

The American Home



DECEMBER
1903

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Bitterness in the Cup

Date of first publication: 1903

Author: L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery (1874-1942)

Date first posted: Apr. 19, 2017

Date last updated: Apr. 19, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170442

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Bitterness in the Cup

L. M. Montgomery

First published *The American Home* in two parts, Chapters I-V December 1903;
Chapters VI-VII January 1904.

CHAPTER I

A mild wind was blowing up from the southwest, over the ribbon of resinous firs in the valley, the low-lying wheatfields and the long slopes of aftermath where the lush growth of the clover rivalled the luxuriance of June. From all it brushed in its unfettered sweep it filched somewhat of odor—from the firs the tang of their balsam, from the field-borders the warm breath of smoke-blue asters and sunned, grasses, and from the Barry orchard the aroma of ripening fruit and the pungency of the mint that grew thickly around the roots of the old cherry trees. All these it garnered to itself and poured, as if from an unseen flagon of delight, around the tiny old woman who sat among the grasses where the lane curved down the slope by the beech grove. She drank in the autumnal draught as she knitted and basked in the sunshine that mellowed on the slope around her. It pleased her to sit there in the day's maturity, under a sky that was curdled over with films of white cloud, and knit placidly while she watched the wind lifting the ferns in the shadows of the birches and combing the long grasses on the slope. She seldom looked at her knitting. Her tiny hands worked ceaselessly but her large and unshrunken blue eyes kept on the landscape a watch that missed little, from the stir and flicker of the sapling leaves at her side to the cloud shadows broadening and vanishing on the far away level fields to the south or the occasional wayfarers along the Rutherglen main road that ran, straight as a die, to the west until it dipped suddenly into the curve of the fir valley.

Save for the little old woman with the eager eyes not a living creature could be seen near or far. From the Barry homestead, that had topped the birch hill for three generations, to the opal-tinted horizons of the south and west and the gleam of the ocean north and east the whole world seemed to have fallen for the time being into a pleasant untroubled dream.

To Mrs. Barry, or Aunt Nan, as everybody in Rutherglen, related or unrelated affectionately called her the afternoon was as a cup of delight held to her lips. She drank it in unsatedly, thinking aloud meanwhile as was her habit.

"Isn't it good to be alive? I want to live as long as there's afternoons like this. Sakes alive, what smells! Seems to me the very air is dripping with 'em. There's the mint—and the dead fir. Haven't I always loved the dead fir? It minds me of when I was a girl and the first Mark and I used to go walking in the lane back of home where the firs grew so thick. That was forty years ago. I must be getting an old woman. How still them firs in the hollow look—as if they were talking to the sky. And what a blue there is over the hills! Strange how it always fades before you get to it! The way with most things I expect. I feel as if I was drinking the sunshine in and

storing it up in my heart to last me through the winter. I'm so happy—it doesn't seem to me that I'd have a thing changed if I could. I've had sorrow enough in my life but it's put behind now and lived over like those furrows the second Mark ploughed in the lane last spring. They looked ugly for a time but now they're all picked out with asters and golden-rod. It's a dear way Nature has. And I just love living!"

She dropped her knitting for a minute and softly leaned her withered pink cheek against the creamy satin of the white birch bole behind her. As she watched the Rutherglen road a girl came out from the purple shadow of the firs that overhung it. Aunt Nan recognized her with a smile of delight.

"That's Lois Wilbur. I don't know as there's another soul in the world I'd want to see just now but I do want to see her. She fits into an afternoon like this instead of spoiling it as most folks would do. I hope she's coming here. If she passes our gate I believe I'll just run down and lay violent hands on her."

Aunt Nan was spared this exertion for when Lois Wilbur came to the white gate at the end of the Barry lane she turned in under the big willows. She walked with the elastic step of healthy youth and there was a faint yet rich bloom on her face, born of her windy walk up from the valley.

Although she was not beautiful in any strictly defined sense of the word she possessed a certain charm and distinction of appearance that always left beholders with a pleasurable sense of satisfaction in that softly rounded girlhood of hers, with all its strongly felt potentialities. Those who knew Lois Wilbur best felt, without, perhaps, realizing it, that her greatest charm was the aura of possibility surrounding her—the power of future development that was in her. She was one to whom maturity would bring her best and you felt instinctively that such maturity could be nothing less than beautiful when the crescent of her rich nature should have rounded out into completeness.

Whatever life might bring to this girl—and it must bring much, if not of action yet of feeling and heart-growth—it could not crush her. Its gifts, whether of sorrow or joy, could only tend still further to ripen and enrich the woman soul that looked wistfully yet unshrinkingly out of her level-gazing eyes. For the rest, she was simply the happy, wholesome girl she seemed, fully dowered with youth's soft curves and virginal bloom, with a dimple or two lurking about her mouth and a saving glint of humor in her frank smile.

As she came up the grassy slope Aunt Nan held out her hand and Lois took it in her smooth, firmly moulded one, looking down at the little woman affectionately.

"I thought you'd come," said Aunt Nan. "You belong to the afternoon so it brought you. Things that belong together always come together. What a lot of

trouble that would save some folks if they only believed it. I was afraid you were going on to the shore and if you had passed our gate you'd have seen a sight now—nothing less than old Aunt Nan careening down the lane at full speed to catch you! Truth is, Lois, I was dying for someone to unload all the thoughts I've been gathering out of the afternoon on."

"I did start for the shore," said Lois. "When school came out I thought of the water purring around the rocks in this off-shore wind and it was too much for me, although I should have gone straight home and done some sewing. But I couldn't sew on a day like this. There's something in the atmosphere that gets into my blood like wine and makes a sort of glory in my soul. And my fingers would twitch and I would sew a crooked seam. So I said heigh-ho for the rocks and the off-shore wind. But I thought I'd give you a call in passing and bring you up the last magazine."

Aunt Nan reached out for it greedily.

"Is the story finished, Lois?"

"Yes—and you were right. She didn't forgive him. It spoiled the story for me."

"I knew she wouldn't," said Aunt Nan triumphantly. "That's what has made the story seem so real to me all along. That girl was so human—one kind of human, of course. There are other kinds. Now, you'd have forgiven him."

Lois smiled introspectively.

"Yes, I think so. If it had been a matter of principle I don't suppose I could. But it dealt only with emotions juggled by fate and I could—yes, I could have forgiven him if I had loved him as she pretended to."

"She didn't pretend," said Aunt Nancy quickly. "She did love him. But it wasn't her nature to be forgiving, poor thing! Don't I know? I was just like her forty years ago. That's why I understood her so well. I knew she wouldn't forgive him. I wouldn't have then—I couldn't. I could and would now but it's took me sixty years to learn how. That's where you have the advantage of me, Lois. You begin where I leave off. It doesn't seem quite fair, does it? It cost me something years ago. But it can't all go for nothing. Do you know—" Aunt Nan dropped her knitting and leaned back against the birch with her eyes on the western sky—"I think that's about the best argument for immortality I know of—leaving out the Bible, of course, for it's no use hurling the Bible at folks who say they don't believe in it, like old Luke Bowes at the Cove. I've read somewhere that nothing is ever wasted. You understand what I mean, I guess—you're up in them scientific things—I ain't. Now, take a woman like me who starts out in life with a good strong tang of temper and a lot of intolerance and any amount of self-will and power of keeping grudges, not to mention a heap of other faults. Well, she lives seventy or eighty years maybe, and it takes her all that

time to learn how to control her temper and be forgiving and tolerant. Then she dies. If there ain't any future life all that knowledge and self-control that took so long to gain goes for nothing—is clean wasted as you might say. Now, that ain't nature's way. There's another life where it will be all made use of. I don't mean to talk you to death, Lois. I'm going to stop now and let you have a chance."

"I love to hear you, Aunt Nan," assured Lois. "There is nobody down in the valley like you. I'd feel like a little fool if I talked to any of them about the things I discuss with you."

"I know," said Aunt Nan comfortably. "You and I always did understand each other, Lois, from the very first time that your mother brought you up here to see me. You were a mite of a child, with such big, serious eyes and long, nutty brown curls, and a habit of saying all of a sudden such queer, deep-down sort of things. Your mother was real worried about you. She thought you was odd. But I guess I always understood you. You always felt real comfortable with me, didn't you? And you've been in my heart ever since you held up your face to be kissed, out there in the garden, and told me you knew you were a very naughty girl but you never could do wrong in a garden because the flowers were the eyes of angels watching you."

Lois laughed.

"I've a bit of the same old feeling still when I walk in a garden. Let us go and see yours, Aunt Nan. Your asters must be out now. Mine got all rusted."

"You're going to stay here and have tea with me Lois. Don't say you ain't, now."

"The rocks and the off-shore wind," began Lois, with her twinkle and her dimple, but Aunt Nan interrupted her.

"The rocks will keep and other winds will blow. You must stay, Lois. I'm all alone. The second Mark went to the back lands stumping after dinner. Took a snack with him and said he'd be too busy to come home to tea. So you stay—and I'll give you some fruit cake."

Aunt Nan had a whimsical way of referring to her only son as the second Mark. Her husband, who had died thirty years before, was the first Mark.

"How is Mark now?" asked Lois as they walked up the slope towards the garden.

"None too well, though he won't give in that he isn't as perk as usual—manlike. He mopes a bit when he thinks I'm not watching. I'll warrant you he is lying on his back among the ferns more'n half the time in them back lands today instead of stumping. I told him he wasn't fit to do stumping yet awhile. But he's the first Mark over again—go he would with a whistle. That grippe pulls a body down terrible. But I've got Mark coaxed up to take a little trip next week and I'm in hopes it'll set him

up in good shape again. He's going to Queenslea tomorrow for Exhibition week and longer if he'll listen to me—but he won't. Such a boy for home as he is! And he is such a dear, good boy, Lois. I've never had a mite of worry over him since he was born. We've just been real chums, he and I, as he says himself. Of course, I know it can't go on forever so. Mark will marry some day and then I'll have to share him with his wife. But I'll be willing and glad to, for I know Mark won't choose unworthily and whoever he brings to the hill will get a whole-hearted welcome from me."

Lois made no reply but her face flushed a little. Aunt Nan looked at her shrewdly out of the corner of her eye and was not displeased at what she saw. The sweet old soul had her own harmless wiles and she had for some time been on the look-out for a chance of indirectly assuring Lois that when Mark brought her to the hill farm she would welcome her even more warmly as daughter-in-law than as friend.

"I'd have given a good deal once upon a time for the first Mark's mother to have intimated as much to me," she thought. "Lois knows what store I've always set by the second Mark and she might feel a bit anxious as to how I'd take his making-up to her—as he is doing, plain as the nose on your face. Now she knows, I guess, and everything is real nice and comfortable."

Aunt Nan's garden had a local fame in Rutherglen. It was on the southern slope, a pool of sunshine on fine days and the haunt of mingled fragrance and cool shadows in dull hours, hedged in east and west by the apple and cherry orchards, and flowers bloomed there from the waking April days to mid-November. Aunt Nan "had a way with flowers," the Rutherglen people said. Just at this time her heart was wrapped up in her asters, a broad scarf of which ran across the garden from the clumps of tiger-lilies at the gate to the old stone bench under the lilac bushes at the further end. They justified her pride and Lois bent over them, her face alight with rapture.

"This aster bed is a springtime poem that sang itself in your heart last May and is now taking outward shape like this," she said to Aunt Nan.

"You always say the right thing, Lois. That thought was in my mind but I never could have put it into words so well."

After a moment's silence Aunt Nan burst out again anxiously.

"Lois, are you altogether satisfied with your life here in Rutherglen? It's narrow, I s'pose—and you are so clever. It seems to me as if you must feel at times as if you wanted to get away to a wider world where you'd have more chance. Don't you get tired teaching school day after day? Don't you get discontented at times?"

"No," said Lois thoughtfully, "at least, not now. Life here isn't narrow, Aunt Nan.

We make our own lives, don't you think, wherever we are? They are broad or narrow according to what we put into them, not to what we get out. Life seems to me very rich and full right here in Rutherglen. And I am content, Aunt Nan, oh, richly content."

Aunt Nan smiled happily. She knew that Lois had had more restless ambitions once. She also thought she knew, deep down in her wise old soul, what had tranquillized the girl's nature.

"Yes," she repeated softly, more to herself than Lois, "life is rich and full here—everywhere—if we only learn how to open our hearts to its richness and fullness. Some shut their hearts against it, not knowing, and reach out after things that are far away. I used to—once. But this is one of the things I've learned. It's taken me a good while, as I've said, but some don't ever learn it."

They roamed about the little sun-flooded domain for some time, talking of the flowers and of the harmless gossip of the valley in which Aunt Nan always took an eager interest. When tea-time came Aunt Nan went in to get it while Lois sat on the broad white stone, flanked by hollyhock beds, that served as a front doorstep to the big farmhouse and looked with dreamy eyes out over the fir valley and the farmland slopes. The wind was blowing less strongly and the afternoon was steeped in color and languor.

The air was athrill with the pipings of myriad crickets, glad little pensioners of the summer hills. And through all the soft mingled notes and the purring of the winds in the tree tops came the insistent, murmurous croon of the Atlantic where it lapped below the north-eastern fields with their fringes of ragged firs.

"How beautiful the world is," said the girl half aloud. "And how beautiful life is! It seems like a cup of glory held to my lips. But there must be some bitterness in it. This can't last forever. I wonder when mine will come—how soon I shall taste it. Oh," she shivered a little—"there is sorrow in an afternoon like this, perfect as it is. It is too perfect. We know it can't last. It has the pain of finality."

"Lois, come to tea," called Aunt Nan blithely.

Lois' passing shadow vanished as she ran lightly in. Aunt Nan had brought out the promised fruit cake and many other delicacies but the table was spread, after their homely fashion, in the kitchen, a big, bright room whose eastern and western windows caught all the sunshine and hill winds of the summer. The window by which the table stood looked out on the birch grove which now, in the westering sun, was a tremulous splendor with a sea of undergrowth wavered into golden-green billows by the passing zephyr breaths that came and went among the trees.

While they ate and chatted Aunt Nan coaxed Lois to come and stay with her

while the second Mark was away and Lois finally consented, pretending to be bribed thereto by the promise of a whole fruit cake and unlimited cherry preserves.

“Won’t we have a time, though?” said Aunt Nan as jubilantly as a girl. “We’ll talk and read—and talk—and make taffy! Your being here will give me a good excuse to be as silly and frivolous as I want to be and don’t dare to be mostly because an old woman of sixty is expected to be dignified and sensible. When you get to be sixty, Lois, you’ll know how it is.”

A faint shadow passed over the girl’s laughing face.

“Oh, Aunt Nan,” she said slowly, “it awes me to look forward so far, think think, if I live to be sixty how much I must have learned and felt—and suffered—by then!”

Aunt Nan patted her shoulder.

“Don’t think of that, my dear. Think of how much you’ll have enjoyed and won out of the years behind you by then. The time seems very short to me looking back. But at your age it used to oppress me when I thought of it just as it did you this minute. I believe that young folks are often really ever so much more serious and thoughtful than old people, for all it’s generally supposed to be the other way. We old folks don’t need to think much. We’ve lived our lives for good or ill and we’re free—but you young folks, well, I don’t wonder that you feel sober by spells. There, I’ve preached enough. Give the cat the rest of the cream. He looks as if that was the highest good in life to him at present.”

CHAPTER II

After tea Lois suggested that it was time for her to go home but Aunt Nan had a plan of her own. "It's early yet," she said. "Would you think it too much trouble to take a walk to the back lands and give the second Mark a message for me? It's real important and I clean forgot to tell him when he left. I want him to bring me some crottle. I must dye those mat rags of mine tomorrow and there's not a scrap in the house. Of course," she added diplomatically, detecting the hint of reluctance in the girl's eyes, "if it is too much bother I can go myself."

"Oh, no," said Lois quickly, "I'll go for you of course. I will enjoy the walk."

"Take the round basket and tell him to bring it full. Just keep an eye on him and see that he gets it good. You needn't hurry. Them back lands must be lovely today. I'd like to have gone myself only I feel a bit tired."

Without the excuse of the errand Lois would not have gone, as subtle Aunt Nan very well knew when she cast about for some pretext and hit upon the crottle. She watched the girl out of sight with a smile of satisfaction on her face.

"There—I've done 'em both a good turn. And I will dye those rags tomorrow, though there isn't any rush, just to save my conscience. Mark needs a bit of help now and then for Lois doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve and she's getting shy and distant with him—a very good sign but he mayn't have gumption enough to know it. How I do love that girl! It's been the wish of my heart for years and years to see her Mark's wife—ever since I knew her. I guess, though I didn't dare to really expect it until late years. There might so many things have happened to prevent it. It seems too good to be true. When you've set your heart on a thing for years it always does seem kind of impossible that it should really come to pass. See here, Aunt Nan! You've got to break yourself right away of this ridiculous habit of thinking out loud. There's a hired boy coming next week and if you don't want your secrets published to the four winds of heaven and Rutherglen you must learn to keep 'em from the birds of the air, that's all."

In spite of her touch of embarrassment Lois was unfeignedly glad that Aunt Nan had sent her to Mark. She did not mind owning to herself that she wanted to see him, for she was singularly free from even the harmless self-deception that most girls practise. Moreover, the walk to the back lands was a beautiful one and enjoyable at any time, even if the one man out of all the world were not waiting at the end of it.

Lois knew every step of it for in old school days she and Mark had traversed it times out of mind. They had been devoted "chums," as they had been proud to boast, with an open, whole-hearted comradeship that found and took all that was

best in those glad young days.

“What a tomboy I was!” thought Lois with a smile. “And what good times we did have! Every nook and cranny of this walk seems filled with the memory of those frolics.”

There was the maple lane first, leading from the yard to the pasture lands, where they had always found the earliest violets, lurking dimly-sweet in the sunned corners of the snake fence that ran along under the trees. At its further end was the big birch by the gate where Mark had once cut their names. They were plainly visible yet, although grown unshapely and ragged, and Lois stooped to touch them caressingly.

“Mark cut them as high as he could reach and I had to stand on tiptoe to touch them then,” she murmured with a smile.

Beyond the lane a long, emerald reach of three fields sloped up to the girdle of woods, all of the same size and shape and now a luxuriant sweet of clover aftermath. Straight through the middle of them ran a road and down this road Lois and Mark had once been wont to run frantic races when they came out of the woods on the crest of the slope.

“Who’ll get to the big birch first?” Mark would say. And then they would hurl themselves down the path. Lois with her brown curls streaming in the wind and Mark with his fists clenched and his brow knotted into a frown as he ran. The honors fell evenly between them for Lois was a good runner and often as not flung herself against the big birch first. She thought of those glorious runs as she walked sedately up the slope and remembered that she had won the last race they had ever had together down the “three fields.”

“It was just such a day as today and the sun was shining fan-like in just the same fashion down on the harbor. I remember noticing it as I ran.”

She put up her hand and felt a tiny scar, high on her forehead and concealed by a curl of her chestnut hair. When she had reached the birch a good three yards ahead of Mark she had tripped over one of its roots and fallen, striking her head on a stone. A bad cut was the result and she could yet see Mark’s pale face and lips as he helped her home down the maple lane, with the blood running into her eyes and blinding her. The cut had not proved serious and had soon healed but Mark could never be persuaded to race her down the “three fields” again.

On the crest of the slope the path broadened out into a wood-road, striking right into the heart of the forest. She and Mark had had their playhouse just inside the gate, in the cool gloom of a thick fir coppice. She turned aside to visit it now, as she always did when she went to the back lands. A charm unnameable brooded about the old place for her, and she gave herself up to it for a time as she sat on the big

white boulder that had once served them as a table. It was long since they had outgrown their play-place, but traces of their occupancy were still plainly visible. The little circle of trees had trim, scarred trunks where Mark had hacked off their lower boughs with his hatchet. Rotting boards that had served for shelves and seats were scattered around and here and there the sunlight glinted on a fragment of glass or china which had once adorned Lois' housewifely "cupboard." She stooped and dislodged one from the porous mould of the forest floor and smiled as she recognized one of the rarest treasures of their old bric-a-brac—a bit broken from the edge of one of Aunt Nan's dinner plates, and called the "Ivy Piece" because it was adorned with a spray of yellow and red ivy. They had been intensely proud of it and it had shared the place of honor on their parlor shelf with a broken glass bangle from an old vase which possessed the power of refracting wonderful rainbow tints. The "fairy glass" they had called it, not understanding or knowing anything about prisms. Lois looked around for it but could not find it.

"Perhaps the fairies have carried it back to fairyland again," she said with a smile.

They had believed so wholeheartedly in fairies and kobolds and wood elves. At first when they set up their housekeeping among the firs Lois had been very frightened of the long dim road that wound away into the eerily-whispering woods. She would never go far along it, preferring to keep to the sunny fields where no wood-elves could lurk. Mark had always assured her that the wood-elves were kindly disposed folk and would not harm them but Lois doubted. They might be; but you couldn't be sure of it. She remembered the day she had first conquered her fears and allowed Mark to lead her through the road with her timid little heart beating to her finger-tips in his sturdy clasp. They saw no wood-elves and how glad she had been when they came out into the back lands that seemed like an enchanted world of sunshine and dreams, shut round by the girdling beeches. The return trip had not been half so bad and Lois had never been afraid of the forest again. Soon she and Mark had explored every cranny of it. They had thought it a vast place although it was really only a few acres in extent.

One day their frolics and "make-believes" came suddenly to an end. A childless aunt of Lois' had come to Rutherglen for a visit. When she left she took the girl with her to her home in a small college town far enough away to shut her out from the Rutherglen life completely. She had not even seen Mark to say good-bye to him for he had been away from home when she had gone up to the hill farm to tell him the news of her sudden departure. She remembered the ache in her heart and the choking in her throat as she went down the hill again. To go away without seeing Mark had

seemed to her like a tragedy. It was the first time the world's pain had touched her.

In the six years that followed Mark had been almost forgotten. They had never met, for the only time Lois had revisited Rutherglen Mark had been away at college. It was not until they were man and woman grown that she came home to stay and she had met her old playmate again.

The meeting was a surprise and a disappointment to both. Each had been unconsciously expecting to find the unchanged comrade of years ago. Lois had looked for a lanky, sunburned lad and found a stalwart, broad-shouldered six feet of young manhood. Mark had looked for a demure little maid and found a gracious young woman who seemed as a stranger to him. It was long before the chill of change wore off. They could laugh at it now, having found each other again in a comradeship that added the charm of the past to the rich fullness of the present and the promise of the future. But during that first year of her return, when Lois was teaching in the valley school and Mark was fitting himself back into the farm life after his two years at the Queenslea Academy, there had been between them a strangerhood that was almost resentful.

Lois knew that Mark was working in the triangle between the woods and the newly cleared oat field and she went down that way under the caressing shadows of the beeches to surprise him. She saw him before he saw her for he was lying lazily on his back in a little grassy hollow with his hands clasped under his head and his eyes fixed on the sky. She permitted herself the treat of looking at him for a space with her heart in her eyes and her breath half gone from her in the sweetness of the moment. Then her expression changed to mischief and she threw at him the fir cone that lay ready to her hand in an angle of the fence. Her aim was good and the missile struck him squarely on the forehead. He was on his feet in an instant, looking about him. When he caught sight of her his face lightened and he came quickly over the hillocks and hollows of fern that lay between them.

Lois hastened to lift her basket and explain her errand.

"Aunt Nan wants crottle, sir. And she wants it good, you'll please to remember. She sent me to tell you so—you, the poor, hard-working boy who was too busy to come home to tea."

Mark laughed and tossed his tumbled black hair from his forehead.

"Really, I haven't been idle all the afternoon, Lois. But a man wasn't meant to work on a day like this. It harks back to Eden—to the untroubled days before the Fall. So I coiled myself up among the ferns to day-dream a bit."

"You don't feel very well yet I'm afraid," said Lois anxiously.

Mark smiled in a tolerant fashion.

“That’s mother’s story. How you women do like to coddle folks! Grippe pulls a fellow down a bit I suppose—but I’m all right. Look at this muscle—and this—no invalid’s arm that, madam! Has mother been telling you that she’s badgered me into going to Queenslea for a week? I don’t want to go—don’t need to go—but these mothers must be humored. I’m glad you came back for the crottle. It just needed you to round out the day.”

His pleasure in her coming was frank and open—possibly a little too frank and open. Lois, with her steady gift of seeing things as they are, recognized this. She knew quite well that as yet Mark’s feeling for her did not possess the depth and intensity of hers for him. But she hoped that in time it would and she calmly acknowledged this hope to herself, with no false shame over it. For the rest, she hid her love from all eyes but her own and waited in her womanly armor for the man she loved to find it out when his own led him to seek it.

Mark clove the fibres of a tough old beech stump with his axe and left it there while he took the basket and set off in search of the lichens Aunt Nan required. By the time they found enough of them the sun was setting and all the woods were brimmed with fleeting ruby splendor. They had come in their wanderings to the Fairies’ Pool, as they had named it in the good old days when a belief in fairies was a vital article in their creed. It was a mysterious saucer of water rimmed around with ferns and shadowed with slender young birches; it was fed by no visible spring and yet never dried up.

“Do you remember the time we discovered this?” asked Mark. “Talk about oceans—surprise—wonder—delight—‘silent upon a peak in Darien!’ I shall never forget your eyes, Lois, when we pushed through that birch coppice there and came so suddenly upon it.”

“I felt all the rapture of a great discoverer,” said Lois, bending down to dabble her fingers in the unruffled water. “Do you remember the day we quarrelled and you pushed me right into the pool?”

“And then fished you out in agonies of remorse? How wet you were, Lois! and how angry! So angry that you would not speak to me although you had to let me help you up on the fence out there in the sun to dry.”

“Oh, I shall never forget it,” cried Lois with a ringing peal of laughter. “I can see myself—a forlorn, dripping mite on that great high fence, trying to be dignified and feeling so furious and drabbled. And you—sprawled out in the grass below me, looking up imploringly and trying your best to appease me. You even offered to loan me your jack-knife for a whole day if I would ‘speak’.”

“And you wouldn’t. And when you did get a little dry you wouldn’t let me help

you down but slid off yourself and stalked home with that brown head of yours in the air, myself following behind like a whipped dog.”

“And I wouldn’t stop at your place, although Aunt Nan came out to us with slices of bread and plum jam, but I went straight home to the valley where I cried and would not be comforted because I hadn’t forgiven you. Your face, as you stood peering after me from the fir lane when I had forbidden you to follow me any further, haunted me tragically all night.”

“And next morning I was down in the valley before you were up, waiting for you at your gate, with the jack-knife and a brand-new, nicely peeled willow switch and a blown crow’s egg you had always coveted. And when you came out—”

“You poked all your treasures over the gate—”

“And the egg shell fell down and was broken—”

“And I said, ‘There now, clumsy,’—”

“And heaven opened before me—and I kissed you through the bars of the gate, didn’t I?”

There was a teasing twinkle in Mark’s dark blue eyes. Lois flushed rosily and turned from the pool.

“We were delightful little idiots, Mark. Come, it is time to be going back. It will soon be dark.”

They wandered homeward through the lanes, swinging the basket between them. At the kitchen door they found Aunt Nan, straining her eyes in the fading light over the last pages of the magazine story. Her cheeks were flushed with the excitement of it.

She wanted Lois to come in but the latter refused. She must go home, she said, and Mark insisted on going with her although she protested. “I’m too big to be turned back at the fir lane now,” he said masterfully. “Come along, Lois. No airs!”

He tucked her hand in his arm and marched her off, Aunt Nan looking after them with an inward delight that almost seemed to irradiate her physically in the gloom. They walked slowly to make the most of the beautiful evening.

At the gate of the Wilbur homestead in the valley they lingered to watch the moon rise over the shore meadows. Mrs. Wilbur, a vulgar, good-natured soul, so unlike Lois as to make the relationship between them seem like a huge joke on Nature’s part, watched them from the sitting room window, turning up a corner of the white blind with a stealthy hand. In her own way she was as anxious for the match as Aunt Nan herself and also took her own ways of furthering it—ways that sometimes seemed in a fair way to defeat their object for Lois, burning with stifled shame over her mother’s effusiveness, always retreated further into herself on such

occasions and opposed to Mark's frank advances a seemingly impassable wall of reserve and aloofness. Something of this had at last filtered into Mrs. Wilbur's obtuse brain and she forebore to go to the door and call Lois to bring Mark in as she would have dearly liked to do.

The two at the gate were not talking in any lover-like fashion as she supposed and hoped. In truth, they were talking but little in any fashion, each being content to linger speechless in the glamor of the night. Once a girl went loiteringly by, half pausing at the gate as if ready to join them with any encouragement thereto. Mark quickly interposed himself between her and Lois, giving her only the briefest of greetings, and after a moment's hesitation the girl tossed her head and walked on.

Lois looked after her pityingly even while she glowed with her pleasure in his care of herself. She knew why he did not wish her to talk with Alicia Craig. His standard of womanly purity was so high that even a shadow on a girl's fair fame barred her in his estimation from his womankind. Sometimes Lois thought Mark almost too severe in his opinions and the unflinching way he carried them out.

"Don't you think you were a little hard on Alicia, Mark?" she asked gently.

"No," he said bluntly. "She's got herself talked about—and I won't have her talking to you, Lois. Perhaps I am hard but I can't help it. I don't want you even to speak to any woman whose whole life isn't as clear as day. She is a blot on womanhood. Mother has grained that into me from babyhood. There is nothing on earth I reverence more than a good woman—nothing I despise more than a bad one!"

After a brief silence Lois said she must go in and passed through the gate. Across it she held her hand to Mark.

"Good-night, Mark. I hope you'll have a pleasant visit in Queenslea."

"I'm glad you're going to stay with the mother while I'm away," he said, taking her hand. "You'll be such company for her and the dear woman will be delighted to have somebody to discuss all her deep thoughts with. She's often lonesome, I think."

Lois lay awake late that night thinking of many things and tasting her happiness. Mark, too, kept his vigil on the hill, thinking of Lois, her strong, sweet womanliness and her satisfying comradeship. He wondered if she cared for him. He thought not, being man-blind, but he resolved that he would make her care in time. He fell asleep at last with the thought of her hovering over him like a benediction.

In the morning he went to Queenslea.

CHAPTER III

Queenslea is a quaint old town harking back to early colonial days and wrapped in its ancient atmosphere as some fine old dame in garments fashioned like those of her youth. Here and there it sprouts out into modernity but at its heart it is still unspoiled and is full of curious relics and girt about with various legends of the past. Once it was a mere frontier station on the fringe of the wilderness and those were the days when Indians made life interesting for the settlers. Then it grew to be a bone of contention between British and French, being occupied now by the one and now by the other, emerging from each occupation with some fresh scar of battling nations branded on it.

It has in its park a martello tower, autographed all over by tourists; a dismantled old French fort on the hills beyond the town and several antiquated cannon in its public square. It has other historic spots also, which may be hunted out by the curious, and none is so quaint and delightful as the old St. Paul's cemetery at the very core of the town, with streets of fashionable residences on two sides, the courthouse on the third and the opera house on the fourth. Every citizen of Queenslea feels a thrill of possessive pride in the old cemetery for if he is of any pretensions at all he has an ancestor buried there with a queer, crooked brown slab at his head, or else sprawled protectively over the grave, on which all the main facts of his history are recorded. The graveyard is very full and very bowery for it is surrounded and intersected by rows of willows and chestnuts beneath which the old sleepers must lie very dreamlessly, forever crooned to by the winds and leaves over them.

Mark knew Queenslea better than most of those who lived in it for he had explored it very thoroughly in the two years he had spent at its academy. He was well acquainted among its people and might reasonably expect a pleasant social time during his visit when his old friends should have found out that he was in town.

He put up at a quiet hotel a block away from the cemetery and spent the first day strolling about the quaint streets of the "old town." At night he was rather at a loss what to do with himself; then, catching sight of a huge poster on the building opposite his hotel, he decided that he would go to the opera house. A traveling company was filling a three weeks' engagement in Queenslea. It was only a third rate one but Mark did not know this, being very unsophisticated in regard to theatrical affairs. He had never seen a play or opera in his life, Queenslea not having possessed an opera house in his time.

He bought his ticket and went to his seat in the parquet, where he amused

himself watching the house through the opera glasses he had borrowed from an acquaintance at the hotel.

The house was full for it was the first night the new company had played. There was a fair sprinkling of women in evening dress, with jewels glittering on their white necks and fluffy swans-downs slipping from their gleaming shoulders, and Mark, who was a beauty worshipper like his mother, albeit quite unconscious of it, feasted his eyes on their loveliness.

There was a stir and rustle all over the building, an atmosphere of mingled perfumes, a murmur of voices and low laughter. Once he thought of Lois Wilbur but the idea of her had nothing in common with the scene around him and he put it away from him with an undefined feeling of preserving something sacred from contamination.

The curtain went up and the stage was filled with chorus girls. Mark did not fancy their appearance greatly—he thought them loud and tawdry and even his untrained eye could see that their make-up was atrocious. But he liked their singing and dancing which was really very good for such a company. Afterwards, when Beatrice Lyall came on, he forgot about them and about everybody else.

She came forward to the footlights amid rounds of applause for she had been in Queenslea before and was popular with theatre-goers, more, it might be, for her childish prettiness and coquettish charm of manner than for her talent—though she acted respectably and sang well.

Mark Barry caught his breath at sight of her. Something swept into his heart and brain that changed life for him in the twinkling of an eye although at the time he was conscious of nothing save a wild, sweet inrush of undreamed-of emotion and deeps that stirred at the sight of Beatrice Lyall's face as they had stirred at nothing in life before. She looked so beautiful, so innocent, so appealing. Her lovely face was as tender-lipped and expressive as a child's, her eyes were dark and soft—and, it might be added, very well managed, although Mark knew nothing of that.

He saw and heard no more of the opera than her part. The ballet sang and danced and kicked, the comedian sprinkled jokes and local hits lavishly, the handsome tenor warbled and rolled his eyes, all in vain as far as Mark Barry was concerned. To him there was only one person on the stage—the girl with the child-face and the great, laughter-brimmed eyes.

Newspaper critics went to their offices after the opera and wrote that Beatrice Lyall was in excellent form that night. This meant that her part in the opera suited her and that she was feeling in a mood to do it justice. She had some talent, although nothing of genius, and a personality that went far to enhance it. She sang and

sparkled through the four acts with an enchanting vein of sadness underlying every look and gesture and her audience cheered her to the echo. Mark alone sat silent and tense. When the curtain fell on the last act he breathed heavily once or twice, like a man newly aroused from sleep, and went out with unseeing eyes staring over the heads of the crowd. At the door the man who had loaned him the opera glass joined him.

“What did you think of Lyall?” he asked carelessly as they went down the street. “Clever little monkey, isn’t she? She’s the salvation of that company—they would play to empty seats without her. She always takes well in Queenslea. She’s worth looking at and her voice will do.”

Mark flinched. This man’s light comment was sacrilege. It was as if clay reviled divinity. He could not sleep that night but tossed restlessly. Once he thought of Lois Wilbur. She seemed to him now as a tale that is told. He could not believe that it was so brief a space of time since he had stood in the Rutherglen moonlight with her and wondered if she cared for him. He believed now that she did not and he was glad.

The next day he was restless and unhappy. He did not care to hunt out old friends. His one wish was to kill time in some speedy way until night came, when he might expect to see her again. In the afternoon he went to the old St. Paul graveyard. It had been his favorite haunt in his academy years when a passion for solitude came over him and he went to it now because he thought he would be alone there and in its green unworldliness he might think and dream of her undisturbed.

On entering it he was vexed to see a woman sitting on a slab at the further end; but the great, solemn place was big enough for both and he turned away to a remote corner, where a seventeen year old middy, who was wounded to the death in a sea-fight over a hundred years ago, was buried. There was no one else in the graveyard, and so thick were the willows around its railing that even the murmur of the streets beyond was dulled. He could think of her here—could give himself up to dreaming about her.

By the middy’s lichened slab he found a woman’s chatelaine purse—a small dainty affair of steel beads, lying amid the long grasses. There was nothing in it save some small coins and a broken pearl pin. As he searched it for some mark of ownership he became aware that the woman at the other end of the cemetery was walking among the graves, looking about her searchingly. No doubt this pretty trifle was hers and she had just discovered its loss. He went quickly down the long leafy arcade towards her. At the sound of his coming she turned and looked up expectantly.

He stood before her, mute and worshipful, forgetting all else in his delight and

surprise. It was she, his sweet lady—yet not the Beatrice Lyall of the footlights, not the flushed, radiant creature, half spirit, half flame, he had last seen her. This girl was small and slender, like a wood flower, in her soft, trailing gray dress. Beneath the shadow of her large hat her face was white and spiritual. The eyes he had thought dark were limpid gray, with dilating, startled pupils. The soft rings of her golden hair clung about her face and her mouth was curved as sweetly as a baby's, with a wistful droop at its corners. How beautiful and tired she looked, with pathetic, purple shadows under those lovely, wide-open eyes!

It did not seem strange that he should meet her here in this fashion—it would only have seemed strange now if they had not met. The merest moment elapsed before she spoke, yet to Mark it seemed as if he had lived through a lifetime of emotion in that space.

“Oh!” she exclaimed in a bell-like voice, “you have found my purse, I am so glad. I feared that I had lost it.”

She held out her hand and Mark gave it to her in silence. He had never been awkward or abashed in a woman's presence before. Now he could not find a word to say. His face, however, had he but known it, was expressive enough to atone for lack of words. Beatrice Lyall dropped her eyes to hide the amused comprehension in them. She knew quite well what that blush and hesitation meant—she had seen that same look of admiration on many men's faces before. But there was something else in Mark's to which she was not accustomed—reverence mingled with the passion of his eyes as if he looked at something holy, and a tenderness of which she knew little spoke to her from his rapt gaze.

“This is a lovely old spot, is it not?” she said as she fastened the purse to her belt. “I come here every afternoon when there is no matinee. It rests me.”

“I saw you at the Opera house, last night,” said Mark, irrelevantly.

She smiled openly this time. He was really delightful, this handsome boy to whom concealment seemed a thing impossible and alien. Her smile was elfin and bewitching. In Mark's eyes it humanized her. She was now a girl to be wooed and won as other girls.

“Yes?” she said questioningly. “Oh no, I don't think you did. You saw the Beatrice Lyall of the footlights. I am not she—I am quite different. Oh, I am not the same person at all. I have two existences, you see. This is the one I like best.”

No doubt she meant it at the moment, or thought she did. And, moreover, she had an instinct for saying the right thing to the right person. The truth was that, before Mark's appearance, she had been feeling bored and had just made up her mind to go when she missed her purse. Now she thought it might be worth while to linger a

little.

“If you belong to Queenslea you must know this old graveyard well,” she went on. “I wish you would tell me about it. There must be some interesting graves here—explain them to me—tell me their stories. Come!”

She made a pretty gesture, half invitation, half command, and moved away over the grasses. Mark followed, wondering if his good fortune could be real.

“I’m not a Queenslea man,” he said “but I’ve been here often and I know the place pretty well. I have always loved it. I am glad you like it, too.”

Together they rambled up and down the leafy arcades, pausing frequently to look at some especially notable monument. Beatrice read the epitaphs aloud in her silver voice and sometimes they laughed softly over a quaint phrase or expression. She liked the soldiers’ graves best, she said, and she knelt by the little midddy’s grave and touched her lips to the mossy stone. But by the grave of a lad scarce out of boyhood, who had fallen in a duel of three generations ago, fought on the square of ground at the north side of the cemetery, over the smiles of a fair lady of old Queenslea, she dropped the red rose from her belt.

“For love’s sweet sake,” she quoted softly. “He died for love, you know so I’ll give him my red, red rose.”

When she grew tired they sat down on a freestone slab, beneath which an aforetime pompous dignitary of state slept humbly. She told Mark much about herself, guessing that that was what he most wanted to hear. She hated the stage, she said. The life was hard and sometimes she was so tired. Her time with the company she was now in expired with the Queenslea engagement and she did not intend to remain longer with them.

“I don’t like them,” she said, patting the tips of her graygloved fingers together with the gesture he was to learn was a favorite one with her.

“And they don’t like me, either. Of course the ‘star’ is not often loved. One has to pay a penalty for the privilege of twinkling, you see. No, I shall try for another company. There is nothing else for me to do. But it is very hard. There is no glamor on the wrong side of the footlights.”

When they left the graveyard she bade Mark good-bye at the gate.

“But—but—you are going to let me see you again?” he asked imploringly.

She looked at him with an expression he thought adorable. It was quizzical and sweet and provoking. She patted her finger tips together.

“Why, anyone can see me who wishes,” she said with laughter threading her tones. “You must have your ticket, of course. They won’t let you in without.”

“You know I don’t mean that,” he said, “and besides didn’t you tell me back

there that the Beatrice Lyall of the footlights wasn't you. It is you I want to see."

She laughed again. So he could be apt enough, too, this broad-shouldered young fellow, when he found his tongue. She liked him. She threw a relenting glance back into the green demesnes behind them.

"I am in St. Paul every day at this hour," she said. "It is a large place—and I don't suppose they would let me lock the gates on other people even if I wanted to. And—if they did—you could scramble over the railing, I think."

She was gone then and Mark, his face alight, went back to the cemetery and to the grave with the red rose. He would not have disturbed it for worlds, but he knelt down and kissed it and one full red petal that had fallen from its over-ripe heart he carried away with him, fast shut in his hand like a precious treasure. He went to a florist and ordered yellow roses to be sent to Miss Lyall at her hotel. She had told him she loved yellow roses. She wore them on the stage that night and Mark felt that his day's cup of happiness was full.

After that they met every afternoon in old St. Paul's. Mark lived only for those hours. His friends in Queenslea saw little of him. Every meeting deepened his passionate love for her.

She was never in the same mood twice. One day she would be a very sprite of mischief, mocking and elusive, who laughed at him until his heart ached for love of her. Another day would find her as frank and gay as a child, bubbling over with careless enjoyment and pleased outspokenly with everything around her. Again, she would be wistful and quiet, given over to dreamy words and ways and pathetic little looks—a mood in keeping with the solitude of their trysting place. Only at such times did Mark talk to her of Rutherglen and his mother.

One day she seemed unusually quiet and shadowy, as they sat side by side on the old dignitary's tombstone. Her face was very white and the violet shadows under her eyes were deeper than usual. She was so tired, she said, with a little break in her voice. Some times it seemed to her that she would never get rested again.

"I envy the sleepers in this silent land," she said wistfully. "I would like to lie down here and sleep forever. Sometimes I am afraid I shall break down altogether. And if I do—" she paused and shivered a little.

"The life you live is too hard for you," said Mark, hotly. "You are not fitted for it—you are an utter alien to it. You should be queen in a home of your own—safely shut up in the heart of some man who would love and cherish you to the end of life."

Beatrice smiled sadly.

"There is no such man," she said, "at least—in my profession we don't meet such men."

“There is one,” said Mark steadily. He put his arm about her reverently. “One, Beatrice, who loves you with all his heart and soul. Will you come to me, dearest, I’m not worthy of you I know, but if love can make up—oh, let me take you away forever from this false life of yours—I can make you happy if you will come, dear.”

She let him draw her head down on his shoulder. She had been waiting to hear the words he had just spoken. Perhaps she loved him somewhat, too—as much as her tired, shop-worn little heart could love. She turned her flower-like face up to him.

“Kiss me, dear,” she murmured softly.

To Mark, as his lips met hers, all heaven seemed opened. She was his, his own forever—his pure, sweet lady of the sorrowful eyes—eyes that it must henceforth be his dear privilege to brim with the light of happiness. His voice was a mere husky whisper as he said:

“Beatrice, Beatrice, I thank God for you!”

CHAPTER IV

To Aunt Nan and Lois the fortnight of Mark's absence had slipped by pleasantly. They were glad that he was staying so long, they told each other with harmless hypocrisy. Aunt Nan thought he might have written, but she supposed he was rollicking about Queenslea with his old friends, and didn't realize how the days were passing. For the rest, she and Lois gave themselves over to having a good time and were like two school children together. In the morning Lois went down to the valley to her school, but in the evening she came back and the two women talked and read together or sat in the garden and dreamed—the one the dreams of age, the other of youth.

Lois had a secret sense of happiness in being in Mark's home. It seemed to bring them nearer together in a sweet, inexplicable way. In every room there was something that spoke of him. She liked to loiter in the little place he called his "den"—an odd, cornery little room close under the eaves, looking out into the emerald gloom of the birch wood, where he kept his books and pictures and his souvenirs of boyhood and college life. In a cabinet of geological specimens she found the lost "fairy glass."

Afterwards she could never think of the hours she had spent there without bitterness. She knew then how they must have passed with him. There is nothing in some sorrows so terrible as their power of staining the leaves of our past. They will not leave us even our memories untainted.

When Mark came back to Rutherglen he felt as if he were returning to a life lived centuries ago. Yet he came back to it gladly for he and Beatrice had made their plans and the Rutherglen life was henceforth to be lived with her. Everything in his past seemed remote and far away for the spell of his enchantment was still strong upon him. Lois Wilbur was a memory—a woman he had known in that other life. This attitude colored his greeting of her although he was unconscious of it. Lois, with her quick intuition, felt it.

He had walked in on them unexpectedly, in the dreamy stillness of the afternoon, and she had colored over cheek and brow at the suddenness of it. He did not even notice her blush and reserve. He was absent minded and Aunt Nan rallied him on it. She said she supposed he would find them very dull and countrified after Queenslea, but he would get used to that in time. The sweet old soul was over-joyed to have him home again and fussed about him as over a petted child.

Lois went home with a heartache for which, her native sense of humor coming to her aid, she ridiculed herself. She had not expected him to catch her in his arms and

kiss her as he had his mother, had she? What was the matter then? This—too much romantic day-dreaming!

“I must be more common-sensible in future,” she said, trying to smile at herself.

In school the next morning one of her pupils who lived on the other side of the Barry hill, gave her a crumpled envelope addressed in a faltering, angular hand. It was from Aunt Nan and was written with an unfeigned disregard of capitals and punctuation. Indeed, the spelling itself was not unimpeachable. Aunt Nan was not conscious of these defects when she had written shakily on the cheap, blue-lined sheet of paper:

“Dear Lois:

i want you to come up the hill after schoole, please. you must be sure to come. something dreadful has hapened. i don't know what to do, lois.

aunt nan.

p. s. don't forget to come.”

There were some spots on the page that looked like tear blisters. The note unsettled Lois for the day. Her thoughts instantly flew to Mark. It must be something connected with him. Was he really ill? That langour before the Queenslea visit—was it the indication of some serious trouble and not the mere effect of his attack of influenza? Perhaps he had found that out in Queenslea. That would account for his abstraction of the night before.

The day seemed to her as if it would never end. Her work perplexed and worried her. When school was out at last she hurried up the hill.

When she went in Aunt Nan was sitting by the low west window of the kitchen. Her erect little body was bowed and limp, her delicate old face discolored and her eyes swollen.

“Oh, Aunt Nan, what is it?” exclaimed Lois, taking her hands. “Is—is—Mark ill?”

“No.” Aunt Nan’s voice was hoarse and gasping from her sobbing. “No, it isn’t that. I had to be the one to tell you, Lois. I couldn’t let anyone else do it. Oh Lois, Mark is going to be married—to a girl he met in Queenslea—an actress. He told me all about it last night. He—he—was dreadful hurt because I told him I’d never forgive him—or her. It’s just killed me. Oh Lois, what am I to do?”

Lois, with her chestnut head against the frame of the window on whose broad sill she had seated herself, looked out through the birches to the curve of the lane. It was less than three minutes since she had come around that curve, a happy-hearted

girl, with only a vague fear to trouble her. She wondered dimly if all this wreck and ruin and desolation of life could have come in three minutes. Her face was white to the lips, but no expression appeared on it. It was as calm as a marble mask. She lifted the spray of golden-rod she had gathered on her uphill road and tapped her chin with it as if her thoughts were far away.

Her immobility angered Aunt Nan whose nerves were wrought up to an irritable pitch by her suffering.

“You don’t seem to mind it much, Lois,” she said resentfully. “I thought you’d feel it worse than I did——after Mark going with you for nearly a year and everybody saying——”

“Aunt Nan!” Lois’ eyes flashed around to meet the older woman’s. For only a moment they looked at each other so. But Aunt Nan never, then or at any other time, said another word on this aspect of the affair to Lois. She had seen straight down into another woman’s tortured soul, sounding such depths of agony in her gaze as she realized should be sacred from such profanation.

“Oh, I’m sorry I said that, Lois,” she faltered feebly, pressing her hands together. “Don’t mind me. I’m just half crazy, that’s all. I could turn on my best friend like a savage beast. My boy has been stolen from me. Oh, I hate her, Lois, I hate her!”

“Oh, you don’t know her, yet,” said Lois, trying amid all the flood of misery that was rising in her own soul to comfort Mark’s mother. “She may be very sweet and lovable. She must be or Mark wouldn’t have—loved her.”

“I don’t care how sweet she is!” said Aunt Nan fiercely. “I told Mark so—he painted her as an angel. Lois, she’s an actress.”

“Many good and lovely women are actresses,” said Lois dully.

“Oh, I know that. I’m not so narrow and bigoted as to think that a woman can’t be good just because she acts for her living. It ain’t that. It’s just because she must be different from us—she can’t have anything in common with us, you know she can’t. What will our life here be to her after she gets tired of it? If I thought it was best for Mark I’d try to reconcile myself to it, even if it broke my heart, but it isn’t—it isn’t. Mark’ll live to be sorry for it. And he’ll bring her here—here, where I’ve dreamed of seeing—Lois, what can I do?”

She wept again bitterly, with the terrible, helpless tears of old age. Lois set her own agony resolutely under her feet, understanding that she must help Aunt Nan to drain her cup of bitterness before she might have even the rueful comfort of putting her own to her lips. All the sweet strength of her womanhood rose to her aid. She gathered Aunt Nan’s hands tenderly in her own firm grasp and said gently:

“Just what you told me you would do when Mark brought his wife home to you

—open your heart to her and welcome her as a daughter.”

“Oh Lois, when I said that I meant—I didn’t mean——”

“You meant just what you said, dear,” said Lois hurriedly. “Mark is going to bring her home now. Give her the welcome he looks to you for. It will be best, indeed it will. And everything may be much better than you expect—you may learn to love her very dearly.”

“I don’t want to love her! That’s the trouble. I suppose I am a wicked old woman. When you were here that afternoon before Mark went to Queenslea do you mind my telling you that I had lived long enough to learn how to keep my temper and be tolerant of other folks’ whimsies? Well, it has all fallen from me now, just when I most need it. I’m in a temper to my heart’s core, Lois, and I feel as bitter and resentful as I ever did in my life. Oh, I know you’re right—and I’ll have to come to it. But I can’t until the bitterness wears away a little—indeed, I can’t.”

“When is Mark to be married?” asked Lois after a silence. She could have laughed scornfully to hear herself asking the question so calmly.

Aunt Nan made a restless movement.

“I don’t know quite. This girl—Beatrice Lyall her name is—well her engagement with the company she’s in is out in a week’s time and Mark wants me to invite her here for a visit. She hasn’t got any folks of her own and she’s tired and run down, Mark says. Then, when she has got well rested they’re to be married. Oh, and to think I almost made Mark go to Queenslea! You’re not going yet, Lois?”

“I must. I have some school work to do this evening and mother may need me.”

She was afraid that Mark might come in, being unaware that he was away at the shore. Besides, she knew she must soon be alone or her pain would break bounds in spite of her pride. Perhaps Aunt Nan understood this for she made no further protest. She followed Lois to the door with a working face.

“You’ve helped me some, Lois. I’ll try to do as you say. But oh, things can never be the same again.”

She stood on the sun-hot doorstone, amid the undaunted cohorts of the hollyhocks, and watched Lois out of sight down the lane. The girl knew it and walked erectly with unflinching step.

“She’s proud,” muttered Aunt Nan. “Too proud to let on she cares, even to me. But if ever I saw a broken heart looking out of a woman’s eyes then it looked out of Lois Wilbur’s tonight. I’m glad that I told her and not someone else. It came easier from me. Her pride’ll help her through some—and she’s young. But I’m old—old—and there’s nothing left in life. Oh Mark, Mark!”

She sat down on the doorstep and wept bitterly. Mark found her there, huddled

up and spent, when he came home. His face darkened with pain, but he lifted her up very tenderly and carried her in. She put up her hand and touched his brown cheek softly.

“Mark, I—I oughtn’t to have said those things to you last night about your girl, nor about Lois, neither. You can ask Miss Lyall to visit here and I’ll try to do my part.”

Mark kissed her.

“Thank you, little mother. I felt sure you would come to see it so. You are sure to love Beatrice when you know her. As for Lois Wilbur, she never cared for me. I’ve always known that even when I was inclined to hope she might learn to in time.”

Aunt Nan’s dark eyes looked up at him through the dusk as she wondered how men could be so blind. The evening before she had wildly reproached him with trifling with Lois Wilbur—making her love him and then casting her aside. She repented this now. She felt that it was unjust to Lois and she hastened to unsay her words.

“No, Lois doesn’t care. I thought maybe she did, but I was mistaken. I’ve just been an old fool believing things because I wanted to believe them. She was here tonight and when I told her I could see she didn’t care a bit. She was as unconcerned and interested as you please.”

Aunt Nan uttered this lie calmly. It did not disturb her conscience in the least—on the contrary she exulted in it. She felt that she owed it to Lois.

Mark ought to have been glad to hear her statement. He told himself that he was but his voice was hardly cordial as he answered.

“I’m glad of that, mother. I was quite sure it couldn’t be as you feared. Lois is a grand woman and I prize her friendship very dearly, but we couldn’t fall in love with each other just because you wanted us to, you see. I shall look to Lois to be one of Beatrice’s best friends.”

“You’ll look for what you’ll never see, then,” Aunt Nan muttered under her breath as he went out.

“There’s a limit to anybody’s goodness, even Lois Wilbur’s. She’ll never like your wife and she won’t pretend to. She’s got that much human nature in her at least. But I’m glad I lied to Mark about her not caring—yes, I am! If I was in her place I’d want the same done for me.”

She began to cry again, but not wishing Mark to see her she crept forlornly off to her room.

“I’ve lost everything,” she moaned to herself in the darkness that was fragrant with the mint of perfume blowing in through the open window.

“Even my home will never be the same to me again with that interloper here. Oh, I oughtn’t to call her that—Mark’s girl. It’s wicked and heartless of me.”

Lois Wilbur had gone home through the ripened splendor of the afternoon, her heart sick within her. She would not go by the lane through the firs although it was much shorter; she could not have borne that. It was the way she and Mark had always taken. She chose the main road instead, although with the instinct of a hunted animal, she shrank from the possible meetings with neighbors. She felt as if the whole story of her wasted love and smarting pride must be blazoned on her face for every curious eye to read. She thought of the days to come with shrinking. How could she live through them?

When she reached home she hurried to her own room, thankful to get to it unseen. She locked the door and threw herself face downward on the bed, envying Aunt Nan her relief of tears. Lois could not cry. Her eyes burned, her throat throbbled chokingly, but no tears came.

“This is the bitterness in my cup,” she thought dully. “It has come very soon. Oh Mark!”

She put her hands over her aching eyes and lay very still.

CHAPTER V

Aunt Nan was sitting in the parlor at the hill farm, waiting for Mark to bring Beatrice Lyall home. He had gone to the station to meet her. Aunt Nan had put on her silver gray silk and lace fichu, perfumed with the faint lavender odor that clung to all her treasured possessions, to do honor to her son's sweetheart; and she had schooled her rebellious heart to play its part properly. She looked very tired; even her eyes had lost their youth. Now and then tears filled them in spite of her, but she wiped them impatiently away. When she heard the sound of wheels she rose quickly and went out to the door with a brave smile of welcome.

Aunt Nan never forgot the shock of surprise at sight of the girl who was coming up between the rows of hollyhocks, hand in hand with Mark. She had never defined in words or even in thoughts what she had expected Beatrice Lyall to be, but she had had a vague idea that she would be some brilliant, flaunting creature with exaggerated clothes and painted cheeks. Aunt Nan had a constitutional belief that all women of the stage, good, bad and indifferent, wore artificial complexions, in private as well as in public. She had groaned in secret over the thought of Mark's wife being a woman who painted. How the Rutherglen gossips would gloat over that!

But this pale, child-face girl, who stood before her in clinging gray draperies, looking up at her wistfully with big, innocent gray eyes—could this be the woman she had hated and dreaded? Aunt Nan's prejudices fell from her like a discarded garment. All her beauty-loving old heart went out in a sudden, honest admiration to the girl Mark loved. She opened her arms to her impulsively, drew her into them and kissed her.

"I am very glad to see you, my dear," she said in a trembling voice. "Welcome to Mark's home."

Beatrice Lyall's heart was touched. Mark had not been able to conceal fully from her shrewd discernment the fact that his mother was not well pleased with what he had done. He would have been surprised had he known how much his guarded words had betrayed. Beatrice had smiled a cruel little smile and had prepared herself to meet dislike with dislike. Innocent and appealing as she looked when she came up the hollyhock path, she was in reality filled with an ungenerous triumph and a determination to flaunt her empire over the son ruthlessly enough in the mother's face.

But Aunt Nan's spontaneous welcome changed all that. Beatrice Lyall had met few tender, loving women in her hard life. She had all Aunt Nan's own peculiar power of divining the thoughts and springs of action in people with whom she had to

do, and she had a sudden realization of the goodness and sweetness of the little gray-haired woman who held her against her heart. A wave of feeling like nothing she had ever experienced before swept over her. She put up her face to meet Aunt Nan's kiss.

"I hope you'll love me," she said wistfully and sincerely.

"I love you already," whispered Aunt Nan gently. She felt a stab as she spoke, as of disloyalty to Lois. But Mark was forgiven. Beatrice's beauty was his valid excuse. Aunt Nan said to herself that she had never seen a face so lovely. She could not keep her own eyes off the girl as they sat at the tea table.

In the evening Mark carried Beatrice off to the garden. Aunt Nan reproached herself for the jealous thrust this gave her.

"If it were Lois I wouldn't mind. I never felt shut out with her and Mark. I do feel shut out now—even this soon—as if I didn't have no part nor lot with them. I suppose I'm ungrateful. Everything might have been so much worse. She's sweet and lovely and winsome beyond anything I ever saw. I feel like a turncoat to like her so much right off, but I can't help it. And 't isn't the same liking I have for Lois. I don't know just what makes the difference, but it isn't."

Beatrice was very quiet and subdued in the garden—more so than Mark had ever seen her. All her sauciness and elusive coquetry, her archness and sprite like variety of look and gesture were gone for the time.

"Mark," she said suddenly, after a long silence, "Your mother is a very good woman, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is the dearest and best woman I know, except one."

"She is very good," repeated Beatrice gravely. "I felt that at the first moment. Good and pure and sweet—the right woman for a mother. My mother died before I ever knew her. Do you know what that means to a girl?"

"You will have a mother after this," said Mark.

She gave him a swift little glance.

"Mark, I want your mother to love me—not because she is your mother, but just for her own sake. It is odd—I never cared before whether another woman loved me or not. I do care now."

"She loves you already," said Mark, his dark face flushing with pleasure. "She loved you at first sight as I did. She could not help that, Beatrice."

"I would rather that she could help it and still loved me," said the girl impatiently. "Oh, Mark, she is good—good. I suppose I have been unfortunate in the women with whom my life has brought me in contact. I never met one like her—a woman so compact of purity and goodness that even an evil thought would wither in her

presence. Mark, you would want—you would demand that your wife be just as good and pure as your mother, wouldn't you?"

"She will be," said Mark tenderly.

"But if she were not," persisted Beatrice, "would you love her? Could you love a woman whose past life held a shadow?"

"No," said Mark with the tinge of sternness his tone always assumed in discussing such a question. "No, I could not. The soul and life of the woman I love must be spotless—and, thank God, it is."

He put his arm about her and drew her to his heart. For a moment she rested so, with her golden head pillowed upon his shoulder. Then she freed herself with a ripple of laughter. Her eyes glimmered with mischief, her lips mocked him. She flung into his face a handful of shredded rose petals and fled from him down the long path, elfin coquettish Beatrice once more. He captured her at the summer house and kissed her again and again, while she struggled, still laughing, to be free.

"I won't let you go," he whispered triumphantly. "I will hold you so forever, struggle as you will, you witch, you darling, you everything that is sweet. Beatrice, I never knew that a human soul could be as happy as I am."

"You are in a fool's paradise," she mocked.

But he did not believe her nor did she intend that he should.

In the days that followed Rutherglen gossiped and wondered and held up its hands and then laid them down again with the sensible but somewhat late-come conclusion that it was none of its business. All the women who could climb the hill to visit Aunt Nan and came away to spread wonderful tales about Beatrice Lyall—tales that differed as widely as did the moods in which Beatrice greeted the several callers. Lois Wilbur, dreading her weird in the valley, heard them all, conscious that the tellers were seeking in her face and manner some clue to her state of mind. It was some satisfaction to her that they found none. Her pain, like her love, was sacred and no eye but her own might look on it. Gossip concluded that Lois Wilbur did not care.

"If she does, she's a better actress than the other," it said.

One evening Aunt Nan came to the valley. She had longed for Lois until the longing would not be denied. She made some borrowed magazines an excuse for her errand and came in the twilight to ask for Lois.

Mrs. Wilbur went to Lois' room for her.

"Aunt Nan's down there, wanting you, Lois. My, but she looks dreadful old: I guess this freak of Mark's has about done for her."

Lois winced. Her mother's blunt comments always had the power to hurt her

more deeply than anything others might say. She put away the school exercises she was correcting and went down stairs to the parlor.

They sat and talked stiffly at first. Both were slightly ill at ease. Yet Lois felt a thrill of something like happiness at having her old friend with her again. And she was Mark's mother! Not even the sting of the awful thing that had happened could quite take the sweetness out of that.

But it was not until Aunt Nan rose to go and Lois walked down the road with her that they came together again. Out under the open sky the invisible barriers fell away from between them.

"I've wanted you, Lois," said Aunt Nan, slipping her hand into the girl's. "I've missed you terrible. Isn't it good to be together again?"

"Yes, it is," assented Lois tenderly.

"I wanted to tell you about her," whispered Aunt Nan. "Have you seen her, Lois?"

"Yes," said Lois, dully.

"She's very pretty, isn't she?" said Aunt Nan, hurriedly. "I don't wonder so much at Mark now—men always make fools of themselves over a face like that. I can't help being fascinated by it myself. I thought you'd like to know that it isn't as hard as it might be for me. She's a sweet little thing and I do love her—I can't help it. She is like a bird and a child and a flower all in one."

"I'm glad you love her," said Lois in the same dull tone. "It makes it so much easier for you."

"Oh, I don't know," cried Aunt Nan. "No, there is something wanting, Lois—and it's the main thing. Don't mistake me. I can't help being fond of her—but it's not the love I expected to give Mark's wife—not the love of woman for woman. I love her as I might a child. I don't think her any the more suitable wife for Mark because of it. She isn't. She's not one of us and never can be. Mark will find that out when it is too late. There's something about her, for all her sweetness, that I don't trust. Maybe I oughtn't to say so or even think so. I don't seem to be able to be true to anybody these days. When I'm with her I love her, but when I'm away from her there's a cold ache. I oughtn't to grumble—it might all have been so much worse. But you mustn't come any further, Lois. There's a heavy dew. Won't you come up and see me soon?"

"Not yet," cried Lois sharply. "I'm too busy," she added in a calmer tone. "The work in school is very heavy just now."

"Of course," assented Aunt Nan, pretending to be deceived. "Well, come when you can. You know," she went on with a sudden stubborn assertiveness, "I love you

best in the world next to Mark. And I always will—always. No one will ever take your place with me.”

“Thank you,” said Lois. She kissed Mark’s mother on the cheek and watched her out of sight up the hill. Then she walked back home, thinking as she went of the first time she had seen Beatrice Lyall.

It had been in the Rutherglen church on Sunday evening of the preceding week. The Wilbur pew was directly behind the Barry one. Lois had been sitting alone in it when the Barrys came—Aunt Nan first, then the stranger, then Mark.

To sit there through the long, peaceful service of the country church, with no change of expression on her calm face, and watch the woman who had supplanted her sitting by the man she loved, was what Lois Wilbur did, but her very soul was seared in the doing it as in a fiery furnace.

The beauty of the girl before her stabbed her with jealousy. She had never been jealous of another woman’s looks before, but she hated this exquisite loveliness fiercely. No wonder Mark loved her rival. What man could resist the fascination of such beauty?

Aunt Nan shrank into the corner of the pew and the lovers sat by themselves at the end. Lois noted their every glance and motion. She could not drag her tortured eyes from them. She saw the expression in Mark’s eyes when he turned his dark, curly head to look down on the girl beside him. He had never looked so at her although she had dreamed sweetly of the time when he would. To see him look so at another woman was almost more than Lois, even in her panoply of pride and determination, could bear. She had been told how Mark loved Beatrice Lyall, but to see it like this before her eyes made her previous pain seem a dull, wan thing by contrast.

When they rose to go out Beatrice Lyall had turned and her eyes suddenly met Lois Wilbur’s, burning down into hers. Beatrice knew something—perhaps some visitor’s gossip had enlightened her, perhaps some careless word of Mark’s or even Aunt Nan’s had given her the clue. She understood, with one woman’s merciless understanding of another, that this girl with the white, set face loved Mark and hated her. Beatrice Lyall was good at returning hate for hate. A cruel little smile parted her rose-red child’s mouth. She sent Lois’ look back to her with triumph and contemptuous pity. Lois knew that the secret she had guarded so desperately was known to and laughed at by this girl with the pale gold hair and seraphic face. The thought, coming back to her in the twilight, was more than she could endure.

“Oh, I can’t bear it,” she said passionately, under her breath. “I can’t—anything but this—that she should know! I saw the triumph in her face. How could she have

known? Mark did not tell her—I am sure of that, at least—nor Aunt Nan. I suppose my feelings were blazoned on my face for all to see.”

As she walked home that evening she decided that she would resign her school at the end of the term and leave Rutherglen. She hoped it would be before Mark’s marriage.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

Mrs. Barry and her son Mark live a life of retirement on a farm in Rutherglen. Lois Wilbur, a school teacher and intimate friend of the family since early childhood, is the choice of his mother for Mark's wife, but while he was visiting in Queenslea for his health he fell desperately in love with an actress named Beatrice Lyall, became engaged to marry her, and brought her to his home for a visit.

CHAPTER VI

Aunt Nan sat knitting by the window and watching Beatrice who was walking by herself among the birches, singing snatches of song in her silvery voice. Now and then a shaft of light fell through the boughs, turning her wind-stirred curls into a saintly aureole. Mark was away from home, but she did not seem to miss him. Of late she had developed a fondness for wandering alone among the trees and along the lanes.

Aunt Nan watched her and thought aloud over her work as was her wont.

"The child seems terrible restless. She's better than when she came—what a lovely pink color she has by spells. But she don't seem real happy although Mark can't see it. I guess this quiet life is wearing on her, although she declares she loves it. I feel real wicked and ungenerous when I don't seem able to put much faith in what she says sometimes. And yet I do love her real well—a body can't help it, with her sweet little ways and her singing and her face. In a way this seems all like a dream—everything is so different. Mark is the only happy one here and he'll be happy just as long as he's blind. He thinks she loves him; she doesn't—but it takes a woman to see that. She's fond of him in her way—but for that matter she's fonder of me."

Aunt Nan was quite right. Beatrice was fonder of Mark's mother than of Mark. Passing that, she loved Aunt Nan with the only unselfish affection her life had ever known. She had mocked at it at first and even rebelled against it. Her love for Aunt Nan was a merciless mirror, in which she saw herself as she was.

Presently she came in and sat down on the low window sill beside Aunt Nan. She swung her hat in her hand and the soft rings of her golden hair curled around her flushed face. She looked like a beautiful child, but her eyes were troubled.

"Aunt Nan," she said seriously, "you do love me a little, don't you?"

"Bless your heart, child, yes," said Aunt Nan affectionately.

"But not so well as you love someone else, Aunt Nan—someone you would rather see Mark's wife?"

"Who's been talking to you?" cried Aunt Nan, too astonished to deny.

"Nobody. But I know. Tell me about her."

"There is nothing to tell," said Aunt Nan in distress. "There is—there is—nobody. Where did you get such a fancy?"

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, your little fibs don't impose on me, dear woman. There is someone. You might as well tell me. If you don't I'll ask Mark."

"You wouldn't do that!" protested Aunt Nan in dismay. But she knew that

Beatrice was quite capable of it and she hastened to add—

“But I suppose I needn’t deny that there was a girl I did like, and I would have been pleased if Mark had taken a notion to her.”

“Perhaps he might have in time if he had not met me,” said Beatrice lightly.

“Perhaps,” admitted Aunt Nan reluctantly. “But he didn’t, you see. So you needn’t be jealous of her.”

“I am not jealous of her on his account. I would not care if he had loved her. It is because you love her that I am jealous.”

“You needn’t be, child. I’ve known her all her life and I’ve always loved her. But I love you, too, dearie—indeed I do.”

“But not as you love her? No, Aunt Nan, don’t look so distressed. I understand. She’s better than I am—and, apart from that, she’s your kind. And you think she would make Mark happier?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you think it. Oh, you are so transparent, dear. And this girl—did she love Mark?”

“No, she didn’t,” declared Aunt Nan eagerly. “She didn’t care for him at all. I don’t deny that I had a kind of matchmaking hope in my own mind about them—old women are like that, Beatrice—but there wasn’t any foundation for it. She didn’t want Mark any more than he wanted her.”

Beatrice smiled. Aunt Nan’s stanch lie might impose on a man, but it could not blind her, even if she had not had the remembrance of that look she had seen in Lois Wilbur’s eyes that night in church. Suddenly she laughed aloud.

“And so your castle in air is destroyed, Aunt Nan—and I am the destroyer! Why don’t you hate me?” She slipped down on her knees by Aunt Nan and looked up teasingly into her face. “You were ready to hate me before I came. Why don’t you?”

“Nobody could hate you, child,” protested Aunt Nan. “And I love you—you needn’t doubt that a mite.”

Beatrice buried her face in the motherly lap and lay still so long that Aunt Nan wondered. When she looked up again her eyes held a faint glimmer of amusement.

“You’ll always love her best,” she said, “but she doesn’t love you any better than I do. You’ve brought out all the good that ever was in me—not a great deal perhaps, but it will serve. I want you to be happy in your own way. You don’t understand now, but you will some day. And it is funny, too.—I am really laughing at myself, you see. After all I’m really the most amusing person I ever met.”

“She’s right enough—I don’t understand her,” said Aunt Nan, picking up her

knitting with a patient sigh when Beatrice had gone. "As to being happy in my own way, that'll never be again. I must just try and be happy in Mark's way. It's always a make-believe happiness at best—to be happy in somebody else's way."

For the next two days Beatrice had a wild attack of high spirits. She laughed and sang and danced hither and thither from morning till night, with a flushed face and sparkling eyes. Mark, in the bonds of his infatuation, thought her only the more adorable. Aunt Nan sighed and even felt cross. She realized more keenly than ever the gulf between herself and the girl who was to be her son's wife. She, the quiet, sober-going little house-mother, had nothing in common with this volatile creature.

So these, the people of this small life-drama, each drained the cup held to their lips as bravely as they might. To Aunt Nan and Lois the draught was very bitter. To Mark it still sparkled with enchantment. Beatrice Lyall best knew the flavor of her own.

She sat curled up among the ferns behind the birch grove one evening, watching the sun set over the valley, which was like a great cup brimmed up with purple and glamor. Down below her she saw the Wilbur homestead and when she looked that way her face and eyes grew hard.

"How I hate that girl," she said aloud, "not because she will be Mark's wife some day, but because Aunt Nan loves her! How odd that I should be jealous of another woman's love. When I go Aunt Nan will have her again and forget me. They will talk me over by and by, the two of them. Bah! I will set Mark free for Aunt Nan's sake and go back to the old life I thought I had left forever."

A pleasant glow of self approval pervaded her. She was sincere enough in believing that she was going to do this solely that Aunt Nan might be happy. She crept out of the ferns determinedly and, with a lilt of song on her lips, went through the birches to the big gray boulder on their southern slope, where she knew Mark would be waiting for her.

She wished the interview over. Commonly, Beatrice Lyall was not afraid of anything but now she shrank from the pain she was going to inflict.

"There are not so many who believe in me that I should find it amusing to destroy the trust of one who does," she thought with some shallow bitterness. "Except Mark, Aunt Nan is the only one in the world who really cares for me—and she loves me against her better judgment."

Mark sprang up and came to meet her with the old glow on his face. The sun had set and the world beyond was a swimming glory of afterlight, but where they two stood, in the shadow of the birches, was the gloom and purple of over-early twilight.

Beatrice, looking at the rapture of illumination on Mark's face wished again that some other hand than hers might blot it out. Bending her head back to avoid his kiss she said:

"Mark, I've come to ask you something—to tell you something. I want you to listen."

"All right, sweetheart," he answered gaily. "How serious you look, darling. Your eyes are so big and gray here in the shadow. What is it you want to talk about?"

"Sit down, please." She pushed him down on the boulder and stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders that she might not see his face.

"Mark, what I am going to say will hurt and surprise you greatly, but I must say it. I—I want you to set me free. I can't marry you. I must go back to my own life—yours is not for me."

"Beatrice!"

In spite of her detaining hands he sprang up and faced her. "My God, what do you mean? You are not in earnest!"

"I am, indeed, Mark. Do you think I could jest like this? Oh Mark, I don't love you—I never loved you! I was tired and ill and sick of my life when I met you. The haven of rest and peace you offered me was so tempting. And your love was very sweet to me, too, Mark. It was so true and loyal—so different from all that I had been made to believe love was. I thought I could be contented and happy in the life you pictured. I know now that I cannot. It is a good life, but it comes too late for me. I am not fitted for it and never can be. I must go back. You will set me free?"

He had listened to her in silence, misery and disbelief struggling on his face. When she put out her hands appealingly to him he gathered them in a grip so fierce that it hurt her.

"I can't, Beatrice. Don't ask it of me. I can't let you go. Oh, you can't mean it, dear. You will learn to love me yet. And, if not, I will be content with your affection and trust. I will do everything I can to make you happy—everything. I will leave Rutherglen and go away with you—you may even go back to the stage as my wife if you will. I'll do anything for you but give you up. That I'll never do!"

She tore her hands from the clasp that hurt her.

"Mark, Mark, you don't know what you are saying! It can't be—I can't marry you. Set me free."

"I will not," he said stubbornly. His face was dark and fierce with passion and pain. She had never seen him look so and it frightened her. Fear always roused anger in her and it leaped forth now unpitifully.

"Then I will go without your permission," she cried shrilly.

"I will follow you to the world's end," he answered.

She knew that he meant it and covered her face with her hands for a moment. When she looked up again the angry flush was gone, leaving her wan and tired.

"You will not let me go?" she asked pleadingly.

"No," between his set teeth.

She made a little protesting gesture with her hands.

"Oh, then I must tell you everything. Nothing else will do. I didn't mean to—I thought it would be too hard. And it is hard." She caught her breath in a throb of real feeling. "Oh, Mark, there is another reason I can't marry you—a reason that even you must listen to. I am not fit to be your wife—or any good man's wife. No—don't speak—you must hear me. Mark, I'm—not a good woman. There are good women in my profession but I am not one of them. There are some things in my life that you would look upon with horror. Oh, it's true—" as an inarticulate sound—half moan, half protest, broke from him—"do you think I would tell you of this if it were not? You've driven me to tell you. I thought I had put all that behind me—that I could forget the past and live only for the future. When I came here and met your mother I knew I never could—that nothing could ever make me like her. Oh, you will despise and loath me now! I know you—how remorseless you are in condemning a woman who has once gone wrong. Nothing she could ever do would atone for that in your eyes—not if she lived in penance for a lifetime. You could never make any allowance for me. Well, this is enough for you, is it not? You don't want me to go into details, I suppose? You will not follow me to the world's end now, Mark?"

Her voice dropped from bitter passion to wistful pain in her last question. Mark did not answer in words. He turned from her with a gray, stricken face and sat down on the stone bench, burying his face in his arms on the huge bough that stretched across it. Beatrice looked at him pityingly. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Mark," she said gently, "you will get over this—very soon, although you won't believe that now. You see, it was never I whom you loved—it was the girl you thought I was. She never existed and one cannot mourn very long over a phantom. I will go out of your life forever. I wish you could come to think kindly of me by-and-by—not of me as I am, but of me as I might have been if I had met you long ago, before life went awry with me. Oh, Mark, won't you forgive me—If not now, by and by, when the pain of this is all over?"

He gave no sign that he heard her, save by shrinking away from the touch of her hand. In his own agony and bitterness he grew cruel. One of her mercurial changes came over her. The softness went out of her face. Amusement glimmered in her eyes. A smile flashed over her mobile features. Suddenly she threw back her head

and burst into a silvery, mocking peal of laughter.

“Oh, it is good to be free,” she cried. “After all, I’m not so unselfish as I thought. I imagined that I was doing this solely for your mother’s sake—but I think I was tired to intolerance of your placid life here. A year of it would kill me. As for you—you scorn me now and a month later you will wonder at your infatuation and thank heaven for your deliverance. You will marry Lois Wilbur by and by. She is your mother’s kind—and yours. But you will never tell her of those days in old St. Paul’s I think. Good-bye, Mark. What? not a word—not a look? How hard you good men can be! Well, I bear you no grudges. It is enough revenge for me to know that eight weeks of your life have belonged wholly to me and that, repent it as you will they always must. That girl in the valley will have all the rest, but you can never give her those.”

With another little trill of mocking laughter she left him. At the edge of the birches she paused and looked back at the bowed and motionless figure, blowing it a kiss from her finger tips.

“Ah, but it’s good to be free again,” she breathed exultantly.

Aunt Nan was lighting a candle at the kitchen dresser when Beatrice came dancing through the hall. She stood in the doorway, a flame of brilliancy amid the lurking shadows. Her eyes were black and gleaming, her cheeks and lips crimson. She was beautiful with a *beaute du diable* that Aunt Nan had never seen before. The latter did not know it but she was looking at the Beatrice Lyall of the footlights.

“What’s the matter, child?” she cried in sudden alarm.

Beatrice kissed her hands to her theatrically.

“I give you back your son. He is yours again. I have broken my spell. And I am free—I could dance for very joy of it.”

She dropped Aunt Nan a mocking courtesy and, catching her muslin skirt in her hands, she pirouetted backward along the hall and fled up the stairs to the lilt of a wild carol.

Aunt Nan stood looking like one dazed. She did not understand Beatrice’s words but she dimly realized that there was more trouble somewhere. Where was Mark? What had this mad girl done now? She felt irritated. There was no peace in life with all the moods and whims that possessed the fantastic creature. She snuffed the candle with a nervous hand and then went along the hall in a puzzled, uncertain fashion as Beatrice came running down the stairs in her hat and jacket. At the open front door she paused.

“Beatrice, what is it?” implored Aunt Nan.

“It’s good-bye, Aunt Nan. I had your hired boy take my trunks to the station this

afternoon, when Mark and you were away. I am going myself—I shall walk to the station and catch the night train for Queenslea. Oh, it makes me tingle. Do you think I've gone mad? Oh no, dear saint, it is not so. It's only that I am free again and it has gone to my head like wine. How dazed you look! You don't understand. Your Mark will explain if he ever finds his tongue. Good-bye, dear saint."

Then, as quickly as was her wont, the wild mood fell from her and the laughter went out of her face.

"Aunt Nan, try to think a little kindly of me by-and-by—when all the bitterness is over. Mark never will—he'll never forgive me, but you must and will. Good-bye."

For a moment her light dress gleamed down the hollyhock path. Then the soft darkness of the calm night seemed to wrap her away.

Aunt Nan rushed to the door and called, "Beatrice, Beatrice," half angrily. Under all her alarm and bewilderment there was a curious annoyance at the girl's behavior. It savored of melodrama and jarred painfully on Aunt Nan's orderly conception of things. She was not used to such ways; they seemed to outrage the decencies of life and put her at the disadvantage of silence and helplessness. She could sympathize with and comprehend Lois Wilbur's moods and emotions, but Beatrice's left her outside, a baffled spectator.

"I'd like to shake her," she thought prosaically and irritably, as she peered out into the darkness. But when no answer came to her save the soft rustles of the night, she began to understand yet was half afraid to believe. Beatrice was gone—so much seemed plain from her outlandish speeches and behavior. But why? What had happened? Had she and Mark quarrelled? If so, doubtless he would go posting to Queenslea after her as soon as his anger cooled. Aunt Nan foresaw endless perplexity and complications. She started out to look for Mark, first wrapping herself up in her shawl against the autumn dampness—for Aunt Nan was practical in even the great crises of her life.

She thought grimly enough that no matter what tune Beatrice piped and Mark danced to there was no sense in laying herself up with an attack of rheumatism.

She called for Mark vainly until she grew frantic with doubt and bewilderment. Where had he gone? The temper of her youth was hot in her tamed heart and she would have enjoyed soundly boxing his ears.

But when she found him at last, huddled up in his mute misery where Beatrice had left him every emotion save pity and warm mother-love dropped away from her. She stole softly up to him and put her arm about his neck, seeking only to comfort him at whatever cost to herself.

"Mark, what is it? Is it just that you've quarrelled? Never mind. She'll come

back—we'll go after her. There, there, mother's boy!"

She patted him on the head as if he were still her baby. She was furious at Beatrice for hurting him. Mark suddenly turned and flung his arms about her, pillowing his head on her breast as she bent over him. His anguish found vent in a sob that stung her to the heart.

"Mother, she's gone—but that's not the worst! I've lost everything—everything but you, mother."

She hovered over him, caressing him and murmuring the words of comfort she had used when he was a child, sobbing to her over some childish hurt.

Amid all her pain for him and her anger at the girl who had wounded him there was a sudden, upwelling sweetness. He was her own again—her son, nearest to her heart. She crushed his curly head with tender fierceness against her breast.

"There, there, mother's boy," she crooned.

CHAPTER VII

Thanks to birds of the air and hired boys, by the next night everybody in Rutherglen knew that Beatrice Lyall had gone and tongues wagged delightedly on hill and valley. They wondered how Mark would take it and how Aunt Nan would take it and how Lois Wilbur would take it. They remembered that they had always prophesied something of the sort. It served Mark Barry right, they thought. He hadn't treated Lois Wilbur very well and they guessed she felt it pretty keen for all she carried such a high head. There was a look on her face that didn't used to be there. Thus the babble of gossip and comment ran on.

Lois was left this time to learn the news from her mother. Aunt Nan would have liked to send for her and tell her but something held her back, telling her that this would come with better grace from other lips than hers. It was Mrs. Wilbur who puffed and panted up the stairs to Lois' room, all agog with the excitement of the news she had brought home from a neighborly call.

"Lois, what do you think?" she said shrilly in the thin, high-pitched voice which consorted so oddly with her roly-poly person and broad, good-natured face.

Mrs. Wilbur sat down on the bed, her hand at her side.

"Goodness, this is what it is to get old and fat. Pray that you never will, Lois. To be sure, your father's people ain't troubled that way and you take after them. There ain't a mite of Sanborn in you. You're the living image of your Aunt Della and you've got to look more than ever like her this while back. Well, and what do you suppose has happened now? Such a piece of work! That Lyall girl Mark Barry picked up in town has jilted him and gone goodness knows where. They had a terrible time of it up at the hill farm last night, so their Jerry told James Almon's Andrew. The girl went on like one possessed—Jerry, he was in the garden and saw and heard her—before she went and Aunt Nan was up all night talking to Mark and trying to pacify him. The girl has gone for good, Jerry told Andrew. He took her trunks to the station yesterday afternoon. Now, what do you think of that?"

"Is it true?" said Lois in a low voice.

"True? Of course it's true. Jerry knows all about it. Won't Aunt Nan be tickled over this? She couldn't abide the whole business though she did try to make the best of it for Mark's sake. She'll have a time with him now, though, I expect. He was crazy about that baggage. But he'll get over it in time. There's a chance for you yet, Lois."

"Mother!"

The girl's tone was full of outraged protest. Mrs. Wilbur laughed comfortably.

“Oh, don’t be so full of airs, Lois. I’ve got to speak what’s in my mind and you needn’t put on so much dignity with your own mother. You never were like any of my other children.”

Lois did not reply. When her mother had waddled down stairs she slipped from her chair and knelt by the window with her head bowed on the sill.

Something bitter and glad and ashamed was stirring in her. After all, her mother’s coarse assertion was only what her own heart was suddenly crying to her in a finer way. But she would not listen to it yet. She crushed her burning face in her hands and tried to stifle her newborn gladness by the remembrance of the pain and humiliation she had passed through. Were not its lessons branded deep enough, that her heart should beat like this at the thought that Mark was free again?

Aunt Nan came down a week later and they met for the first time since Beatrice had gone. Mrs. Wilbur happened to be away, for which they were thankful, Aunt Nan especially so. The openly expressed curiosity and sympathy displayed by her acquaintances was getting on her nerves. She had been very crisp with some of them; they had said Aunt Nan was not as easy-going as she used to be,—“though it isn’t to be wondered at after Mark’s tantrums.”

“You’ve heard?” said Aunt Nan, not caring to pretend disguise of her object.

“Yes,” said Lois. “It must have been very hard for you, Aunt Nan.”

“Me? Oh it don’t matter about me. I’ve been worried some, I suppose—but I needn’t try to deny, and to you of all folks, that it’s a relief that she’s gone. But of course things like these leave scars, you know. It’ll be some time before they wear away. I’ll feel sore for a long time myself. As for Mark—well, I don’t know what she said to him, but it must have been something terrible. He’s a changed boy—boy! He ain’t a boy any more. He looks as grave and stern as a man of 40. Oh, he’s suffering enough—and my heart aches to see him—but I can’t help him any. Folks have to go through times like these on their own strength. It hurts me terrible to see the look on his face. But he won’t speak or let me speak. And I guess silence is the best medicine if it is sometimes hard to take.”

“It is only natural that Mark should find this bitter,” said Lois calmly. “A love like his—is not easily conquered.”

“Y-e-s. Only there’s one queer thing, Lois. I don’t believe he loves her now. I don’t believe that if she was to come back and beg of him on her knees to take her back that he would. Of course, you may ask why he feels so bad then! Well, I don’t know. He acts broken-hearted, but it’s more as if somebody or something were dead and lost to him even in memory. I don’t understand—it’s all a puzzle to me. Perhaps it may be cleared up some day. Mark must dree his weird and drink his cup

as others have done.”

“I wish—that we could spare him the bitterness,” said Lois suddenly. Aunt Nan looked at her keenly and what she saw filled her with satisfaction.

“But we can’t,” she said as she rose to go. “And maybe it’s just as well we can’t. It’ll be wholesome for him if it is bitter. This scar in his life will grow over in time like the furrows in the lane. Don’t you remember that day, Lois? Doesn’t it seem a long while ago? Yet it’s only a few weeks. When are you coming up the hill to see me?”

“Not yet—not yet,” said Lois hurriedly. She came close to Aunt Nan and put her arms about her neck with a kiss for the sweet old face. Aunt Nan held her to her heart and patted the glossy head.

“No, not yet—but some day,” she whispered.

So Mark in his turn had to taste the bitterness in life’s cup. He drank it manfully enough, making no wry faces over it. After the night she had gone Beatrice’s name never crossed his lips. To him she was as one dead; more, as she herself had said, the girl he loved had never existed. He had bowed down before an idol of his own creation.

He went about his work day after day with dogged determination. He had no heart in it. Beatrice had not only blotted out his future, she had robbed him of his past. He could look backward only with regret and shame. There was nothing but the dull present in which he was a silent, solitary prisoner.

Aunt Nan wisely kept her peace. Eager as she was to see the old relationship established between Mark and Lois she knew that it must come, if it ever came, in its own good time. She schooled herself to accept the slow passage of the healing days calmly.

Autumn went by and in its turn winter. But when spring came again to Rutherglen, sprinkling violets along the lanes and coaxing the tremulous green out on the birches, Aunt Nan bestirred herself. It seemed to her that the desire of her life would never be given her unless she once more put forth her hand to take it. Her resolve not to make or meddle with Mark or Lois was set aside by the conviction that if she did not help matters a little they would never get on at all. Sometimes Lois came to the hill farm now; she did not seek or shun Mark. When they met—which was rarely, for he avoided her—she was gracious and friendly to him, but she made not the faintest effort to renew the old comradeship. Aunt Nan, watching the little life-drama with a keenness that lost nothing of every mood and tense, sighed with impatience. Would Mark’s eyes never be opened? Or was it that he was wilfully blind?

One evening she went to meet him in the wood lane, when he came home from a day's ploughing in the back lands, driving his horses with one hand and holding a cluster of purple violets in the other. At sight of the little figure waiting for him among the ferns his face softened into the smile that only Aunt Nan ever saw.

"Here, little mother, are some violets for you—the first of the spring. There's a spot in the back lands that is purple with them."

Aunt Nan made a cup of her hands and drank the violet fragrance gratefully.

"Your father always brought me the first violets, Mark. You're so like him in some of your ways."

She slipped her hand into his and they followed the horses down the windings of the lane. Aunt Nan, glancing up sideways, noted the stern, set lines of the lips that had curved so boyishly a year ago. She sighed and Mark looked down.

"Tired, mother?" he asked, gently.

"No." Aunt Nan sniffed at her violets to gain courage. She did not know what might follow her premeditated stirring up of sleeping dogs.

"Lois Wilbur was up this afternoon," she said. "She is such a sweet girl. She just went home a few minutes ago. I wanted her to wait until you came, but she was in a hurry."

Mark made no reply. He looked straight before him down the fern-fringed lane. Aunt Nan spoke sharply.

"Mark, I don't think you are treating Lois right. You slight her and shun her—and it hurts her. Why aren't you friendly with her as you used to be?"

Mark spoke with an effort that sent the blood darkly to his face.

"When a man has made a fool of himself in a woman's eyes he doesn't greatly care to look in them to find her contempt of him, mother."

Aunt Nan flashed out at him suddenly.

"Mark, aren't you ever going to get over that—that folly of yours? I believe you're fretting after that girl still!"

Mark looked at her flushed, reproachful face gently.

"No, mother, I'm not. I never fretted after her, if it comes to that. I was deceived and made a fool of and it cut to the quick. It is a hard thing for a man who has worshipped a woman as something finer than an angel to find that he has been duped. But after the first bitterness of that wore away, I seemed to myself like a man who has come to his senses from a madness—and I realized all that I had thrown away. I knew I had lost Lois Wilbur forever. We may as well thresh this matter out now and never refer to it again. I thought I loved Lois before Beatrice Lyall bewitched me. After Beatrice herself destroyed my ideal of her I came to know that

I still loved Lois—and that not as I had before but ten times more deeply. And I had lost her by my own folly. She might have cared for me once. She never will now. Do you think I can seek her friendship when it is her love I want?”

“Oh, you blind bat!” cried Aunt Nan, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry. “Mark, you never could see the length of your nose. Why Lois Wilbur loves you—loves you I tell you—and always has.”

“That is not what you told me once before,” said Mark harshly.

“Well, I lied to you,” answered his mother remorsefully. “Oh Mark, I suppose you’ll never believe anything I say again. But that was the only lie I ever told you in all my life and I told it for Lois’ sake. You can’t see it from a woman’s standpoint. Forgive me, Mark. It’s the truth I’m telling you now. Lois loved you and it nearly broke her heart when you went crazy after that—that—after Beatrice.”

“If this is true,” said her son bitterly, “it only makes matters worse—can’t you see that, mother? If she had never loved me she might forgive me—she never can now.”

“Oh, she can and will,” exclaimed Aunt Nan, catching hold of his arm in her eagerness. “Oh Mark, you don’t know Lois. I do. She will forgive you if you let her see that you want to be forgiven. I heard her say once, one day last fall when we were talking about a story, that she could forgive ‘emotions juggled by Fate.’ Those were her very words. She never says what she doesn’t mean. But,” added Aunt Nan, with her usual spice of practicality, “I wouldn’t leave it too long before I gave her the chance. She might find that harder to overlook than anything else.”

Mark made no reply and Aunt Nan kept silence. She had said her say and the only thing to do was to bide the result as best he might. To say too much might mar matters worse than too little.

“Anyhow, I’ve done my best,” she reflected wearily. “If he can’t spunk up enough courage now to go back to Lois when he’s dying for her I can’t help him. He’s dreadful like the first Mark—takes things terrible to heart and broods over them until they kind of poison everything.”

Half an hour later Mark passed through the kitchen from his room. He walked with a lighter step and Aunt Nan noticed that he was dressed in his best. She watched him from the window until she saw him take the valley road. Then she drew a long breath of thankfulness.

“Surely things will go right this time,” she said.

Mark turned into the fir lane when he came to it and strode along with a turmoil of emotion seething within him. He did not expect to overtake Lois for she had left the hill farm an hour before, so that when he came upon her suddenly at a curve in

the lane, sitting on a boulder among the ferns, he lost his presence of mind utterly and could only stammer a confused greeting as she rose.

She was dressed in white, with some of Aunt Nan's wine-red geraniums at her belt, and she wore over her shoulders a pale yellow scarf of some light silk that fell almost to the hem of her dress or wavered about her in the winds that came at intervals along the lane. She carried her hat, full of ferns and violets in her hand, and the soft masses of her bronzed hair framed in her face, as purely cut and perfect as a cameo. Mark looked at her and thought of Beatrice Lyall's baby face with a pang of selfcontempt.

"You didn't expect to find me here?" she said smilingly. "Well, I've loitered in a shamefully lazy way. This lane has always a charm for me—I love its shadows and its silences. This evening is so perfect, too. It has made me forget how long I have been on my way."

Mark fell into step by her side and they went silently down the road. The balm of the firs rained on them through the cool green dusk above. Here and there the woods broke away to let in glimpses of saffron sky and rosy clouds. The tang of the trampled ferns smote upon the moist air and they heard the gurgle of a spring that was born under the firs and fed the valley brook. Each thought of their many walks through this same wood. It was vocal with old memories.

Mark cast vainly about in his mind for words; he could find nothing to say. Doubt and fear assailed him again. She could not care for him. If she had ever loved him his behavior must have killed her love. She must despise him—and how lovely and desirable she was in her magnificent womanhood! What a fool he had been to shut his eyes to this and let his infatuation for a woman not worthy to breath the same air with her, lead him where it would.

Lois' heart was beating painfully under her calmness. She had waited very patiently and if her heart's desire was now to be granted her it would not have been spoiled by any unmaidenly grasping on her part. But she was ready to forgive him fully and freely. There was in her nature no small vanity which must be satisfied before it could pardon.

When they came to the sagging little gate where the lane joined the main road she turned to him as if she expected him to come no further. It had always been their parting spot in childhood. Mark opened the gate and held it. As she passed through he put his hand on her arm.

"Lois, may I go the rest of the way with you?" he said imploringly.

It was too dark for him to see the glory that flashed over her face.

"If you wish to," she answered steadily.

Mark knew that he was forgiven. He closed the gate, and hand in hand, they went down the road to the valley together. Later on they had much to say to each other. But now the silence was too beautiful and eloquent to be marred by so much as a word.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Bitterness in the Cup* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]