so much. The rest goes to express my wife's ambitions, since I have none."

"And to finance my campaign and pretend it's a party," George said bitterly. "And to put me for ever in your debt, where I've been already for fifteen years!"

"Who paid me their money? The Little Men. Who have a better right to get it back?"

"And I'm the trustee! Where would you find a worse one? I'm not even honest. I fight for the Little Man, but any worldly

thing I can get my hands on will go to make sure that my son isn't a Little Man, that my daughter never marries a Little Man."

"My dear old centrifugal humbug, it's our boast on this continent that every male baby is a potential Prime Minister or President. And who are they except the glorified virtues and faults of the Little Man? You see, George, now you're a public man you can't win an argument with me, who am nothing. You have to stand by what you said yesterday or an hour ago, or until you think up something better. I, having no thesis or morals or philosophy, and having made no promises, can distort or repudiate any known premise, just as I would change my brand of ale."

"But ale is not a premise," George objected. "It's a deduction."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Joy packed his bags, for George was off on his great adventure. Wherever he looked to find things, Joy had been there first. Handkerchiefs, socks, shirts, underwear, pyjamas, brushes, shaving and toilet articles, suits, evening clothes—she had found a place for all.

"I've put your woollen mufflers in, and all your woollen socks," Joy said. "It gets fearfully cold in Ottawa, remember. And see that you wear them. I want no letters telling me you are down with a cold."

Behind her affectionate scolding, George saw that this was the only truly executive rôle being played. He was elated, tense with expectancy, but still an uneasy feeling persisted. He had a wild impulse to throw it all overboard, knowing that he could not. The sense of a man suddenly flung into prison, and wondering, "I'm sure I won't like this. Why did I ever get myself into such a mess?"

George told Joy, when he was ready to go: "I feel like a quitter. It's the first time I've ever left you since we came back to Canada. I've always leaned on you, and now I'm on my own for the first time. I feel I'm going to make a hash of it. Look, dear, couldn't we chuck the house and you come down, too?"

"No," Joy said firmly, "we won't take Hal and Alma out of school. And it won't be so long, dear. I'll manage. What worry can there be for me, except to wonder whether you've changed your underwear!"

A clatter of feet down the stairs interrupted her. "Alma, come and say good-bye to Daddy! We have to run for the train or he'll miss it."

"Will you lose your job if you're late?" Alma asked.

And George grinned: "Not likely. The business I'm going in for, everybody's late. Years late. Good-bye, darling."

Hal was at the air school. He had said good-bye with the simple: "Don't work too hard. And if you can get any good openings for a pilot, let me know."

Bo and Pitch were already waiting at the station.

"Fine of you to come down," said George, feeling uncomfortable. And he thought of the time, years ago, when they four had been there, Pitch and he to meet his wife and Bo.

As if she read his thoughts, Pitch cried: "I'm simply bursting with news—just to make this meeting different from the last one. Do you know what! I'm leaving for Hollywood in the morning, for screen tests. It's all arranged, and I haven't even told Bo yet. I saved it for now. I've also arranged for auditions with the N.B.C.—not that I intend to be a mere radio voice, of course."

"What's become of your scorn for the movies?" Joy asked coolly.

"But that was different. I always said I would play opera or operetta leads. And this will be either Victor Herbert or Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Why not," said Bo casually, "play them both at once?"

Pitch ignored him and exclaimed: "Just think, Georgie, the last time we four were here! And this time you and I are going away, and the others are staying. It seems like fate! But do you think we can trust them together?"

"Well, I should hope," George laughed. "They knew each other first—" He broke off, aware that in his loyalty he had said what she wanted him to say, and he wondered: "What the devil is the she-cat up to, anyway!"

He stood on the observation platform as the train moved away, and Joy ran along the platform waving her handkerchief. She looked so small at last that she seemed a child. Between him and the dread and anticipation of his trip, there suddenly loomed the remorseful feeling that he was seizing something the world had offered and was leaving Joy with the cares he had wished upon her. It was a futile, empty feeling. His conscience stabbed him with the thought that he had run out on her.

"We'll take you up on that," Bo was telling Pitch, pretending not to see that Joy's eyes had tears in them. "Since you're leaving us together, we'll make the most of it, no fooling."

He loudly planned illicit programmes with Joy.

"But you'll have to be good," Joy said, rallying to his obvious efforts to drag her mind away from the moment. "We political widows are hard to please."

"Don't worry, you've never seen me really in action since I lost my amateur standing," Bo grinned.

When they had seen Joy off for home in her car, Bo drove silently home with Pitch, and grunted in reply to her chatter. When they were in their house, he said: "That was pretty rum, you know, such an obvious play as that."

"I agree. You talked like some common drunk."

"I meant you, not me."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. It was hitting below the belt. In the first place, I expect the right to be at least advised before you make these arrangements."

"You showed no such interest when I talked about it," Pitch began, unintentionally on the defensive. Her eyes glowed with anger.

"But prattle was one thing, and definite planning another. What if I don't want my wife in the movies?"

"In that case, darling, you may have to get used to it," Pitch smiled frostily. "You have Joy to play with—as before." She rose, yawned with a bored expression, and walked into her own sitting-room. Bo followed her.

"In the second place," he said, as if explaining a theorem, "it was a bit thick to spring it as you did, trying to embarrass both George and Joy."

"Don't be silly, Bo. They're not children."

"But you are, or you wouldn't have done it."

"Really, Fred, you're being tiresome. If you want to quarrel, I'm afraid you'll have to wait till tomorrow. I'm tired, and I'm going to bed."

"Splendid idea. We'll both go."

"I'm sure you're quite welcome to go when you like. Good-night, dear." She smiled icily into his stony eyes, and he stood aside as she went through the door and up the stairs.

After a few moments, Bo turned out the lights and went upstairs to his room. He undressed slowly, drew on the bottom half of his pyjamas, carried his bathrobe and the jacket, went to the fussy bathroom off his bedroom. As he brushed his teeth his eye fell on a china vase, on the little table. It was a loud, expensive-looking thing, and all at once he grinned.

"When an ornament offends, what then? Best thing is to find out how it gets that way, and what it's made of." He reached out his toothbrush handle, and gently edged the vase to the edge of the table. He pushed it very slowly, it wavered an instant, then toppled and fell, and splintered into a thousand pieces on the tile floor.

"Oh, oh! that's too bad," he said to himself. He padded out and across the hall and into Pitch's bathroom. He surprised her there. She was creaming her face. He made note of her involuntary shudder at sight of his arm stump.

"Do you want something, dear?" she asked coldly.

"I decided to use your bathroom. There's pottery all over my floor—just an accident. Mind if I have a shower?"

"You may have a hailstorm, dear, if you'll only wait until I finish," said Pitch, with acid sweetness.

"On second thought, I'll use my own. You have no shower curtains in this place of yours. You don't know what bathing pleasure really is."

"I don't bathe for pleasure. Our Methodist training didn't go in for that. We bathed to get the dirt off."

"Strange idea," sighed Bo. "No doubt some carry-over from the dark ages. Mean to say you don't like the feel of warm water splashing down over your shoulders, caressing you?"

"I should think, with all your experience, you'd want some more satisfying caress than that."

Bo leaned against the door, and studied Pitch as she wiped off the first dressing of cream and reached for the night jar. "But I don't seem to get it," he shrugged. "So I take my fun where I can find it."

He knew that she could see him in her mirror, and he wiggled the stump of arm again. He loved to see her wince.

"Fred, please put on your bathrobe. You'll catch cold."

"It *is* rather frosty in here. Do you need a heater?"

"No, thank you. I'm quite happy."

"Would you like me to hug and kiss you?"

"If it amuses you. My face is hardly in shape for it."

He drew aside her negligée and kissed her shoulder. Pitch drew the gown into place again. Bo still hovered.

"Is there anything else you'd like, my gushing adorable?"

"No, thank you." He saw to his delight that she was exasperated. "And please have your shower, if you're going to."

"Would you like, for instance," Bo persisted, grinning cheerfully, "a nice swift kick?"

Behind his smile there was a grim look that warned Pitch. She half suspected he might do it.

"Bo," she said in a voice of vexed pleading. "Are you trying to make me angry, or what *do* you want?"

"I want to make love to you. In stories the hero always does that."

Pitch laughed coldly. "Are you a hero?"

"I'm afraid I am, my little spoon of maple syrup, to live with you. But it seemed the right thing to do, at the moment. You going away and all that, where you won't be able to have me—"

"Does that make any difference?"

"Quite. It robs us of choice. While we are together, we have the choice of lying together or lying separately. When we're apart, we just lie. It's not very satisfying, just imagining, do you think? Or am I boring you?"

"I'm sure I haven't thought about it. Have you any more questions, or may I go to bed now?"

Bo stood aside from the door, and there was a sudden hard glint in his eyes. "You may, by all means, little dove. Go to the devil if you like." He followed her into her room.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "I prefer Hollywood."

"When you're in Hollywood," he said slowly, in a preoccupied tone, "you could get a divorce just for what I'm thinking."

"When I'm in Hollywood," Pitch said, "you won't need to go on thinking that way, and you won't need to go on pretending it's someone else we know—if Joy will let you."

"That's the meanest and cheapest thing you've ever said in all your long record of mean and cheap things," Bo spoke in a low and passionless voice.

"Why did you mention divorce, then?"

"Because it's breakfast table talk down there. Secondly, because you wouldn't get one anyway, for fear you'd be soiled and inconvenienced. Thirdly, because it wouldn't be legal in Canada even if you did. Fourthly, because you have ice in your veins—dry ice. It burns and freezes all at the same time."

"How interesting! Maybe I should go into the circus freaks, instead of the films."

"If you weren't my wife, I've already told you where you could go," Bo said quietly. And then he added: "That's merely a rhetorical statement, off the record."

"It sounds definite enough to me."

"Not at all, my demonstrative petite. If it had any definite purpose or meaning there would be no 'if' attached to it."

"Have we finished fighting now?"

"We haven't started—yet."

"Very well, then. Go to bed and let me sleep."

"Not me. I'm going down and raid the ice-box. These passionate love scenes make me hungry."

"Not a bad idea. I think I'll come, too."

"Good! There ought to be some cold beer in the refrigerator. Funny thing, cold beer warms you up sometimes. You could use it."

"I don't need any beer. And I don't want any."

"If I pour you a glass of beer," said Bo in a savage voice, "you'll drink it if I have to pour it down your swan-like throat."

"With one hand?"

"You're asking for trouble," Bo warned, and he was grinning now. "I see you're not impressed yet."

"No, but apparently you are." There was no humour in Pitch's voice. Bo burst out laughing.

"Haw haw! Ho ho!" He strode complacently off to get his bathrobe.

Pitch followed him down the stairs to the kitchen.

"I think you're the most contemptible man I've ever known," she blazed.

"Did you come down here to tell me that? Or do you want some cheese and crackers?" Pitch was silent.

"You ought to have a baby," Bo said speculatively. "It would make a different woman of you, if we had a baby."

"We! With your crude jokes and your uncouth mockery of affection!"

Bo was leaning back in a chair, his feet propped against a drawer fastener. He sat forward quickly, and his chair thumped the floor.

"Now I'll tell one," he said, and glared at her with a swift, familiar intensity that even Pitch found hypnotic. "You've housed yourself away in that gorgeous, complacent shell of yours so long you can't even break out of it. It's like driving piles with a tack-hammer to try to break in, with the ordinary weapons of affection. For years you've cloistered and sanctified that beautiful body of yours as a shrine to some nameless giddy passion, which you smothered long ago lest it cost you a career. You've got a tin shirt around your heart. You'll find out, when it's too late, that they're not wearing them any more. Have some cheese."

"And is this the great, blinding truth that I married you to learn?" she demanded with blistering scorn.

"You married me for two purposes only. One was vanity, and the other was to pry two friends apart, since you had failed

to pry a man and his wife apart by the same tactics. You're not very abstruse, dear."

"There is no need to call me dear," Pitch said coldly. "There's no one listening."

"—because you are an extrovert," Bo went on calmly, "and like all extroverts you're as easy to read as a calendar."

"If I'm as obvious as all that," she scoffed, "why go to the trouble of fighting me, and boring me to death with your stupid sophistries?"

"You provoke me into fighting because you love it. And you love it because the subject of every fight is yourself, and there's no subject on earth pleases you like that. You'll be in good company in Hollywood. And if those rages I've been able to rouse will help you to project that Jezebel nature to the screen, your future is made."

Pitch smiled sarcastically. "They call that a plug, don't they? It's too bad you can't write. You might make a good press agent—But why must you swill beer out of a bottle?"

Bo Charlton swallowed slowly, with a ridiculous grimace of pleasure, and set the bottle on the sink.

"Because, my little sunbeam, the beer is imprisoned in the bottle, and that's one of the easiest ways to get it out. Also, any connoisseur will tell you that beer loses quality in the light, and that the simple act of pouring it into a glass and allowing it to settle takes away twelve per cent. of its vitamins. Besides, bottle-drinking promotes belching, and there's nothing like a good belch to relieve a man's feelings."

Pitch made a wry face. "Since you're tired of infuriating me, you're now trying to nauseate and sicken me."

"You're being redundant, little sugar plum. Nauseate and sicken mean the same thing. I have never been nauseated without being sick. But I will concede your point after all. For I have been sick without being nauseated—"

"Oh, damn you and your nausea, you unspeakable swine! I'll throw this plate at you if you don't get out of this kitchen."

Bo lighted a cigarette and threw the match in the sink where it sizzled in a drop of water. "It's Doulton," he said easily. "I wouldn't throw it if I were you. It probably isn't open stock—"

He ducked, and the plate whizzed past his head and smashed against the tiling of the sink-board. Bo flipped some ashes after it. He levelled a mocking, accusing look at her.

"You tried to smear me," he charged. "There was butter on that plate!"

There was a hasty pit-pat of feet on the stairs, and the cook appeared at the door, eyes staring in fright, and she was pulling a shawl over her white flannel nightgown.

"Who's there!" she quavered. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Charlton! Bless me! I thought 'twas a burglar."

"It's all right, Molly. We were just playing horse."

Pitch fled past the cook and scampered wildly upstairs.

Molly saw the open refrigerator door, the dishes on the sink, and the debris of the plate. She advanced solicitously into the room.

"I'll just slick that up in no time—Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Charlton! I forgot." She dragged the shawl further around her and backed away in a fury of modesty.

Bo laughed loudly. "No, come in. I'll leave you to it."

Upstairs he tiptoed to Pitch's room and peered into the darkness. Pitch lay full length on the bed, her face buried. He listened, and knew that she was sobbing. He went swiftly to the bedside and knelt down beside her.

"Why, you gorgeous double-crosser!" he scolded into her ear. "You've been in love with me all this time!"

"A-a-ah-rr!" With a rasping sound of rage Pitch wrenched away and turned her face from him. "Don't touch me, you beast!"

"Darling, I really didn't know you cared for me that way!" Bo whispered, grinning in the dark. "What a pity, just when you're going away, too! But maybe you'll come back all the sooner."

"I'm never—c-coming back to this—s-s-stupid, boring life again!"

"Of course you will! You'll be back in six months," said Bo cheerfully.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"If a press gallery man will pass this I'll get by," George Battle told Tom Cross. "That's why I wanted you to let me run through it."

Tom settled back resignedly in a chair. "Let 'er go, George," he said. "I can take it." Tom had been *The Post's* correspondent in Washington and later in Ottawa.

They were in George's room at Ottawa. As one of the three independents in the House, George had secured, with Tom's intercession, a place on the order paper to speak in the opening debate. This function of Parliament bore the sonorous and poetic title of, "Debate on the Address in reply to the Speech from the Throne."

"I ought to have my dig when it comes to the Budget," George had objected at first.

"You get in now," Tom advised him. "There won't be any Budget. This government won't last any longer than it takes to blow it up. Stuart can't get a majority, and the Liberals are all set with a want of confidence motion. I wouldn't be surprised to see the knockout right away."

"Good God! You mean—finish? Government resign? Parliament dissolve? That means another election!"

"Just that. And it means the boys won't get their sessional indemnity, unless they prolong it a while."

"That's right," George's mouth fell open, "I'd forgotten that." Inwardly he was terrified. No indemnity meant no repayment of his debt to Bo. It meant a let-down to Joy and Hal and Alma. It meant they lost their home, everything, and started again. He forced a smile.

"And here am I," he said with dry lips, "with a speech criticizing the government, trying to do myself out of four thousand dollars!"

"Not that bad," said Tom. "Cheer up! Your speech might be so rotten it would work the other way."

"Gad, I hope not. At least—Oh, let's get on with it. I'll skip the compliments at the beginning. Ready? Here goes!" He pawed over his notes.

"I'll go something like this: 'On behalf of the great majority of our people I regret that the government has indicated no forward step to show that it really understands the problem of the average person. We have seen some half-hearted gestures toward the socialists. We have seen the loftiest pretensions functioning under wraps—those safeguards which this and every preceding government has thrown around the legions of privilege'—How's that, Tom?"

"Old stuff," Tom said. "You'll put the boys to sleep with that."

"But then I go on," George broke in. "I say: 'There is in this country a curious fellow, with baggy knees, who has the faculty of meeting you everywhere you turn. He never has his name in the papers except for the birth and death notices, he is seldom more than a jump ahead of the sheriff, he has done nothing notable. And yet he is the greatest man in the nation.' Then I'll go on to say—"

"Never mind the I'll say's," Tom Cross urged. "Pretend I'm the House, and omit the interruptions."

"Okay," George said, and held out his hand in a dramatic gesture. "This, honourable members, is your friend, your neighbour, your corner grocer, your friend when you need one. The chances are he drove to town for a doctor when you were born; he'll be one of your pall bearers when you die. As long as you live you will not be separated from him.

"I give you the most plotted against, the best known and the least understood character in the land, the mighty atom who, in his millions and in his mercy, holds human society together—The Little Man!"

Tom Cross sat up. "Maybe you got something there," he murmured.

"And then I go on, Tom, and tell about his greatest fight, against regimentation, and I go away back to the amœba stage, and tell about his billions of cells, and how they are all fighting for their own independence. The amœba, Tom, was the original rugged individualist, going unaided to his food.

"As long as these cells struggle, Tom, he is alive, our Little Man; and when they lose the spark of independence and surrender, he is dead."

"But let's get on to the Utopia."

"Utopia!" George snorted. "A spineless and characterless mirage, where the little willows and the giant oaks merge into an illusion of common height!"

"No, Tom. Our Little Man has to have a stake in the earth, in the factory, in the education of his children. Not the way the state gives it, but the way free men have got to give it. Then everyone has something; he works for himself. He inherits his right to a happy childhood, a fruitful life and a peaceful old age. Most of our people have none of those three things, Tom.

"But the cranks are telling them they can have it by taking it from someone else by means of the state. What a ghastly thing! For as soon as that happens we have state slavery and away goes the Little Man, and all his hopes, because the state can have no more conscience than the men who fashioned it. And so I end up something like this:

"In the lanes and at the lathe, in the fields and in the halls, we hear the tempting voice of the crackpots telling the Little Man that he can take what he wants, and they will show him how to do it. All they want in return is his freedom, his right to live and love and think and worship as he pleases.

"Between the cranks on the one side, and the die-hards on the other, our Little Man is drifting inexorably down the sombre and terrible river toward the cataracts of state absolutism, from which neither he nor his children will return."

George paused. "How's that for a start?"

"Too idealistic," Tom said. "But it will do. And then you've got to go ahead and talk about vulgar and earthy things—otherwise you'll sound like a crackpot yourself. Let's go to work on these notes."

Days later, George sat in the House and knew that it was the end. The government had fallen—beaten on a want of confidence motion. In a little while now Ryan Elwood Stuart would stomp in to his place, and everyone knew what he would say. The corridors were full of nothing else.

His mouth went dry as he remembered the speech he had made, before a scant few members. His dreams of electrifying them were gone now, and this new career was ending as his other careers had ended. One had been with the death of a man, one with the death of an ideal, and now this with the death of a government.

Well, there were other things to do, and he would do them. He was impatient to be at them, and he realized now that he had leaned heavily on letters from Joy, and the cheerful notes from Bo, to keep him in touch with reality.

Verne Fraser had gone to Hollywood, and suddenly it was clear why Pitch had gone, Joy told him. It was not because of Verne, for she cared nothing for him. It was because he knew the big men, because he could go where no one else could go.

That insolent fellow, it was plain, was on the track of some new promotion, George reflected as he waited for Stuart. And he gave Verne his due for his gifts, though he loathed him for his total lack of principle.

This new liaison between Pitch and Verne, George knew, should have seemed incredible, and yet he could not feel surprised. For at this distance he seemed to have achieved a new perspective, to see more clearly her insatiable ambition, her imperious and unbridled will, which would deal with even a rat like Verne if thus she chose.

"I don't really think Bo has found out how to love her yet," Joy wrote. "But somewhere he has a feeling that he should, and that he could learn. He says it all eludes him."

George folded that letter thoughtfully. In all their talks Bo had never opened his heart to George. It was a great thing that his pal of the years could at least come to his home and there tell his troubles. "They understand each other," George thought. And he chided himself for a great wave of pity for Bo.

"That's pure nonsense," he argued to himself. "Bo can take care of himself. Who am I to pity him, when he's practically looking after my family and me? Well, it'll be almost a relief to have this uncertainty over with and get home again."

And so he fidgeted in his seat in the House, aware that he was viewing a convulsion of the national constitution, one more episode in his country's long march toward adulthood.

"Birth of a nation," he thought. "Canada is born with years, even with generations, of labour—much of it under anæsthetic. Ah, here's Stuart now!"

When Stuart entered a room at any time it was an event. He had a robust, animal magnetism that registered even when your back was turned. Today his brows were drawn into a deeper, shaggier frown, jutting crag-like above his wide, set face. Everyone in the House stiffened to alertness. He was the bearer of grave tidings, an event in his own career which was an event in the lives of all of them, and in the life of the nation they represented.

He came with almost a swagger, despite the tense look in his eyes. He carried himself with colossal self-esteem, and George felt that, grave as his news was, he almost enjoyed this moment of supreme drama, this anxious time when he held the affairs of every member in his hand for a brief while.

He would be up on his feet now, as soon as the pious mummerly of the opening was over, and he would thunder his denunciation at their heads. Ryan Elwood Stuart was beaten, but he would go down fighting.

He was beaten, not by the handful of men who sat about him, but by the hopes and dreams of the millions behind him. He was beaten because he stood for and on the hard rock of his magnificent egoism in the desert of unbelief, and the fickle and shifting sands had blown away and stranded him. He was beaten because, like the Sphinx, he stood for everything that was buried beyond recall, and the four shrill winds of time had scythed and slashed out the gullies in the valley of the forgotten kings.

It had been a grand show, and he was the greatest show-master of all. Ah, it would be a sabbath of the gods when he said good-bye, a story for posterity and a smashing valedictory to end all valedictories! George enjoyed it in anticipation with a rapt relish.

He started as from a reverie when Stuart stood on his feet. Stuart was speaking now, in low, almost casual tones. He had been to see His Excellency, to report the misfortunes of the hour. George smacked his lips. That was just like Stuart, he exulted, shamelessly applauding in his mind the man he had come to oppose, the man whose political philosophy he felt was wrong. Just like Stuart to build up this strainless atmosphere, this air of the family circle. Then, like a clap of summer thunder, he would let them have it, these quarrelling, unfriendly groups whom he would accuse of selling their nation down the river of political decadence.

But what was this! George grasped the edge of his desk for the feeling of reality, for the great words being spoken—

"—the government which I have had the honour to lead has resigned."

Stunned with amazement, George heard the pandemonium that broke loose in the great chamber, saw the clouds of foolscap being flung high in the air by the exuberant members of the left, the drawn, sober faces of the members to the right of the Speaker.

It was over. Stuart had sat down. No fireworks, no spectacle, no thunderous denunciation. Stuart sat silently at his desk a few moments, his great eyes cast down, and then he was gone from the room.

And the room itself was tumbling around George.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Old ways and young years die hard. They have their convulsions of passion, their gaping voids of frustration, their fierce yearning for things to come, their bewilderment at the speed of things gone.

It seemed only yesterday, George Battle thought in the spring of nineteen-thirty-nine, that Joy had told Alma the approaching first facts of life, so that her sudden biological phenomenon should find her neither embarrassed nor afraid. It seemed only yesterday that Hal had played with his model airplanes in the basement and had then gone East.

It seemed only yesterday that George's great illusion had blown up soundlessly into space before his eyes. That Pitch Black Charlton had gone to Hollywood, to walk in the tanglefoot that Verne Fraser had laid for her.

That Bo Charlton had nonchalantly come to George, and told him that his need for an advertising director with imagination was imperative.

That Joy and the children had met him at the station, these four years gone, at the end of his messianic safari through the beginner's jungle of public politics.

That the Forgotten Man had finally been forgotten. That the Great Depression had ceased to be even a vaudeville joke. That Japan had invaded China, and the little brown men had turned their incredible lust against a people older, wiser and tougher than they.

That the murderous bandit, who had ridden to Rome in a railway train seventeen years before, had taken his cue from the Son of Heaven and assaulted the Lion of Judah, on the preposterous excuse that the pesky blacks had castrated some lecherous Latins who raped their wives or carried them off without paying for them.

That the word Sanctions had been dusted off and dragged out to stand in mocking unreality before the great powers, and that the League of Nations and Woodrow Wilson's dream had died in each other's arms.

Down in the Gran Chaco another war was going on between Paraguay and Bolivia. But they minded their business and kept their war to themselves, so beyond polite interest nobody cared much.

Over in Spain the dons and the republicans arranged to shoot it out. Into their outmoded ports, their gaunt hills and their blue skies rattled the war machines of the greater powers for the first dress rehearsal of the thunderous first act to come.

In those years, too, many thousands had died in the moral badlands of Europe for believing, as George Battle believed, that if you scratched hard enough through the grime of a German tenement you found the Little Man.

In those halcyon years of hard times in North America, when men were paid to rake leaves into heaps so that the wind would blow them away, when farmers were paid not to grow pigs and wheat and cotton, more concrete roads were laid down than had been built in all its history before. Commercial aircraft built a network of fast, safe services that dwarfed the past.

And Pitch Black found that there were more star-makers than stars, and came finally home again.

In those years, George Battle wrote again, and gained a little success because publishers found an elusive quality of frustration and idealism that mystified them. But Bo told George:

"You should knit all these things together, old buzzard. They're not stories, they're episodes, and you need some common denominator to link them. It might be only a single strand that's missing. But you must find it. You're holding yourself back. Take off the wraps, man!"

In the later days of those years, too, Uncle Jim had followed Aunt Sadie to the grave, and George felt it with a shock of horror as the parting of a link with his childhood. He had known it must come, and yet it left him with a hurt and puzzled feeling that Uncle Jim had meant more to him, a nephew, than to Pitch, his daughter.

He stared unconsciously at Joy, a startled intensity in his eyes, as if beseeching her to ward off a blow that might also come to him.

Joy came over and kissed him and put her warm arms around his neck.

"Poor Daddy," she said, "they're all leaving you, one after the other. Soon our own children will be gone, and then you'll have only me."

"Eh—Beg pardon! Oh, yes! I was just thinking about Jean. Her family's grown up, and we've hardly ever seen them. She knew Uncle Jim, too, when he was mighty and unconquerable—But say, the children leaving! No, we mustn't think of that. I get these ghastly ideas sometimes. What would we do if—anything happened to them!"

"You goose," Joy laughed. "I meant they'll be getting married, and then we'll be just the old folk. The house will be empty without them. You and I'll have to sit in one room and then another, and mutter to ourselves. You won't find me very adequate, after three of us."

George drew her down on his knee and held her hair against his face. And he heard the pounding urge of the years. Joy was right. They were getting to be the old folk, and he had done nothing for her yet as he had dreamed.

"Nonsense," he said, to hide what he felt. "We can always sell the place and go live in a hotel."

"And be thrown out because our neighbours object to a typewriter at three in the morning! We'd be better off in a trailer!"

"Guess you're right," George admitted, and he thought of the nights he had sat at his typewriter, clawing his hair, lighting cigarettes one on the other, trying desperately to break through the unresisting, imponderable opaqueness that yawned everywhere before him. He would sometimes say to himself: "This must be like what the Japs found in China—so much beyond, and old China just opens up and swallows them, and goes on."

"Guess I ought to give the whole thing up," George said morosely. "Can't seem to pull the loose ends together into a plot. Guess I lack something. Remember, years ago, when Bo used to say that some time I'd be married and prosperous and fat. I'm married and Bo's prosperous—"

"And I'm fat," Joy added.

"You're no such thing. You're only a few pounds more than when I met you, and you were a half-pint then. I've had a lifetime of cold sweats fearing I might somehow lose you. Guess I was born to be afraid. Never could have faith in my own good luck. Every year I've been promising you we'd have that trip back to the Old Country to see Dad and Mom, and we've never made it yet."

Joy patted his shoulder and wiggled out of his arms. "Put that right out of your mind, and get on with your book."

"I should stick to the drug business. I'm no good at that either, and Bo knows it. But he keeps me on."

Joy yawned luxuriously. "Bo knows you're worth it, and that's why you're there."

George mused: "Poor old Bo. He deserved so much and got so little. I deserved so little and got so much. Wonder how they're getting on since Pitch came home. Bo's a fool to have taken her back." And Joy said, "Yes, I feel that way sometimes, too. They had their separation, but the selfish cat wouldn't go the rest of the way and get a divorce from him. But it's wrong to feel that way about anyone."

"Maybe she loves him, and won't admit it," George suggested. "If she could love anybody, that is. Funny, the way Alma's always thought so much of her. She can't be all bad. Children don't make the same mistake over and over again. By the way, where did they go today?"

"Alma said they were going to drive up the mountain. She said they wouldn't be late. Alma sees differently from us. Pitch is her ideal, the perfect beauty."

"Shucks! She can't hold a candle to you."

"No, that isn't right, George, and you know it isn't. Pitch is flawless, and she has an imperious way with her that always seemed to hypnotize Alma, even when she was a little girl. Alma copied her style, and she's the beauty of our family."

"She's a peach," George agreed. "But she got it from her mother."

"There are times when I think she looks like Pitch. That's not impossible, with the same great-grandparents, and you

always say Hal is the image of his uncle."

"Hal's learning to stunt—that kid's a born flier. Gad, I get goose pimples when I think of it. You'd think to read his letter he'd just won the Irish Sweep."

"He's won more than that, I'm afraid," Joy said, with a worried look. "He's won what he longed for and dreamed about for years, ever since his first air show, and even before that."

They thought both soberly and excitedly of Hal roaring down out of the sky in a power dive, the kind that had raised their hair when the sons of other fathers and mothers were at the controls. They remembered Hal's shining eyes, the prophetic gleam of his enthusiasm, the heart of him that stayed locked up in a hangar long after the body of him had come home to bed.

"He's such a child, to be flying," Joy said.

"He's nearly nineteen," George reminded.

"Yes, I should remember."

"His daddy was a full-fledged sap at that age," George grinned.

The telephone rang, and George went to answer it. "George," said Bo's voice. "Take it easy now, old boy. If Joy's there, don't let on what I'm saying. But there's been an accident and they're both hurt, I'm afraid—Alma and Pitch. I don't know any more than that at the moment. But will you and Joy come down to the General Hospital at once. I'm here now—come to the admitting office."

"Oh, yes, I see," said George. "Thanks. We'll go." And he tried to make his voice sound natural.

He replaced the receiver carefully, and his heart was a frozen mass that sent desperate chills through him. His mind was racing to find the words he must use. He turned.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," Joy said. "I bet it's bridge."

"Joy," said George, and he walked toward her. Joy saw his face and got up very quickly. He could see that the courage was hers now and that she knew.

"Something's happened! Is Alma—" she paused on the question.

"They're hurt," George said. "Car accident. Bo said to come to the General at once. He didn't know any more."

"Get the car out. I'll be ready in a moment." Joy darted upstairs, and before George had the car backed out of the garage, she was there. She climbed in and she had a little bag with her.

"Some few things—in case she has to stay there tonight," Joy said, and George saw the brave smile on her face. As he had done for twenty years, he marvelled even in his own swift agony at the fibre of Josephine Yorke who had married him. As if to steady him, he grasped at a wisp of thought, something Bo had once said: "These Britishers as a herd are more stable than we are in this country or America. They don't stampede worth a damn."

But Joy beside him was more shaken than he had yet seen her. "I was cross with her today. Almost the last thing I said to her. Oh, if only I hadn't. I scolded her for being so careless with her clothes. As if they mattered now!"

"Now, don't worry, Mama," George soothed, and found comfort in getting away from the saw edge of his own anguish. "You're the grandest mother a girl ever had, and you simply mustn't worry now. We'll need all we've got—" he stared hard through the windshield, and finished slowly, "—to get through what's ahead."

Bo met them in the admitting office. His face was drawn and twisted, and he was no longer the flippant Bo of old. His voice came thin and wan and anxious, as if strained through a sieve.

"They're taken up," he said, "to the operating-room. I'll tell you briefly. They were on a hairpin at the thousand-foot level—going too fast. Car met them, right in the centre of the road. They went over the bank and turned over. A tree stopped them. Alma is—hurt—pretty badly. Her head and her back. She's unconscious, stunned. May be concussion. Several bad

bruises. Don't know about bones broken—yet."

"When can we see her?" Joy asked, and the steadiness had come again in her voice.

"They won't know for a while yet. For now, stimulants, I guess. And pray."

"And how is Pitch?"

"Screaming and moaning. Face and arms are cut—glass. Lost three teeth. Conscious, but half crazy with shock. They'll give her sedatives. They say her injuries are—superficial."

Bo looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry," he said in a slow agonized tone, "that it had to be my wife who did it. If anything happens to Alma!—But there are some particulars to give the nurse, George. Maybe you'll do it. I've given her most."

And in some way he could not remember, George gave the details and the name of their own doctor, who was to be called.

"The police phoned me," Bo told Joy. "The ambulance was here before I was. I came here first, and then called you. I shouldn't have waited, I guess."

They were taken after a while to a guest room, to wait for Dr. Baxter, their own doctor, and George sat beside Joy and held her hand in a beseeching silence. He knew what torment was hers, that she could not be with her baby. Joy, who had been on call since Alma had been part of her, forced now to wait, wait, wait for others.

Bo was saying to them, "—open cars are Pitch's idea. Has to be Hollywoodish, and that's one way. Closed car would have saved them, maybe." He said it without venom, and Joy protested:

"You mustn't feel like that, Bo. It may not have been her fault."

George prayed, silently, while thoughts seared his mind: "Dear God, don't take her away! Don't take her from her mother. What has Joy ever done to You? All my life, since You made me happy, I've had this feeling that some day You would take them away from me, one by one. It isn't my fault that Pitch is a Jezebel. Just because one woman hates and gives all her life to revenge, you don't have to indulge her. She's had her own way long enough. It isn't fair, God! Do the right thing, now, and send Baxter to tell us Alma is going to live. Tell us what we can do to help."

Time crawled as time can crawl only in a hospital. The austere, unbearably kind hush prevailed as only a hospital can be austere and unbearably kind. When Baxter came to them he was not rubbing his hands complacently as usual. He was not bland as usual. His face had a set look, and George felt, rather than saw, Joy's fingers tighten in her palms until the nails bit into the skin.

Dr. Baxter talked to George, and George thought: "Why can't he look at Joy! He knows he should."

"That's a really bad knock, Battle," said Baxter. "These back injuries, I don't like them. Bump on the head might be serious. Can't trust them. It came slantwise, or—"

"But, will—" George tried to interrupt, and to himself: "Oh, why doesn't he say!"

"—it might have been the finish," Baxter went on. "Concussion, you know. Hard to tell about that. You might as well know the danger. Danger of blood clot—"

"Is my baby going to live?" Joy asked, in a voice eloquent of command. That was the woman. Brush aside the details, the working up toward something. Get at the basic fact first, and then work back. Baxter turned to her so casually that George could have struck him.

"Ye-es, I think so. Next few hours should tell. These new drugs—work wonders—sometimes."

"Oh, damn your new drugs; tell us the truth," thought George.

And Baxter went on: "It's a complete shock, you understand. Heart, nerves, the brain, all at once. Loss of blood is heavy, but not necessarily serious itself." And then he added, as if by an afterthought:

"Your daughter is a beautiful girl, Mrs. Battle. A truly beautiful girl. Now, as for Mrs. Charlton, mostly shock, hysteria, you know. Shaken up, but nothing serious. She'll be able to go home tomorrow, after a good rest. I believe they've put her to sleep now."

George felt a stab of remorse. He had not asked about Pitch. They had demanded their own news first, and Bo could wait. Bo was sitting on the edge of the chair, refusing to edge them out.

"Thank you," Bo said in a dry voice. "I understood it was about that."

George stood unsteadily on his feet. "Doctor," he said, "if there's a heavy loss of blood, transfusions help, don't they? Would mine help?"

"If she needs it she'll have it," Baxter said sharply. "But not that way."

"Oh!"

Joy asked, and it was more an assertion than a question: "But we can see her tonight?"

"I'll let you know," said Baxter, and was gone. In a few interminable minutes a nurse beckoned.

They followed into the ward where Alma now lay, and in the dim nightlight the sight was so terrifying they gasped audibly. Alma was propped and bound in such an incongruous, inhuman position that it was an effort not to cry out. Her face, unearthly pallid as in death, half averted, was ethereal in its graven, motionless unreality. Its beauty was distorted, the features drawn fearfully out of place and proportion.

Joy tiptoed to her, ignoring the stony disapproval of the nurse, and touched her lips lightly to the forehead. With a queer, strangled sob choked down in his throat George looked at his daughter, and knew as he had never known before the chilling horror of despair.

Baxter motioned them out. "Even in a coma," he was explaining, although George hardly heard him, "some nervous sense is liable to be on the alert. Might stray out for a moment and in again. Even the vibration of a room—human reaction is a complicated thing. Nobody understands it, even yet. Certain affinities may belong beyond the range of medicine as we know it."

George knew that he was talking to restore a sense of normal. And Joy, who had borne herself with superb control and courage, suddenly sobbed and buried her face against George's coat. He held her fiercely, as if they were coming for her, too, they, the demons from beyond.

He even begged Baxter that they might stay in the hospital that night, and Baxter sternly shook his head. "The wards are for sick people," he snapped. "Take your wife out of here and get some sleep. We don't want a nervous collapse on our hands as well."

"Thank you," he said, for no reason at all.

"You can't do any good here for at least twelve hours," Baxter added, a little more gently. "And you," he turned to Bo, "go along and get some rest."

In the still night, George fancied he could hear again and again the stealthy, whispering footsteps as they had been in the corridors. He could will himself into some twilight zone of sleep, and then the footsteps seemed to be the fluttering wings of death, and he wakened in terror. He stole to Joy's bed sometimes and listened, thinking she was asleep, and each time Joy's hand reached out and she patted him in silence.

It seemed the one thing of reality in the white terror of the night. It did not seem possible that Alma was lying near death, in that grotesque and horrible posture, twisted out of shape now so that, by some hellish quirk of surgical humour, she should have her natural shape when—and if—she was well again.

"Well again!" That presupposed that she would live!

"*Would* live! Of course she will live. God in heaven, she will live! Damn and blast anyone who says she will not live. The curse of hell on them, on Pitch, on Baxter, and on the hospital and all its works if she dies!

"Oh, God, you were there. You saw it. You knew it was coming. Why didn't You stop it? With all the human scum that crawl the earth, with all the reeking candidates for Your revenge, why pick on us? Why reach down and snatch away this young life that never offended?"

He stared at the dim ceiling in a bleak and merciless agony. Remorse tore at him now. Remorse and the hellfire dread of his boyhood came again to torment him. He would be punished for these thoughts. "God hears me and winds up when I lead with my chin like that. He's too busy when I mean well and ask for favours. What use is Alma's life to Him? He's got millions to look after. But she's all to us, she and Hal. And she's lying there now, out in the cold no-man's land between life and death, alone. We can hear her call, in that haunting, wild appeal of a child in terror. It claws at your heart and it burns and sears into your soul.

"She was so droll and so infinitely small when she lay by Joy there, her first hour on earth, in this very hospital. Her little eyes were closed like two tiny lines straight across, and her funny little face was all wrinkles.

"And then she came to whack her spoon on her plate and say da! da! da! She bobbed around on the floor on that little doll's rump of hers, grew to the busy age when she could hardly take time to wash her face, and, by and by, she was moody and easily upset and then her mother told her about the things that happen to little girls in the relentless design of life.

"Before we could turn around again she was in her long dresses, and had gone to her first party with a boy—and her mother went without new clothes so that she could have more, and hold her head up with the others. And there was all the hero worship she lavished on Bo, and the hypnotic fascination Pitch Black had for her. She was only a child, she couldn't see the scheming hate behind that lovely mask.

"She was lofty with her brother. Hal, the wise old one, with his greasy hands and his inseparable airplane motors and designs—the little beggar used to sneak spare parts to bed with him! He treated her with tolerant, affectionate disdain, like a brother. She was always too earthbound for him, too utterly unimportant. I've wired him. He'll come. He can fly here in less than a day.

"Children are so wise now. They grasp where we groped. They have left far behind them truths which we have not yet caught up with. Time was when youth longed and yearned for adventure and dived into it headlong when it came. Now they look at its teeth, they turn it over, they question its reality. And yet they, too, baffle me with their disillusionment. It isn't a pose. I used to think it was. They really are different than we were. The glad, sad, gullible days of make-believe are not for them. The thrills and suspense we used to know are jive and jitter now, and the dreams that once were in the blue are in the groove instead. We used to whittle sticks, and now they cut rugs.

"But they are happy—happier than we were, maybe. I don't know. I don't know at all. I feel old, lying here. I feel older by years and centuries than Joy, whose girlish loveliness defies and mocks the calendar as in some hallowed Shangri-la beyond the virgin, eternal snows of those mountains there."

He was glad that the butterflies and their fluttering were gone now, and the ghostly footsteps. But a moment of quiet brought the terrors back anew.

"Oh, Jesus," he begged frantically, "bring Alma back from the emptiness! Bring her back from the shadows. Bring her for Joy's sake. Joy needs her even more than I do. I have Joy, but Joy has only me."

Joy was up, he knew presently, and realized that he had slept. He knew he had heard her voice. She came back quietly to bed, and he got up and knelt by her and kissed her.

"I—just phoned. There's been no change," Joy said.

When the day came Bo was there with them, haggard, unshaven. George knew again, as he wakened, that he had heard Joy's voice. It was Joy telling Bo: "You shouldn't have done this, my dear!"

"Nonsense, you need help." Bo's voice. "How's the old horse?"

Then a woman with a white cover-all apron passed the door, and George realized what Bo had done. He called out.

Joy came in hurriedly, and bent over him, and her nearness was again the reality he had craved in the stark night.

"George," she whispered, and there was a compelling note in her voice. "I called the special again, and Alma—her pulse is stronger. There's a teeny bit of colour in her face. There's hope—Oh, darling, it's too good to be true—hoo-hoo-hoo!" And Joy was sobbing into the bedclothes beside him.

He tried to put his arms around her. He opened his mouth to shout. But his voice came out half-way. "My—prayers—I prayed w-we'd win!"

Bo had come upstairs, and was saying in the shredded, but incredibly cheerful voice of his: "You haven't got a steak in your apron pocket, nurse? Boy, what I could do to a steak—and a drink!"

"Some in the ice-box, Bo," George called. He could see only Joy's face, lined and tear-stained, her eyes glowing unnaturally from deeper sockets, and the dark circles beneath them. Slowly he comprehended the strain of the vigil she had been under. He felt guilty and selfish to know that he had slept even a while.

When Dr. Baxter came to the hospital, and they were there, George said to him: "I wish you'd look after my wife. She's all in, but she won't admit it. Please!"

"Mrs. Battle will sleep," Baxter said briskly. "Don't worry about that. That's what you got the ward for, isn't it?" And he rattled out instructions to the nurse. George looked at him in bewilderment, and then more understandingly at Bo.

Baxter gruffly ordered Joy off to bed, and when he had gone with her and come back, George said to Bo:

"You're a prince, old man, thinking of that. Guess I wouldn't have had the nerve, after Baxter turned me down last night. But I feel guilty—you here, with us, and Pitch needing you."

"Don't be an ass," retorted Bo with bravado cheerfulness. "Pitch is tough as well as beautiful, she's getting on alright. I saw her this morning. She's on the next floor."

"I hope," said George, with an effort, "that she'll recover." And he thought that his fire of hatred had burned out now and left no feeling about her at all.

"Face is slashed up a bit," Bo said. "But only one thing matters now. Pitch isn't hurt—much, but her vanity's had a thin time of it these last few hours when she saw the mirror." There was no bitterness and no tenderness in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Bo," George forced the words out.

Bo said gruffly: "You couldn't help it. You weren't driving."

George did not know then, and never was to know, the brief and violent scene of that morning.

Bo had found Pitch propped up in bed, with a hand mirror from the bag he had brought for her. His wife was a sight—and he said so—with one eye swollen and bruised, with a bandage half across her face, the swelling pulling her mouth out of line into a wry grin. Pitch hid her face from him then.

"Don't come near me!" she said shrilly.

"Why?" Bo advanced. "I can stand it if you can, my darling little murderess."

She looked up wildly. "It isn't so! She'll get better. The nurse said she would. She's young and strong. And she hasn't a mark on her face. Ugh! Look at me!"

"Alma," said Bo coldly, "may never walk again." He brought a wooden chair to her bedside and sat facing her. "You still have your voice," he said coolly. "You can still do the singing and let movie stars make the faces. But for God's sake tell them not to sing 'ah' with their mouths half shut."

"You beast! You're as callous as if nothing had happened."

"Has it?"

"Something *will* happen, when I get out of here," Pitch fumed.

"You're right. You'll get the spanking of your life. Tell me, why did you try to kill Alma?"

Pitch looked at him disdainfully. "If I tell you a secret, will you keep it? Because she's a spoiled brat, because I don't like her English accent or her mother's or yours, because I'm sick to death of having Alma, Alma, Alma thrust down my throat every day of my life. Because I hate you all—"

"—Because," Bo finished, "outside of Alma, who worshipped the ground you walked on, we didn't bring in our quota of hero worship. Because you've hated Joy ever since you knew her. Because you've sprayed that hatred over her children. Because for spite you sold out to Verne Fraser, and when the G-men caught up with him you came back—to find that you couldn't stand honesty and loveliness again."

"If you have quite finished, let me tell you, in case you're interested, that I love Alma as if she were my own daughter—and I wish she were. I didn't try to kill Alma. Alma tried to kill me."

"Your head's fuzzy," Bo prodded cruelly, "after that sleeping pill you had."

"My head is quite clear. Alma's a crazy little fool, like all children her age, and *Alma was driving!*"

Bo shrugged. "I expected you to say that. Alma has driven George's car since she was fourteen, and she doesn't drive in the centre of the road on hairpin turns, and she doesn't drive fast. She's a regular old maid at the wheel. So what!"

"So I'm a liar," Pitch snapped. "And you can go to the devil, Fred Charlton."

"And we'll go to the devil together, Pitch Black," Bo mimicked theatrically. "And now, my little angel, remember that I shall devote the rest of my life to making you happy. Every other weapon has failed—seduction, devotion, satire, sophistry. We shall now employ hero worship, and you'll be my glamour girl."

He rose, bent solemnly over her, and kissed her forehead, and clutched the swinging mirror in Pitch's hand before it reached his head. A nurse, entering at the moment, smiled solicitously.

"Are you quite comfortable, Mrs. Charlton?"

"Mrs. Charlton is most comfortable, thank you," said Bo. "By the way, she is not leaving hospital—until I say so."

He winked at the nurse, and walked out.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Hal came home. Hal, the son of George and Joy Battle, and in some ways the image of his Uncle Hal. He was bronzed, lean, tall in his air force blue uniform. And he was not away from the airport until he ran into a mess chum, Squadron Leader Gordon Davis, whom he hailed as Puddy. Puddy was on furlough, visiting a married sister, and Hal promptly took charge of him and brought him along.

Puddy was two inches shorter than Hal, broad-shouldered, solid bodied, blue eyed, with a wide grin that started with his generous mouth and travelled upward. His hair was nondescript colour, cut short, and his cap sat atop his leathery face as if it had been dropped by accident and stayed where it dropped.

Puddy had the happy knack of carelessness, even to the fit of his clothes. His chunky form filled the jacket with a substantial bulging, and it was evident he was a young man of tremendous physique. Though Hal's age, he looked older, and Hal did not need to tell them that Puddy was his idol, for it was Puddy says this and Puddy says that.

They were taken to the hospital room for a brief interval, but Hal was plainly uncomfortable and bored, once assured that the worst was over.

And it was. They had all been reminded that youth was resilient, when, on the second day, Alma's eyelids had fluttered, even while George and Joy had whispered about the marble immobility of her face. For the first time since the accident she drew a deeper breath, like a sigh, and they leaned forward to catch the slightest sound.

Alma's lips moved, and her tongue seemed groping to reach them, to relieve their parched harshness. She went back again into some vague twilight of the senses, and from time to time there were small mutterings, formless phrases, as if in protest, as if to get away from something that pressed down on her. And suddenly on the third day she opened her eyes wide, and knew them.

Away from the hospital, George watched the two young men with shy fascination. He felt that his son had already passed him, and he looked on this solid, confident young fellow Hal had brought along as he had looked on the old gun crew in the years gone by, with awe and liking, with the longing to be liked in return. Puddy was brusque far beyond his years by habit. He seemed striving for a proper manner with George.

"He's a misogynist, or something," Hal laughed. "Never been able to get him out with a girl yet. Have to team him up with Alma. Poor old girl—Is she as old-maidish as ever?"

Giving his sister a build-up would have been the last thing in Hal's mind, but it was a memorable moment when Puddy first sat by Alma's bedside and talked with her, after the first week. Davis was suddenly an awkward big boy, reluctant at first with the reluctance of a brother sent to play sissy games with his younger sister. And then this look gave way to amazed puzzlement when he found that talking with Alma came naturally with him. It was not long, either, until this gave way to outright fascination. George wondered if Joy had seen it, too.

"I've got two weeks, Mom. Isn't that great!" And Hal had folded Joy up in his arms with a single sweep. Hal had become a man suddenly, down there at the air base, but with all the burly grace of youth, all the brash vitality and the air of easy possession that belonged to his age. Davis looked uncouth beside him, and yet more profound, more rugged.

Joy had liked Puddy instantly, and that reassured George for his own ready, unquestioning acceptance. Joy found in him, George knew, some almost mystic quality of kinship, as with a man who instinctively moved with self-assurance, a man to whom success was assumed and not to be even debated. Puddy belonged to their family circle the moment he approached it, with an intimacy that George knew was as much instinct as conscious choosing.

Pitch had gone home, in high rebellion against the restrictions of the hospital, and surrounded herself with special nurses. Bo came often to the hospital, filling Alma's ward with flowers till they begged him to stop so they could find room to move around. Bo confided that he was an accident-widower, that his wife refused to see anyone, and had threatened twice to commit suicide by diving head first out the window.

Bo shrugged, and George was worried at his hardness. It did not fit, this new mood, and it seemed to be pulling them apart. It was hard to get at common ground again. There were times when George faced himself and asked: "Is this the final devilry of this woman? Has she succeeded in failure after she had failed in success? What has happened to them?"

Is Bo falling in love with her or is he absolutely indifferent as he pretends to be?

"Does a man ever try to convince you he is indifferent, if he really is? It would be the grand solution of it all, if he falls in love with her. She would be his, body and soul, within a week. Pitch never gave herself to Verne Fraser. She's too good a poker player—better than he is with all his cleverness."

At home, they heard Hal and Puddy in the basement, and knew that Hal must be showing Puddy the model souvenirs of his boyhood research.

George called down the steps: "Hi, there!"

"Hiya, Dad!"

Some wild new happiness had seized him. This had been going on for years under his nose, this growth of his family. Those weren't boys down there. They were men. He had been among men himself long before this age. And even Alma was no child any more. She was grown, reaching for the ripe old age of eighteen.

"No use pretending things haven't happened, for they have. Maybe I don't pretend, I just don't realize. That's the answer with all of us. Same with this Munich business. We say we pretended there was no danger from Hitler till it was too late. We didn't pretend at all, we just didn't think. And we don't think even yet. That's what Bo says. Gad, I'll find out what these kids think about it."

They had Hal to themselves for these few days. He would make the most of it. He need not wince when the planes roared over their home now, and imagine Hal in one of them. He need not see him suddenly have to bail out and float down into the sea, as that young man had done the other day. He need not see a shiny thing come down out of the sky in a dive that did not end soon enough.

These thoughts were childish, he had admitted, and then corrected himself. No, they were not childish. No, he would think instead, of those dark misgivings which had dogged his years, the uneasy feeling that he had let his son down, that all of the things he had dreamed of for him by his father's doing were still dreams.

That feeling was gone now, as he sat radiantly with them both, and saw the complete assurance of these young men. He sought in vain for a mirror of himself in Hal at that age. He found this image rather in young Davis, the great, shy, ambling hulk whose uniform wrinkled comfortably around his body.

"Puddy looks at Alma as I used to look at Joy, a far-off, unattainable dream, a being sent out of the blue to tantalize and elude me."

What a contrast this was to Bo, his fabulous hero with the empty sleeve, the mask of cynicism, the swift deep insight, the sure grasp. Pitch Black, for all her lightning terror, had been a plaything with him, an outlet for his incurable mischief, a creature to tease and anger to see the fur fly and to see her scratch.

Her own imperious appetite would take Pitch on and on. It had taken her to Hollywood and had brought her back. Her insatiable desire for domination and revenge would do as it willed with her, all but for one thing. That thing lay within Bo himself. Here were two challenging natures, two beings who sprang instinctively to the offensive against each other. In Bo it sprang from adventure, from impulse, from the swaggering impudence of the man; in her it was deliberate, a design for living, a shape of dreams—and against a stronger nature than hers it was a defence mechanism of a high order.

Bo was right after all. Only in his indifference could he be the stronger. Once that iron will of hers had been enmeshed in the yielding, unbreakable web of that weapon, she had been helpless. It had built up in her a resentment which was the nearest thing a callousness like hers could come to hatred.

And now Bo could work his will with her. He would be the first to see that himself. He had escaped the divine passion in his youth. Now he could approach it realistically, armed with a broad sympathy. If only that reckless, unchallenged heart of his could be touched as George's had been touched, as Puddy's was now being touched.

Well, stranger things had happened. Pitch in all her fearful beauty and talents and the determination behind them, who needed no one, was now Pitch Black with a marred face, a Pitch reduced to tears—the tears of vexation and self-pity, the first honest tears of her life. Could it be that now, with her queenship assailed and debased, she would reach down

into that rich, charged well of his nature and strike oil? Could it be! Could it *help* but be!

Instincts run hours, days, years ahead of rational thoughts. A thing at first unseen plays like static in the human soul a while, appears then, fitful as lightning beyond the horizon, and at last flashes into present reality.

So it was with George. The path of his dreams had entered new regions. He was riotously happy as he sat proudly near his wife, and watched the awkward, honest admiration of young Davis for her. He, George Battle, was a lucky fellow. His home had evolved through and beyond a cycle, built, held together, motivated and governed from the throne of motherhood.

From England, from the tradition of her father and mother, Joy had brought this instinctive, compelling force of the home. A mighty, centripetal force it was, in the way that was known there. It had taken more than courage to bring and implant it here in this younger world, where the antithesis was true, where the forces of home were centrifugal, where the new frontier was not mere topography but a state of mind. No, it was deeper than bravery, the quality that Joy had.

For she had done this: She had so fashioned their lives that each one of them would turn homeward for ever in his thoughts, his appeals and his resolves. This absolute, she alone had built into all of them. This benevolent sovereignty of the home was now the family compact, the unwritten constitution. An intangible thing, a bond of no material substance at all, like the shimmering moon path on the water. No stronger than that—but would you try to cut through the moon path or break it apart? Would you?

What, then, he was asking, did they think of Munich? Puddy's broad-shouldered shrug was eloquent.

"It'll be all the harder to do when we come to it," he said.

"It can't really prevent war, can it?" Joy asked. "The Germans hate us too much for that. Dada's agents tell him they talk of nothing else in Berlin."

"It's too late to put off the war," Puddy said. "It's been on for three years now—in the field. And it's been on for years before that on the diplomatic front."

"How sure of themselves, and yet how right," George admired secretly. "These boys are fighting already, fighting mentally into the future. When a man's by himself up in the sky, does he get a new perspective, see the lines drawn on the ground?"

"Hitler started the war when he opened the first concentration camp, you mean?" Hal said. "Or was it Japan when she bit off Manchuria?"

"Guess you're right both times," said Puddy, and squirmed to find he was the centre of attention, as George had squirmed years ago when asked his opinion about another war. He would rather fight than talk, this lad, it was plain. But he was flattered, too, because Joy and George were asking his opinion.

"This war," Puddy went on, "was really born a revolution, and then sort of changed over. The revolution of an inferiority complex, dragooning the masses, robbing them of all initiative."

George thought: "Puddy talks like Bo!"

Hal laughed, a joyous, buoyant laugh.

"There goes your Little Man, Dad," he said.

"There are no Little Men left in those countries, but their neighbour countries still have them," George offered. "The next phase of war will be to strangle those as well, don't you think?"

"Too bad we can't strangle that Prussian gang who are using Hitler for a Messiah," Puddy said grimly. "We should be bombing Germany right now."

Joy gasped audibly. George, knowing her, did not mistake it for a gasp of fear. For what had flashed into Joy's mind was a nostalgic thing, a sudden vision of family, reunited over these six thousand miles that separated them. Her boy in danger, yes; but her boy going as ambassador to that distant embassy of blood and kinship, going to form a grand liaison

between the new and the old.

George's mind had wrestled briefly with Puddy's remark, with the picture of the Prussian louts who once again stood for Germany, and of how even in the dying echoes of the last war, they and the German industrial barons had begun the grooming and sublimating of the young Austrian. He was to be their buffer against the revolution that would shake them down and down.

He quitted the thought with distaste, and with relief to follow Joy's mind, to sense what she had swiftly sensed, the coming of a reunion with those who were hers by birth and blood.

A thought had been rekindled with him and it would blaze and burn and would not be put down.

His heart was singing when they went again to see Alma. There would be, he felt, after hearing these confident young men talk, a period of fumbling, of stalling, of happy compromise. Then suddenly a people would be angry, and that vigorous positive would boil violently to the top.

He could realize now the force of things he had talked about with Bo. The Little Man against the Mass Mind fitted after all.

He was to learn very soon how right he was.

Chapter Forty

By one of the abrupt decisions that marked her way of life, Pitch Black Charlton emerged in a tempestuous moment from her retirement and bade them all come into her life. If there was fate in an accident, it was not for her to admit it. But it was Bo's own plan that drew her out.

To her, Pitch's doctor brought a young specialist in plastic surgery. Her cheek ligaments had been torn, and the gash ran into her temple. The side of her nose had been abraded. Left to itself the face would have healed askew, the assaulted nerves would have their way, and the cheeks no longer be twins. The scar would run from the left of her mouth to the left wall of her nose, with a flanking stripe toward the left temple.

The surgeon, young John Douglass from McGill, had no hesitation. He had worshipped from afar, he knew her fame since his university days. He saw her now as a vehicle to his own independence. If there were medical history to be made with a beautiful woman whose face was well known in the magazines, the screen and the newspapers, who was he to object to making that fame? Douglass was a shrewd workman, a shrewder thinker.

He replaced the bandages, regretted that he had not been called at once, made an appointment with her. Bo sat placidly back while this went on, but when Douglass had left he sprang toward her with a protest.

"This young fellow is fascinating, and all that, my little humming-bird, but since when have you been a guinea pig for classroom carpenters?"

"Since when," Pitch asked, "have you been interested in my face or my decisions?"

"Since you were hurt," Bo said bluntly, "I have decided that you need me, after all."

"So sweet of you," Pitch murmured. "So touchingly sweet. But this happens to be my face."

"Quite right, but you are my wife. It eludes me, this craving of yours for adventure with one of the three main assets you own."

"Thank you," Pitch said sweetly. "When I need a psychoanalyst I'll not forget. In the meantime, some scientific knowledge is needed."

"If it was your backside," Bo burst out wrathfully, "there might be some excuse—and no doubt our young medical student would be doubly enthusiastic about his work. Just because this bouncer has the gall to start hacking your face is no reason why you should be fool enough to let him. The woods are full of experienced surgeons. Why give yourself away to some collegian who's barely dry behind the ears?"

"You're not exactly shying away from youth yourself—and I'd sooner have them wet behind the ears than under the arms, the way they get later on in life."

Bo's eyes gleamed. "As I said before," he soothed, "I hardly realized that you actually cared for me, but this little outburst of jealousy convinces me against my own senses. And why, may I ask, do you think I'm showing this concern? Because the fellow is too good looking. There—you have an honest confession at last from a disordered and dishonest rascal."

"You may go back to your fountain of youth and let me have my fun while it's still to be had," Pitch mocked. "My only sorrow is that you're *not* capable of jealousy."

"I am green," Bo said solemnly. "I am green and blue alternately. I am beside myself."

"Well, take yourself by the arm, then," Pitch snapped, and looked at his empty sleeve, "and guide yourself out of my affairs."

Bo's eyelids flickered, and then, under control, he sighed noisily. "Alas, my gentle scarab. Your patience unmans me. Your words caress me like a steel file. I come with loutish advice, with insulting language, with my tongue in my cheek. I come to make war on youth with a scalpel—and I am scalped. I bow from the waist."

"It was a youth who got me into this," Pitch told him with surprising restraint. "Now let a youth get me out of it."

"Your hand on that," said Bo simply, and dropped the mask of mockery. He knelt beside her, took her hand, looked deep into the smouldering fire of her eyes.

"Pitch Black," he said at last, "you have courage, you have what it takes. You and I travel parallel roads. But you chose the rough one. Too bad."

"Oh, don't look at me," Pitch said with exasperation. "I can't stand it. I'm no sight for you now, except to gloat over."

"I'm looking at your eyes," Bo said. "There are no scars and no bandages on your eyes. There's no guile there, either, nor any sin, nor any of the ills of us weaklings."

"I'm sorry if I disappoint you."

"You're not sorry, and you don't disappoint me. To disappoint is to create an illusion or an expectation and then shatter it. You have done neither. There's no guile in your eyes because you stand by what you set up. But there's no welcome there, either. I have never read it in your eyes. I have never read the invitation there that I've been able to read—and accept—in other women's eyes. I have only read an eternal good-bye."

For a moment Pitch leaned forward, and the dark fire that he saw became a softer glow. She averted her gaze from him then, stared over his head. There was the smallest gesture of her body which he felt, and then she suddenly met his stare again.

"Good-bye, then," she said. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I'm going over to George's menage and spill a beer with him."

Alma was propped up on supports in hospital, and able to see the boys for short visits. And it was no secret to anyone with eyes what was going on, with Puddy Davis preoccupied, red-faced and more awkward than ever. "The man must have been in love with her, from her pictures, before he ever met her," George reflected.

Yes, that must be it. Hal was a loyal brother, under all his mask of superiority. He admired Alma with all the wholesome admiration of one young animal for another, but with the sense also that she was an integral part of his life. What more natural than he try to draw his closest companion in with him?

"Kids get acquainted fast these days," George said.

"Whereas it took us ages," Joy reminded him.

"Every time he comes near me with that fixed look in his face I feel he's up to something, don't you?"

"It's coming. Only maybe they won't ask us, they'll simply say it's happened, or it's going to happen. We've got Alma back only to lose her again—and she's only a baby yet."

This was comfortably incredible, George thought. The sort of thing he was putting into his endless book. It was strange—reassuringly strange—that he could think of it without fear. It meant that Alma would go away, perhaps soon, crippled though she might be, that she would be with them no more in the old way, that their family would be gone, and only he and Joy would be there. Yes, that had been his vision often, that they would be going, one by one—

He bit off the thought in its flight.

Yet the thought of her with Puddy Davis had no terror. He would go away this time, perhaps, and on his next leave he might come again. But children changed. A year in their lives could be a century in their events. They might never see him again.

That, too, was unthinkable. So when Puddy came to them both at last, and said shyly, "There's something I'd like to ask you," George swelled to the occasion. He was not sure whether it was Puddy Davis on leave with a request, or Squadron Leader Davis making a command. He saw Joy's expectant look and wondered if her thoughts were as jumbled

as his own.

"God forbid pomposity," he told himself. "After all, I'm only her father. I don't want him to think I'm a fool. What do fathers do in these circumstances—'Certainly, my boy; of course you realize that marriage is a very serious matter. Hm! Now the first thing—' Oh, no, that'll never do. Guess I'll let Joy handle it."

"Hal and I will be going soon, and you've been so wonderful to me that I hardly dare mention this," Puddy played with the lapels of his jacket, fumbled for a cigarette, found it, laid it down unlighted, clasped his hands nervously over one knee, put his foot down hastily.

Joy's smooth, welcome voice eased the strain. "If it's anything in

"Sir!" How had he come by this status? Not by his own efforts. Not by his own standing in the world, for he had no standing save that which he had got from association with Bo. And he had no social standing save what Joy had brought him. And he had no other standing either, save that by some magic he had arrived at middle age on the shoulders of circumstance as the father of two children.

His thoughts flew back twenty years to that other time when he had come trembling to Wendell and Alma Yorke. He grinned, suddenly, a wide grin, looked quickly at Joy for a cue, and said:

"You—you work fast, Puddy."

"I'm afraid I—I did, sir. There wasn't much time, you see, and—Well, things move pretty fast sometimes in our business, and I—I sort of forgot about formality. I ought to apologize for dashing down like that but—Oh, I acted on impulse. And Alma said she was game if we could—fix you up, so—So there we are."

George said to himself: "The young bounder, he's not sorry at all! He's tickled to death with himself. It was Hal engineered it, but Puddy won't tell on him. Hal will think it's a good joke on both of us. And Alma knows we can't scold her, since she's an invalid. Yes, sir, the perfect plot."

He got up and walked self-consciously to Puddy's chair. Puddy lumbered to his feet and spilled an ashtray off its stand in the operation. He dived down after it, and sent the stand itself sprawling.

"Oh, Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Battle," he said, and pulled things back to their place with a sweeping paw. Then he stood up again, red-faced and embarrassed, and found George's hand waiting.

"Sorry," he said, "I rather—"

"Ha ha!" said George. "Puddy, if it had to be somebody, I'm glad it's you. Wait till I get my hands on Hal—ha ha!"

"I thought you'd be—But Hal said—"

"I wish you two could see how funny you look, pumping hands—Erk!" cried Joy, and shrieked with laughter.

"Ha ha—ha ha ha!" Puddy began hesitantly.

"Ha ha ha!—Ha ha ha ha ha!" George barked.

"Ha ha! Ho ho ho—Oh ho ho!" they roared in unison.

And just then Bo rang the bell, and without waiting for an answer walked in to find what the noise was about.

"Erp—harrumph!" George gulped, and scrambled for his dignity again. "Bo, of all people you're the man that should be here. Meet our future son-in-law."

"Nearly the present son-in-law, I'll wager," Bo said.

"Aren't you even surprised!" cried Joy.

"At a handsome flying officer and a beautiful girl, and he on leave and she tied up where she can't get away!" Bo exclaimed gallantly. And he turned to George. "How are you bearing up, old horsefeathers? Do we have a drink on it?"

"No use resisting a man like Puddy, eh!" George yelled excitedly. "He's too big to lick, eh—Ho ho! Ha ha—Ulp! Say, we *could* have a drink, couldn't we? In fact, as a prospective father-in-law, I probably need it."

"Now," said Bo, "you're talking." And he thought of the interview he had just had with Pitch. He looked at Joy for a moment, began to smile, changed his mind and bolted for the kitchen on George's heels. He swallowed three times on the way.

After the wedding, the strange little ritual in the hospital ward, the boys had to pack almost immediately. And while they were busy George remembered how he had fidgeted at the prospect of Alma's shock because she had to be left behind. And there again they seemed to have been ahead of him.

"I'll follow you down East," Alma smiled at Puddy, "and then I'll follow you to England, or wherever you go. You'll always have me on your trail now."

Alma's eyes were sparkling, to George's amazed relief, when he and Joy came in discreetly afterward for a moment.

"Thank heaven she doesn't miss him as we that are left will miss all of them. She's going on soon. We stay—or do we? How can we say in these times what we shall do, or whether we can even decide?"

At the airport, Hal swung Joy into his arms and off her feet. "Bye, Mom," he said. "Better have a swell girl picked out for me when I come back—Hey, Mom, what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet."

Joy smiled, and patted his cheek. "Kissing you is—like a parachute jump," she gasped, with a brave attempt at lightness. But her voice was suddenly thin and frail. And she thrust her face against his jacket and held it there. After a while she looked up and met his startled eyes.

"We'll have a girl picked out," she promised, "WHEN WE MEET AGAIN!"

Then the colour came violently back into her cheeks, and one hand, unseen by Hal, reached swiftly to George beside her, and clutched him. Hal looked vastly relieved.

"That's better, Mom! Gosh, don't you go getting sick, or Dad'll be in the soup! Eh, Dad?"

They were in the plane, and it taxied around for the runway, and tore into the wind, with the sonorous bellow of its motors singing back to those on the ground.

Joy and George and Bo waved until the plane was a silvery speck in the sky, and finally it was gone in the haze. When the sound of it had died away, George could still hear, in his heart, the haunting prayer in Joy's words:

"—when we meet again!"

Chapter Forty-One

There came an end to the old easy humour about Bo Charlton that awed and fascinated George. It was easy to see, he realized, how this man had succeeded. His empty sleeve seemed only to lend strength and fullness to the other one. George wondered if it were fantastic to see this empty sleeve as the symbol of the old, empty ways, and the full sleeve as the days ahead.

"They're deciding the way we'll live over there," Bo said. "We might have to take a hand in that."

George heard Joy's quick intake of breath, and her face was transformed with a sudden unfathomable expression. It might be anxiety, or it might be eagerness. It was the wordless eloquence that is in a mother's face when her baby tumbles in his first strides, or chokes on his own cry.

"We're lucky to decide even what we'll do," George said soberly. "Millions of others are losing that right."

"Yes, my old torchbearer, your Little Man is going down like ten-pins over there. The things that are potential pother over here are real blood and death in Europe. The Little Man's rights are on the skids."

"We'll have to fight it," George said. "But we'll have to fight it at home, first of all."

"I think you're wrong, old tootler," Bo differed. "Human nature is a cantankerous thing. We'll make no to-do about our faults—as long as they're our own. But when someone else improves on them we're outraged. Here we've been breast-feeding the same sort of thing that Hitler has raised on the grand scale, but the fool has put it under the magnifying glass, and we see what a gauche and horrible thing it is, and then we fight it. We're generous to talk about the European losing his rights, forgetting that he never had them, as we know them. But he's after them, and it's slippery going, and sometimes he falls back farther than where he was before."

"Dear me, you're talking like George now," Joy applauded with an effort. "Where's all your sarcasm gone, Bo?"

"Frankly, I don't believe a word of what I said," Bo admitted. "It's a rank bromide to say people get what they deserve, so I won't say it, but there's no law to prevent me thinking it. We've come through a lachrymose decade over here, when even George's bourgeois wept aimlessly for some unidentified waifs of the storm called the Forgotten Men. It was duck soup for crooks like Verne Fraser, teaching people to lean on the state and bawl for the government every time they had a cramp. Anybody above the moral level of a puff-adder knows he crucifies his freedom every time he bawls."

"What ghastly monuments you have to your satire!" George murmured. "Fat mountebanks like Mussolini and heels like Hitler."

"They all started as demagogues, old bean. Scrape the top layer off a thousand tinpots gathered up in the dark in this country and you find the same writhing thing inside. They're thick as maggots on cheese."

"Would you really like to see it start?" George asked.

"I'd like to see it finish, my old hindsighter. One of these days we'll stop holding on to something that isn't there any more. Like voodooism, it's gone over the dam. War with one nation against the other is only the riper and second phase of the revolutionary war that's been going on for years."

"I see. We're part way through the disease, then?"

"At the virulent stage. It's a mess, a mess of fear, fraud and force. And it's got to be cleaned up—like a doctor wading into an epidemic of smallpox with a siphon of vaccine in one hand and a slop pail in the other."

Bo was right, he knew. Many things were going over the dam. The last flood of illusions from the boom, the mawkish and defeatist sentiments, all the escapist shibboleths of the twenties and thirties—all had been torn loose in the ruthless jerking of this new convulsion, and were swirling and splashing over the spillway into the gorge in a flood of human anger.

He saw now, as Bo had said, the cruel treachery of the Spanish war that was no civil war at all, but the cold and deadly manipulation of human passions toward that unhappy land which had not had its dreadful inoculation in the last war. And

then, as a syphilitic germ colony would spread, after striking at an open sore, this galloping malady would destroy one country after another. And only one power on earth could stop it. The multitude of Little Men, grimly gripping their right to make up their own minds.

Already it had raped and engulfed that struggling home of freedom beyond the Bohemian barrier, and in four short days had ended its way of life. He could see that. He could not see in form, but he could dimly see in substance, that it would go on and on.

It would go on with such an upheaval and overthrow of all the things that men knew and trusted that there would be no longer any present in the world; there would be only a future and a past—a future looming suddenly out of the dusk, no sooner taking shape than to be whisked into the night of the past. It would be hard, then, to predict, hard to visualize, easy only to realize.

Poland would be swallowed from the east and the west by this plague, and the work of years undone in a month. Denmark would be swept unprotesting out of its cherished identity in eleven hours. Norway, another member in this family of democracy, would be overrun in three weeks. Holland would go down in four days. Belgium in eighteen days. The little duchy of Luxembourg in ten hours.

France, sabotaged, betrayed and bewildered, would succumb and surrender in six weeks. Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, those dubious havens of intrigue, would sell out without even the show of a fight. Yugoslavia would fight and some of her would never yield, and little Greece would stand briefly, gallantly against the whirlwind. Russia herself would be assaulted, and the most cynical bluff in all history would be ended in the Prussian clique that fashioned it.

And finally, at some point, the peak of fever would be passed. Then, as a plague is halted because it has eaten itself out, this ravage, too, would be halted, and the long job would begin of driving it back, back, back, into the realm beyond the tide-rip, and at last into the cesspools whence it came.

They thought often of that day in the weeks that came when the world began to fall apart from the inside, through the summer weeks with their endless pregnancy of events. The fateful August came and brought the cold conviction that what was to be, was inevitable, that a miracle was needed, and none was in sight.

Years of latent lightning and threatening storm, and then the deluge. So be it. Among themselves, too, the tide of events seemed bearing closer, and with it a ground swell that sought to carry them off their feet and change their lives.

The world tottering on the brink of war—a war that already had taken Hal from them and soon would take him overseas to the Royal Air Force, into the humming skies above the fields of death; and Alma was gone to be with Puddy, her own heart on wings with the flying hosts.

Pitch Black emerging with a new face made from her leg and her ribs. It was an amazing transformation from the gouged and grimacing tigress who had gone into the hospital to gamble for something that was worth more than life to her, at the hands of a youth. But this was a young man's world, it seemed.

From San Francisco a newspaper friend wrote George:

"Remember Verne Fraser? That guy always knew which fork to use, but I guess he's losing his grip. Police caught up with him in San Francisco and held him for extradition for gypping the income tax people. That's the way they get all the slugs down this way. They had two strikes on Verne, but they let him out on bail and now he's hooked up with Hitler down Mexico way. He won't like the climate there, and they can spare him, so he'll turn up. He should go to Germany and take Roehm's place."

That was partly right. Verne Fraser did turn up, a year later, in the missing list when a German *Untersee-boote* sank a Mexican ship in the North Sea. But Verne Fraser did not matter any more. For the pattern that he wove was a tiny web. The thing that impended mattered.

Will it come? Will it come? They faced each other, George and Joy and Bo, with a question that writhed and burned in that summer. There had been the Gethsemane of Berchtesgaden, the crucifixion of Munich, the twilight of Vienna, where the plug-uglies had assassinated the little five-foot Dollfuss, whom Joy mourned because "he was such a cute little fellow in his pictures." And the ill-starred Schussnigg, held incommunicado under the living death of a third degree.

Prague, and the ignominious dismembering of a republic, the terrible cry, "We could have fought them if you had helped." The battle machines clanking on the paving stones, the sullen crowds, the clamouring students—every third one picked out and shot.

Memel, Danzig, "those bandits of Warsaw," "this is my last territorial claim in Europe," the shrieks of rage against Poland. It was coming, no man could see how it could be avoided.

How soon will Hal go? How soon Puddy? In for their transfers to the R.A.F., of course. And George and Joy and Bo looked at each other in startled realization that day in August when Hal's wire came from Ontario:

"We're off. Alma following soon. Love to all."

Bo said, slowly and steadily: "It's my fault. He asked me to use a little pull I had to get him over there. I'm afraid I agreed."

"You mustn't feel like that," George said, and he looked inquiringly at Joy. She nodded. "We did a little interfering ourselves. We wrote to Dada to use his influence—Hal's heart was set on it. He'd have gone there anyway."

"I guess Wendell Yorke thinks we're screwy over here, everybody writing him," Bo grinned.

"Yes," George said, "he said so in his letter."

"Poor Alma," Joy mused, "She and Puddy will have their honeymoon trip separately after all."

"It's not to be sneezed at, an ocean voyage," Bo said, and looked elaborately at his feet. He raised his eyes at last to them and said:

"In fact, it got me, just thinking about it. I've booked passage."

George leaped up. "You've—booked what! You might be caught over there!"

"I hope!" said Bo dryly. "I sail on the twentieth. I'll just make it, I think, in time to see the London crowds when they declare war. I saw them the last armistice, and I wouldn't miss this—if I could help. But I kept putting it off until I may be too late."

"But—your business—you mean—" Joy began, and George, looking at her, felt the explosion of an idea within him, an idea so bright and glaring he winced before it. Her eyes were shining with the strange excitement he had seen there before. He knew what it was.

But he backed away from it. It was too simple, too evident, too accessible. There must be some catch in it. To begin with, they must live. What could they do—over there? Bo was saying:

"Can't do much with one wing, but I'll get in somewhere. This country'll be in it, too. I should stay here, I guess. Be a dollar-a-year man or something. But it's too far away—from here."

"Oh-h! Wouldn't it be grand! See Dada and Mama again, and be near Hal and Alma, and do some of the things we used to do in the last war—"

Joy caught herself, was abruptly silent, and George knew guiltily that she was reproaching herself.

"What," he teased, "would we use for money?"

"And who," Bo added, "would be the manager of the drug company?" And he looked straight at George.

George was wrestling with his thoughts, as though they were illicit, trying to assemble them into some order. All the suppressed longings of the years came back now in a rush of nostalgia. All the memories of disappointment when their long-cherished plans for the trip back had fallen through, for one reason. Their family. And now their family was gone before.

Even he had this forbidden dream of roaming again where they had their first romance. What must it be, then, to Joy? How long had she repressed desires which he could have the luxury of visualizing, yet which she, dependent by her own

choice and her motherhood upon him, could not indulge? His whole logic and reason now told him that it was an insane idea, that it could not be done. And the whole force of his being cried out for it.

But Bo had put it up to him. And Bo had been his friend, had helped him, tided him over, coached and imported him into this drug business, as a friend. As a friend only? Yes, that was the answer. That must be the answer, now and for ever. There could be no other reason any time. And yet it was not impossible that those indefinable ties of family went deeper than mere friendship of one man for another, went so deep as to put the family obligation first, even to using the friendship as a cloak. *To see that he as Joy's husband did not fail!*

Now Bo had come to collect. Bo had come to harness and use that confidence, that investment of friendship over the years. No, Bo did not look on it that way, but he, George Battle, must look at it in no other way. Bo was asking him to take responsibility for the business which Bo's daring and brains had established and made his own. Bo was saying, rather casually, to Joy:

"There are already a couple of million more women than men in the Old Country. It'd be no picnic. No home like you have here. This war is going to be slaughter on a scale never heard of before. The Germans are lousy with planes."

Bo paused then, and said slowly: "I would a thousand times rather help persuade your father and mother to come here—if they would. They've been through one war—yes, two wars—already. Why another—at their age?"

"If they only would—but they never will. Dada would no sooner leave there now than—than—I don't know what. But they'll need—" Again Joy bit off the words.

George thought: "There's a parental imperative that has been put off too long. But there's the book, too. Worked for years on it, and just about to whip it into shape and decide what the plot ought to be. Maybe I could do it over there. But would I ever? No, it would go off in a packing-box and be forgotten. And when the war's over maybe I'd dig it up and think how damn silly and flaccid it all is. It would never be finished. My great hope to do something worth while, for Joy's sake. For the sake of Hal and Alma, Joy's babies."

Bo did not tell them then, or ever, of breaking the news to Pitch.

A small, brittle smile played around her lips, almost belied by her eyes. "It's nice of you, of course, to let me know your intentions. Are you going alone?"

"Of course not. You're coming with me."

"To show me off to the father-in-law and the mother-in-law of your dreams, the freak with the artificial face? No, thank you! If you wanted to take me overseas you had plenty of opportunity before this crisis came. Now that we might very likely be caught over there, your feet are itching."

He lifted her chin, forced her to look at him. "Listen to me," he said, "this is serious business. It is no pleasure trip. We are not going to be 'caught' over there. We are going over there to stay till it's over."

"You remind me of that Yankee song of the last war," she said sullenly.

Bo's eyes softened. "You're bitter, my dear. That accident did something to you—you used to be able to shrug these moods off. But I was never more serious in my life. This is war. It is not only war as we know it. It is war as nobody knows it, even those who are starting it. Before it's over it won't matter where you live; it will reach you. Do you realize that? Nothing will be the same afterward. Nothing! The things we know and use and own, they will all be different."

"Even wives," she murmured.

"Perhaps even wives," Bo said.

"And your business? I suppose you plan to hand it over to the Red Cross?"

"George can manage the business, if he will. He'll make a good executive."

"Have you asked him?"

"Yes, I hinted it. Even a share in the profits, if he will take it."

"Has it ever occurred to you that George might want to go over there himself, to his *real* parents-in-law?"

She brought a hard glint, as she had meant to, into Bo's eyes.

"I think you're asking for something," he said.

Pitch shrugged. "Merely for information. How do you know he will even consider a bribe like that?"

"You're right, perhaps."

"Of course I'm right. I've known him rather longer than you have. He'd give his heart and soul to be over there himself, only he's never been a good enough manager to save the fare. And so would Joy. She's dying to go—for the duration."

"You're asking me now," he said coldly, "why don't I take her, and leave George to you. There's only one answer to that, and in chivalry and gallantry I can't make it."

"George has always wanted me, in a way you wouldn't know about." Pitch said it calmly, as an invitation to a retort. Bo did not trouble to make one. "I suppose I might get a job in a munitions factory," Pitch prodded. "I believe that's the proper thing for those thick-legged English girls to do, isn't it?"

"You—" Bo checked himself. "You can sing to the soldiers," he resumed shortly, "and leave the munitions to the experts."

"I'll go," Pitch decided suddenly.

"Good! I've placed the house with an agent. You have a week to get ready."

"That's nonsensical. I can't get ready in a week."

"Where we're going," Bo said grimly, "you'll have to get ready in a moment, when the bombs start crunching around us."

"And sleep in one of those little iron shelters they're making!" Pitch scorned. "Is that your idea of going to war? You *are* a brave man!"

Bo grinned happily. "Again I believe you're right," he said, and kissed her on the lips, and she did not resist.

George after a sleepless night sought out Bo the next day and told him with a troubled frown:

"Bo, I don't quite know how to tell you this. You've been a wonderful friend to me. And this offer to me now is just like you. All your life you've been giving, and all my life I've been taking, and you make money and I don't."

"I've given nothing, old bingo, and you know it. You've been doing all the giving. But there's something on your mind. Out with it!"

"Well, it's like this—Hal's overseas, and Alma's going as soon as they can arrange it, and—and—"

"And you want to go to war, too. And so does Joy."

George fumbled with his tie, and was shy with Bo for the first time since he had burst into his college room. "Oh,—I guess we do get crazy ideas at times. But it isn't that—not right at once, that is. I'd do my best here, you know that. But there might come a time—Bo, don't think I'm ungrateful, but—" He fumbled to a full stop and looked at Bo with such entreaty that Bo laughed.

"So you don't want the job?" he said. "And I knew you wouldn't."

"It was just, that—well, I feel I can't conscientiously take on something I mightn't be able to finish."

"I figured that," Bo agreed. "So I have a successor to take over when you're ready to go—provided you teach him. We'll split the profits and both go to war. What say?"

"No, we couldn't do that," George laughed uncertainly, and he stopped when he looked back at Bo. "Say, you didn't mean that! I couldn't accept such a thing, you know. I've got no right to it."

"I have the papers all ready to make you a junior partner."

"I can't do it, Bo. Remember, there's after the war to think about."

Bo leaned across the table and said earnestly: "George, I'm as sure as I ever was about anything in my life, that I'm not coming back. I'm so sure that I have made my will and bought a one-way ticket."

George and Joy had Bo's cable on the night of August thirtieth. It came after they had gone to bed, and said simply: "Here Sic Transit."

They laughed sleepily at Bo's laconic confession of seasickness, and wondered if he meant himself, or Pitch, or both.

Two nights later, at about the same time, they heard the radio announce that the war had begun, that Poland had been invaded on the morning of September first.

Two nights later still, after an agony of waiting, they heard at about the same time that Britain and France were at war with Germany.

Joy said, trying to be casual: "Hal might be on leave about now, seeing Mama and Dada. I hope he's written."

"Guess they're pretty busy," George said. And he was thinking of writing, too, of fearful writing with long white plumes of smoke in the sky.

For as swift as the path of Hal's fighter plane, the world as they knew it was falling apart, and all the old familiar things were being torn away.

Chapter Forty-Two

Alma went overseas in early October, to be near Puddy. Her back still was lame, and they softened the shock of her going with the word that Dada knew a specialist who was to undertake her case.

Across the distant sea came the muffled thunder of the tramp of millions—the millions of men going to war. And yet it was a restrained and thudding sound that seemed trying to hide its own truth. Its own truth was, that it was pushing aside all the old ways of life, because it was a war that would last for years, and it would leave in its wake a cascade of revolutions and upheavals around the globe that would go on for the natural lives of all living men.

George worked as he had never worked before in that long grey fall when the war came, the war that at first was like no other war. The war which was to bring a rain of death on Joy's homeland. The war when machines, not men, would settle destinies; when man had ceased challenging the machine, and the machine had challenged man. The war when all that everyone knew held on until it was too late.

George worked at his book in the evening hours when he had finished his day's work for Bo—for he was determined that he would deserve the trust of a friendship.

"Most people think it will be duck soup," Bo wrote. "But if we don't hurry up and get a move on we'll be the ducks."

"When the book's done, and my successor knows the business, I'll go and join you," George would promise Bo silently in his thoughts. He could not stop to analyze the urge that drove him, the imponderable feeling that he was on the long road at last. It could be only this, that after twenty years when they had sailed away to the western horizon, to a destiny he had painted in vivid colours to Joy's father and mother, they must have an accomplishment behind them when they sailed back again.

Hal wrote to them from France. Hal in France! How long, oh, how long, since another Hal's letters had come. Hal flying with the Royal Air Force above the lush fat valleys, with their half-hidden scars from the last war; above the green hills with their healed wounds, their forests of white crosses and their immemorial sadness. Above that far land where he and Bo, and the ghostly comrades of their memories, had gone those twenty and more years before.

Ah, those days, so near now, so close with all their fascination, all their terror, all their incredible squalor and filth and lice and rats and reeking shell holes, and all their appalling futility. This at least was a cleaner war, they were saying, when you could fly instead of trudging along the endless paving-stones at twenty kilometres a day. It was a cleaner war, they said, this with machines, which could carry death on the ground at fifty miles an hour.

His heart sang with hope in these months of the early war, because Joy believed in his book. It was going presently to the publishers. And together they would go through every page of it, slicing, adding, taking away, working till early morning, often in some mysterious frenzy of haste against the time when he might go over there again.

For all their ties drew them. Their son in the blue skies above France. Their daughter whose stocky husband was in an unnamed air field in England, training students and chewing his nails against the fate that held him there.

"All Puddy has to do is stay right here in this little island," Bo wrote to George, "and he'll see all the fighting he can want."

And there was the silent, forlorn little grave on the green slopes, where Hal would go to lay some flowers. "From George to Hal. God rest you."

Yes, God rest him! And God ride the air lanes, too, with the younger Hal. God in the hallowed sanctuary on the hillside, God in the cockpit as well. God and Hal in death, God and Hal in life.

"Our boys are simply too good for them; they're not anxious to fight," George would say, hopefully trying to keep Joy's mind and his off the things that both their minds were on. "If one of ours can take on ten or even twenty Jerries they'll have a merry time raiding England."

"But with all the thousands of planes," Joy would say. "Suppose they just keep on sending them over, even if they lose hundreds of them, just to bomb London, what would happen?"

"That's what Bo says," George would answer obliquely, both of them reluctant to face the reality, both drawn to it irresistibly. "Bo says it's good strategy for them to make us feel we're invulnerable, and then some bright moonlight night they'll come over in swarms and keep on coming." And he would come to Joy and put his arms around her and say:

"That's why we're going over some time, to see the London we used to know, to take care of Mama and Dada, as they took care of us."

Joy would say: "Yes, I hope so."

He would convince himself over and over again: "Of course it will be that, for that is unreal, and reality is being stripped away now. Only the yearning and love in our hearts is real, only that stays."

But he took up unquestioningly the responsibility of the privilege which Bo had laid upon him. He had Bo's business to manage, and he would give it his level best.

And he would read the papers about the Royal Air Force on the Western Front. There were not enough of them that winter, nor the following spring. And not enough of the enemy were appearing. The boasted clouds of planes had not arrived, and their absence was ominous. But when they knew week after week that Hal was well they gave him a charmed life, and their hope pushed their judgment aside. For Hal and his flying buddies were indeed supreme.

And then all at once it came. Germany invading the Lowlands, Germany bursting through the Sedan gap where there was no Maginot Line, Germany surging toward the sea down the winding Somme, the French counter-attacks that never came, the bewildered French generals who disappeared with whole armies into the maw of the machine, the last futile fighting on the shores within the sight of England, the thousands upon thousands clustered on the sands of Dunquerque and wading waist deep into the sea without arms, without regiments, without any of the things they had taken, save their lives.

The heroic and battered Royal Air Force, one-quarter of its fighter pilots gone in a few weeks, its fields overrun, and its planes forced back to England for bases and supplies. The sky black with German planes, and the dauntless, incredible assault of the defenders against these innumerable black bats of the hooked cross—

None of it was believable, and none of it could happen, because it was a nightmare and a madman's dream. But it had come, and the tattered remains of the British army were home again. The thudding march of millions of men was coming closer all the time. It could be heard in the rumble of the guns that shook the ground of Kent.

Britain was alone. For on the minute of the collapse of France came the word:

"It will make no difference; Britain will continue the war."

The Battle of Britain, the nightly roar of bombers by the hundreds against the slender defences. The Royal Air Force sending its fighters into the sky, hiding its air fields, rolling its new planes from the factories, husbanding, building up its reserve of the men who must be always there for the last decisive fight, even though every building in Britain were shivered. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few ..."

Hal was there, in the centre of it, and Hal was alive! Somehow, he would come through. He was one of that heroic legion. Perhaps Mama and Dada could look into the sky and wonder which plane was his.

But Mama and Dada might have left London by this time. Why was there no word? It came, as it inevitably must come, for hundreds of bombs had fallen where they were.

Dada's cable: "Bombed out mother gravely injured will keep you advised."

The war came home to them with an appalling, numbing shock, and it was Joy who first gained decision. As if sensing their thoughts, Bo's cable gave more detail. Alma Yorke's left leg was torn with a bomb splinter, and the concussion shock had temporarily paralyzed her. She was taken to a hospital in Surrey, out of the bombers' path. Then followed Bo's instructions which they must follow for Joy's passage from New York on the fifteenth of October.

Bo concluded: "Assuming you coming confirm."

There seemed no question in their minds what they must do, and they accepted Bo's orders automatically as if they formed a command. Behind his terse words they felt an urgency not even contained in the brief cable from Dada.

Yet in the midst of their planning Joy interrupted herself, and came and lifted George's face in her hands and cried: "I can't bear the thought of leaving you. What will you do, poor boy!"

"You mustn't think of me—not ever," he said, and he marvelled that she could. The thought of her going was unbearable, and he was resolutely closing his eyes and his mind to it. For somehow, he too would find a way to go to war. His debt to Bo must be paid in some other way, at some other time. But Alma and Joy's mother came first.

He was with her as much as he could be in the strenuous days that followed, for there was endless preparation to be made. And after the first day in a week which he had spent at the office he returned with his mind a little clearer, his step lighter than it had been. He had been able to think, for a while, with faith in his book. It was in the publisher's hands these many weeks, his best hopes with it. And he felt a conviction that, by the law of odds alone, their troubles of the present could not be unrelieved. Any day now there might be a letter about the book. They would say—what would they say?

He opened the door and threw his hat and coat to the nearest peg. He would pretend, in this brief homecoming moment, that nothing had happened, that life was once again as they had known it.

"Hello, sweetheart!" he yelled into the silent house. And Joy's voice came to him from upstairs. She pattered down the steps toward him faster than usual, and he saw an unusual, puzzling expression on her face.

Over her shoulder, he saw an oblong parcel lying on the hall table. And even though he knew what it was, he pretended to himself that he hadn't seen it. There was no mistaking it—and yet it wouldn't be that—of course. Might be something Joy had bought. He looked resolutely away from it.

"I've been sorting out some things," Joy said, and he knew she was refusing to think about the same thing that he was refusing to think about. "Another letter from Bo came, addressed to both of us. He hardly ever sees Pitch, they're both so busy. Pitch has really become a new woman, he says—"

Joy talked on, too steadily and too swiftly, and he followed her into the kitchen when she tugged him to see what she had made for him for dinner.

It was many minutes later when Joy said, as he had known she would: "Oh, dear, I forgot. There's a parcel for you on the hall table. Maybe you got it, did you? Just came in the afternoon mail. I had to sign for it, so it must be valuable."

"Oh, yes," he said, terrifically casual. "I did see it. I have an idea what it is—nothing very important."

Joy pretended to scoff: "But you haven't even opened it or looked at it! How can you know what's—" And then she stopped all at once and she came and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling. I know what it is, too. But don't worry, dear. Maybe just that one publisher—"

And George looked back over the years to the first hungry hopes of his childhood, and remembered how often he had known before what packages contained, without looking at them, and how he would sometimes put them away if he thought anyone was looking. As if they were some printed circular he could not bother looking at. It was always the same, he knew. Always "just that one publisher—"

From where he sat he could not see the parcel in the hall, and yet it stared accusingly, defiantly at him, with an impudent dare to open it. And he knew at this moment that he would not, but that he would put it away for a long time, till he had the courage and the anger to start on it once more.

"Yes, there's no use pretending," he said. "Just no good, I guess. Well, it's one more thing to pack away in the storage boxes."

"But why not open it—just to make sure? Maybe it's something else—or why would they register it?"

"Because I asked them to, if they didn't want it," George said miserably. "And sent them postage to cover it."

"Oh? Yes, I do understand, dear. Please don't be down-hearted. You did your best, and I think it's a wonderful book. Tell you what, we'll take it to England—when you go—and you can work over it again. Maybe we can change it somehow. Bo might know someone."

Yes, Bo would help again. That was it; that was always it.

But he knew from experience what a forlorn hope it was. He knew his book had come back to him because, like himself sometimes, it lacked some vital thing. There was no other reason. If there had been they would have written, and kept it. His book had come back, and his dreams with it.

"Poor Daddy; it's such a blow for you. I know how you feel. Let me get you something." And Joy skipped off to the sideboard.

He knew that she was the leader. She had an immediate purpose, the age-old purpose that women had when men needed them: To nurse them, comfort them, let them cry because they were hurt, and then coax their ego back to life again.

The very thought of his weakness horrified him. What were his worries beside her own—with her mother who bore her lying stricken and crippled, between life and death perhaps? No, he was being contemptible and childish. He would get out of it some way. He must.

While he was meditating, the doorbell rang. "I'll go!" he called to Joy.

And he met a telegraph messenger. He initialled automatically for the message, fished for the change to tip the boy. It felt like old times, the old days of *The Post*, to have a telegram delivered to his home once more.

He ran his finger through the envelope cautiously, remembering how often in those happy days the paper edge had slit through the skin and made him swear.

The first word he saw was "*Ottawa*" up in the corner of the telegraph sheet. And then the date, and his full name and address, and—

George looked suddenly, violently away from the paper in his hand. He looked at the telegraph boy who was riding away on his motorcycle down the street. He knew the first four words because they had made four, quick angry burns when they struck: "We regret to inform—"

And he knew what followed, too. Of course it wasn't real; it would be about someone else. It could even be about the book, maybe. The publisher, of course, was not in Ottawa. Still—

He knew that the long moment these thoughts had taken were merely to give him his nerve back, to get a grip on himself and to stop the horizon from whirling. He knew the message by heart. It burned itself into his mind in that brief wild flash. No use pretending he had read only the first four words. No use trying frantically to pretend that he had not seen the rest.

George backed in through the door and closed it. He heard Joy in the kitchen.

"Somebody trying to sell something?" she called.

Yes, that was it; they were trying to sell him something. Trying to sell him the thing that had closed its icy fingers around his heart before now. Trying to sell him the conviction that his prayers had been no good, that the world was old and cynical, that God had grown deaf.

He came to the door then, where she was. "Joy—"

She turned swiftly at the odd sound of his voice. He saw her eyes dart from his face to the telegram he held in his hand. He saw her take quick steps toward him.

"Please be ready for—pretty bad news—"

"Is it Hal—or Alma—or Mama?"

"It's Hal, darling."

And all at once he held Joy in his arms, tightly, and her hand and his hand held the sheet of crinkled paper before them. For an instant only, he had time to remember Joy's sudden, frightened pallor at the airport where her son had crushed her in his arms that day. He remembered the unforgettable, fearful refrain: "—when we meet again!"

Hal's mother had got her telegram that day. He, the father, had got his only now.

Joy did not cry out. Just a strange, unnatural, open-mouthed sound, half gasp, half voice, and then she slid quickly through his arm to an unprotesting, pitiful little heap on the floor.

Gasping with panic himself, George gathered her in his arms, and found her limp, quiet form ominously difficult to lift. He laid her on the chesterfield and propped pillows behind her.

Joy opened her eyes, stared at him in bewilderment. He knelt beside her.

"Hal?" Joy whispered, and her eyes searched his incredulously, as if looking for a denial. "My baby?"

"He was—killed in the sky," George said, and drilled his voice to softness, to discipline. "The wire says he—he was—killed in action over Britain—Our Hal—Oh, Mama!"

Joy sat up suddenly, and clutched him with a fearful strength.

"They killed him! We'll both go now—soon—won't we? It's our war now, Daddy! Ours and Alma's!"

He said: "Yes, it is our war. It always has been our war, for it is only we and we for ever who can fight it and understand it."

He held her in silence a little while. He was thinking:

"Damn their bloody hearts! Ten to one they were, in the Battle of Britain over there, and they got on his tail. It was the only way they could fight our Hal."

He stared at the skyline, through the window. Beyond that lonely sculpture, beyond the land, beyond the ocean, lay the thing that he would do. Greater than all his years until now, with the sum of their deeds; greater than his dreams, even, it would be.

For all the known things of his life were massed now to help him on that distant, uncharted frontier. There, so Bo had written, from over the sea, stood his Little Man, transfigured, supreme and sublime, who will win the war—the only man strong enough to win it.

There had been two of them together, in those days of his youth, he and Joy, with their faces toward the heart of the tempest. Now there were two of them again. Perhaps three—Joy and George and the book. Yes, the book would go with him when he followed Joy, he knew now. For the book was themselves, and a chapter must be added. That was why the book had come back, for it was unfinished.

He pressed his lips to Joy's brave cheek, where a tear shone in terrible testimony. He would not try to fathom with words this communion which was fathomless. Just as her baby had been wrenched from her body, so now he had been wrenched from her life, and some of her had gone to dwell with him where he was and to watch over him for ever and ever.

George stood with Joy again where the trains came, as they had stood in far-off, battered old Victoria Station in those other years.

They could have control now, they knew, because they were beyond being hurt. Events had beaten in upon them too swiftly, too savagely in these last few days. They had reeled, as from an onslaught for which they had fashioned no weapons. Yet somehow they had stood.

And now they had found their directions again. There could be no swerving any more, no hesitancy and no fear.

Thus George told himself, and when Joy placed her hand softly in his, and her capable little arm came up around his neck, and her glorious hair brushed his cheek, he had to tell himself over and over again that his new courage had come to stay.

The warning bell was ringing, and he went with her aboard the train, to leave her there and to come back and stand on the platform. Joy trotted back, like a child, to the observation car to lean over and hold his hand in hers.

The train moved, and he went along beside her as far as he could.

"I'll see you soon, darling," he kept saying over and over again. And the car where she stood began gliding away from him into the dusk.

He knew that sometime, somehow, he would find a way to follow.

Joy's figure was limned against the lights of the car, and the tiny white object she waved to him was a handkerchief Hal had given her on Mother's Day.

He kept walking and walking along the platform after the retreating train, until it went on beyond the curve and beyond his sight, and he could see Joy no more.

THE END.

[The end of *Little Man* by George Herbert Sallans]