

OUR ERNIE

ALICE HEGAN RICE



*** 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 Fadedpage.com 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: Our Ernie

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Alice Hegan Rice (1870-1942)

Date first posted: Jan. 21, 2019

Date last updated: Jan. 21, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190171

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Al Haines, Howard Ross & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

By Alice Hegan Rice

MRS. WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH
LOVEY MARY: FURTHER ADVENTURES OF MRS. WIGGS OF THE
CABBAGE PATCH
MISS MINK'S SOLDIER & OTHER STORIES
THE LARK LEGACY
CALVARY ALLEY
MR. PETE & CO.
CAPTAIN JUNE
OUR ERNIE
MR. OPP
SANDY
QUIN
A ROMANCE OF BILLY-GOAT HILL
THE HONORABLE PERCIVAL
MY PILLOW BOOK
THE BUFFER

And with Cale Young Rice

WINNERS AND LOSERS
TURN ABOUT TALES
PASSIONATE FOLLIES

OUR ERNIE

By
ALICE HEGAN RICE



D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED

NEW YORK 1939 LONDON

COPYRIGHT, 1939, BY
D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY, INC.

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher.

The names of all characters used in this book are purely fictitious. If the name of any living person is used, it is simply a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

JANE GILLMORE KNOTT

“Write me a book,” you said,
“a happy book about funny people.”

I have sought to do so.

OUR ERNIE

CHAPTER I

The happy-go-lucky Bossel family, of which "our Ernie" was the youngest and most adored member, had managed to exist for years with scarcely more visible means of support than an air-plant. Whatever sustenance it derived seemed to come from its own hilarious and highly congenial society.

The house in which it lived was the only two-story one in Wirt's Division, a brownstone edifice with a wide porch cutting across its face like a grin, and a tiled roof that tilted over its upper windows for all the world like a rakish hat.

Grampa Calloway, once the proud Captain of the *Ohio Queen*, had squandered his entire patrimony on the residence, partly to prove that the family derelict could still live like a gentleman, and partly to provide a home for his three motherless grandchildren and their one-armed father, Benjamin Bossel.

At the time he made his magnificent architectural gesture, the old Kentucky city was heading due south, but following the capricious habits of cities it changed its mind and swung to the east instead, leaving Wirt's Division dangling like a shabby fringe to the skirts of society.

However unfortunate the financial venture had been, the investment had far-reaching effects on the Captain's progeny. The comfortable elegance of their abode set the Bossels apart from their neighbors, and sustained a family pride that otherwise might have languished. Plate-glass windows demanded washing, concrete steps required scrubbing, ornate iron fences shrieked for paint, and the one pretentious house in the neighborhood had to be lived up to.

Unfortunately, the model exterior was no indication of the interior. Since Grandma's death six months before, housekeeping had been negligible. To be sure, there were extenuating circumstances, for Rosie was studying to be a trained nurse and away most of the time, the Captain far too elegant to engage in manual labor, Mr. Bossel a night watchman, and Curt, the eldest, too absorbed in being a mainstay to assist with domestic duties.

Then there was Ernie.

At fourteen Ernie was an overgrown blue-eyed, pink-cheeked youngster who confidently expected the world to accept him at the high estimate he placed upon himself. From the hour of his birth he had been the undisputed occupant of the family spotlight, and as he grew older his sphere of influence widened. To be sure, the consensus of opinion was not always favorable. It was generally conceded that he occupied too much cubic space, that he was often bumptious, and sometimes a nuisance. But, nevertheless, eyes twinkled, voices softened, and people smiled when they spoke of the youngest Bossel.

Late one spring afternoon he was sitting on his front porch, characteristically absorbed in trying to achieve the unattainable, by shaving his forearm with the hope of producing a hirsute adornment, when his peace was shattered by an insulting call:

“Hi there, Mellin’s Food!” jeered a voice from the street. “I been layin’ fer you, ‘cause of what you said about my Ma!”

“It’s a dirty lie,” said Ernie affably. “What did I say?”

“That she looked like a walrus.”

“I did not. I said a hippopotamus.”

“Well, what’s the difference?”

Ernie regarded the boy with devastating contempt.

“For pity’s sake, Dutchy, you goin’ on thirteen and astin’ me that? Ain’t you ever been to the Zoo?”

This digression into natural history revealed the appalling fact that Dutchy had not only never visited the Zoo, but that he had never seen an elephant.

“Never heard of such ignorance,” said Ernie. “I got a good mind to take you to the Zoo next Saturday.”

“Where’ll you get the money?” asked Dutchy guardedly.

“Well, I don’t mind putting it up if it will get some sense into your head.”

With this adjustment of a delicate matter, settled to the satisfaction of both parties, Ernie put the knife into his pocket and proceeded around to his back door, where he was greeted with rapturous joy by a sorry-looking canine that answered to the name of Roustabout. As he entered the kitchen, he found his father, apron tied around his neck, mixing something at the stove with his one hand.

Ernie looked at him suspiciously. There was no possible doubt about it, Pop had been crying. A weak redness about his lids and a trembling of the lower jaw were sufficient evidence, even if he were not in the very act of trying to wipe his nose on his elbow.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Ernie.

“‘Twasn’t the boss’s fault,” murmured Pop. “Had to have a stronger man to do the night-watchin’. I ain’t blamin’ him.”

“You mean you’re fired?”

Pop nodded. “After ten years. It didn’t ‘mount to much, but it kept you in school and kinder made me feel—” His emotion being too much for him, he put down the spoon and covered his face with his hand.

Ernie was instantly beside him with an arm around his shoulders. He loved his father better than anything in the world, and the shell-shocked, one-armed little man had been his care and companion since childhood.

“Don’t feel bad, Pop,” he implored. “I don’t mind stopping school and going to work.”

"I been a failure," sighed Pop. "Your Ma ought never to have married me."

"Then where'd I 'a' been?" asked Ernie indignantly, adding as an afterthought, "and Curt and Rosie?"

"That's right," admitted Pop. "If I never give the Calloways anything else, I've give 'em three fine infants."

"And look at your war record," said Ernie. "Ain't every family got a decoration like you."

Greatly comforted, Pop went back to his stewpan.

"I was just starting things for Rose," he said, still sniffing. "This is Bob's night and I know she'll want to get through early."

"Bob's taking too many nights," said Ernie, shedding his sweater and washing his hands at the sink. "First thing you know he'll be wantin' to marry Sis."

"Well," said Pop, "can't say I'd blame him, can you?"

Hot words leaped to Ernie's lips, but they were suppressed. The possibility of having to divide Rosie's affection with another male infuriated him.

"Love's a singlar thing," said Pop, gazing pensively into the stewpan. "I ain't fergettin' when it struck yer Ma and me. She was a Calloway, and I was raised in a orphan asylum, and not right sure who I was. We run off and got married and from that day to this I ain't looked at another woman."

"You was more faithful than some of our family," Ernie hinted darkly.

Pop looked at him disapprovingly. "You ain't, by any chance, talkin' about your Grampa, are you?"

"I sure am. Here Grandma ain't good and cold in her grave an' he's strutting around like a old rooster."

Pop was obviously shocked.

"You shouldn't oughter speak disrespec'ful of him, Sonny. You mustn't never forget that after I got back from Germany, and your Mamma died and left me with you and Curt and Rose and only one arm, it was the Captain that put a roof over our heads and made a happy home for us. He may have his failings, but he's been like God to me."

"No better than you've been to him! I bet he's tight this minute," averred Ernie.

"No," said Pop, shaking his head, "I saw him 'bout an hour ago up at the corner. He wasn't much full."

"Which corner?" demanded Ernie.

"Well, he was restin' his feet up there by the Beauty Parlor."

"I knew it!" said Ernie, savagely, flinging the wet towel in a corner. "What's the matter with everybody, anyhow? Rosie wantin' to marry that little sapsucker, Bob Gibbs, and Grampa lookin' over his specs at that frizzle-headed old widow, Mrs. Myrtle!"

“Here, here, Ernie,” interrupted Pop, “don’t be so hard on folks’ feelings. Love just happens to you like whooping-cough or measles. There ain’t nothing whatever you can do about it.”

At six-thirty Rose returned from the hospital. She was a plump, cheerful, efficient person, who spent her spare moments trying to bring order out of the domestic chaos.

“Pick up that towel,” she ordered her brother. “Don’t put it on the chair. Put it in the clothes basket. What’s the matter, Pop, darling? Caught cold?”

“Quit his job,” said Ernie.

Rose’s face expressed consternation. “Why, Pop, how’d you ever come to quit?”

Mr. Bossel’s under lip worked ominously, and Ernie again rushed to the rescue.

“He quit work just like I’m goin’ to quit school. We’re both fed up on it.”

“I never heard anything so crazy!” cried Rose. “And just when your reports are getting better.”

“Only in science and math,” said Ernie. “I’m rotten in English. This here adverb and adjective business gets my goat. I can most generally tell a noun, but, oh boy! those other things! Conjunctures and propositions!”

Rose, diverted from Pop’s dire news by this appalling exhibition of Ernie’s ignorance, paused in the act of mixing corn-bread.

“Ernie Bossel, I’m downright ashamed of you! If you think you can get by with nothing but cheek and good looks, you got another guess coming.”

“You hadn’t oughter be so hard on him,” intervened Pop, who was setting the table. “It’s a pretty good boy that’s willing to give up his schooling when his Dad loses out.”

“He don’t have to give up school. Curt and I can take care of the family; that is, we can try,” said Rose.

“You won’t have to,” bragged Ernie, encouraged by his father’s commendation. “I got a scheme that’ll fix us all for life. It’s a patent that nobody’s ever thought of before.”

“Perpetual motion, I suppose,” said Rose scornfully.

“No, siree. It’s a pretzel-twister. Ever since the beginning of hist’ry people have been making pretzels by hand. I bet you didn’t know that, either one of you!”

Pop and Rose had to acknowledge that they did not.

“Very well. It took *me* to think out a machine to make ’em. You take a board and drive nails in it in a certain way and make it revolve. Then you run a roll of dough into the groove and sorter force it round through the nails and it ties itself into the prettiest little knot you ever saw.”

“But what makes the board go round?” asked Pop, impressed but confused.

“Electricity. That’s the only thing I ain’t got going yet. I got the board and the nails, and I been using putty for dough. As soon as I get the old battery started you’ll see a-plenty.”

“In the meanwhile,” said Rose, “you better go in and brush your hair.”

“What’s the good? It’ll go hay-wire again. Nothing but alfalfa.”

“Stuff!” said Rose. “Your hair is beautiful and you know it. Wish I had your wave.”

“I’d rather be bald,” he said with palpable mendacity. “Makes me feel like a fool girl!”

When his brother Curt came in to wash up for supper, Ernie told him about Pop.

“Don’t tell Grampa, and don’t let on about his eyes being red,” he said. “He’s kind of licked, and pitiful.”

“Don’t see how we are going to make it,” said Curt, with his face in the washbowl.

“I do,” said Ernie. “I’m going to work.”

“Fat lot of help you’d be! What you’re going to do is to finish high school, if I got any say-so about it.”

Ernie did not respond. He knew from experience that he was no match for Curt in argument; but he also knew that he was going to carry his point.

They were half through supper when the Captain breezed in. He had been something of a buck in his earlier days, and despite age and reduced finances he still presented a gallant and jaunty appearance, carrying his vices and his virtues with equal pride.

Like the stone-front house, he was at the same time a family asset—and liability. Pop and the boys went without overcoats that he might have a fur collar on his. Rose wore darned gloves and half-soled shoes, but he was always arrayed like a lily of the field, which he resembled in more ways than one.

At an early age he had exchanged his respectable and uninteresting heritage for a mess of pottage, and had thenceforth trod the primrose path. Yet nothing could have looked less like a black sheep than the pink-and-white old gentleman who now gaily took his place at the head of the table.

“What you looking so down about, son?” he demanded of Ernie.

“I’m all right,” said Ernie gruffly.

“Sounds to me like your head’s stopped up.”

“He’s sulking, because I don’t want him to stop school,” explained Rose.

“I’d let him stop if he wants to,” said the Captain. “He’s gone pretty faithful.”

“Talks like an alley rat,” protested Curt. “Nobody would think he was your grandson.”

“You shut up!” cried Ernie. “I ain’t that rotten.”

“You certainly are,” persisted Curt. “Much good your big ideas will do you if you can’t put them into decent English.”

The blow struck home and for once Ernie was without an answer. He gloomily contemplated his big fists as they lay on the red table-cloth. Alone with Pop, he could murder the King’s English and get away with it, and certainly the residents of Wirt’s Division saw nothing unusual in his speech. He felt hurt and abused to have Rose and Curt show him up in an unfavorable light.

“Our Ernie is young yet,” said the Captain, coming to the rescue. “At his age I was more out-of-hand than he is. I had run away from home and was serving as cabin-boy on the *Harry Brown*. That was the steamer that blew up later down below Vicksburg, just opposite the Jefferson Davis plantation. You all remember my telling you about it.”

They certainly did; they had had no opportunity to forget. Nevertheless, they listened with attention to the oft-repeated tale, for, next to Ernie, it was Grampa who lent color and drama to the household, and, whether he was courting the ladies, getting tipsy, or retelling old adventures, his gusto was contagious.

“Heard a lady saying pretty things about you to-day,” said Rose when he finished his recital.

“And who might that be?” he asked, self-consciously.

“Mrs. Myrtle, up at the Beauty Parlor. Said you had a regular school-boy complexion.”

“She don’t look a day over forty, herself,” countered the Captain, showing fine white teeth.

“She don’t act a day over twelve,” said Curt. “I saw her jumping rope in the back yard.”

“That’s to keep her hips down,” said Rose, wisely.

“She’s got the heart of a child,” said Grampa, gazing absently out of the window.

“Oh yeah?” said Curt.

After supper, Ernie put on his roller-skates and went out on the street. Taking a seat on the curbing, he gloomily contemplated the gutter. His sudden decision to leave school shook the world beneath him. While being more than willing to forego the arduous necessity of getting his lessons and subscribing to dull routine, he nevertheless saw the necessity of an education if he was to scale the heights as he confidently expected.

Heretofore he had listened with indifference to the endless discussions of Pop and Rose and Curt concerning the best way to meet the financial needs of the family. But the sight of Pop reduced to tears had brought the matter home to him.

As he sat plunged in thought, he felt a pair of hands clapped over his eyes.

“Tilly Katzenbach!” he said, catching her wrists and flinging off her hands as if their presence were insufferable.

“Come on, skate with me,” she begged.

“Why should I?” asked Ernie. And having thus shown his masculine superiority, he rose and moved off beside her.

Tilly Katzenbach was the girl, recently moved next door, whose mother had been the cause of the dispute earlier in the day concerning a walrus and a hippopotamus. She was sixteen, large, coarse and noisy. She could outskate any one in the neighborhood, and swear volubly in two languages. She and her family were highly disapproved of by the Bossels, chiefly because Pop’s brutal treatment in a concentration camp, during the World War, demanded hatred of all things German.

“Let’s go over to the Park,” suggested Tilly. “Maybe the ice-cream man is still there.”

“Nothing doing,” said Ernie firmly. “I only got a quarter and I promised to take that bum brother of yours to the Zoo.”

“Which one? Adolph?”

“No; Karl.”

“Can I go?”

“If you got the price,” said Ernie.

This lack of gallantry in no wise offended Tilly. She skated gaily beside him, with occasional side glances of admiration.

“Say, you’re growin’ up, Ernie,” she said. “If you’d wash your face and slick up more, you’d be right cute.”

“You telling me?” said Ernie. “Pity I can’t say the same for you.”

As the conversation promised nothing further in that direction, she changed the subject.

“Where’d you get your iron ring at?”

“Traded with a guy at school for a old flash-light. It’s for rheumatism.”

“You got rheumatism?”

“No, but I got to get some use out of the trade, haven’t I?” he demanded savagely.

“Want to see me do a Dutch Roll?” she asked.

“I ain’t particular about it,” he said with an air of pained fatigue.

“Well, watch me! Look!”

He watched her skilful movements with envy, and when she suddenly went skimming down the street found himself careening after her in hot pursuit. It was reckless of one so inexperienced to be intrepid, but he swayed precariously after her until they reached the Park.

Spring was in the air, an impulsive Kentucky spring that leaps right out of

winter, and catching the old earth unaware goes dancing away with it under the sweet warmth of the sun. The air was heavy with the scent of locust blossoms, and squirrels scampered in the tree-tops.

Something primitive seized Ernie, and he became a denizen of the forest in pursuit of prey. When he overtook Tilly, at the pergola, he not only caught her but held her in a deathlike grip. Suddenly she relaxed in his arms and, tossing back her tousled red hair, thrust out the tip of her pink tongue. It was then that Ernie kissed her.

Until now girls had played an insignificant part in his existence, and this sudden impulse surprised him so much that he lost his balance. His head went backward, his feet forward, and for an awful moment he and Tilly clutched and lurched, before they went catapulting down the pergola incline, landing at the bottom with Ernie draped about her still upright form like a fluttering flag around a pole. Unable to maintain his dignity before the crowd of derisive youngsters who had witnessed the performance, he ignominiously turned and fled.

On reaching home he saw Rose in the doorway.

“Come in this minute, Ernie Bossel,” she called. “You know it’s Saturday night.”

“I ain’t dirty.”

“You are, too. Everybody will be wanting the tub at the same time!”

“Couldn’t he wait till morning?” asked the Captain, who had joined them.

But Rose was adamant: “Now, Grampa, you stop spoiling Ernie. He knows he’s got to take a bath Saturday night.”

As they entered the side door and passed into the house, a pleasant odor of pop-corn and apples assailed them.

The dining-room was an architectural portrait of the Bossel family, reflecting as it did their pathos and absurdity, their gaiety and inconsequence, their casual disregard for convention. Rosie’s sewing-machine, Grampa’s rocker, Curt’s accordion, and Ernie’s patent were all in evidence, while a fine old Chippendale sideboard stood aloof in bow-legged dignity. But with all its incongruity it was a cheerful, comfortable room that looked as if it would go on forever, living on its memories and the echoes of laughter it had known.

The Captain paused in the doorway and tried to get the attention of its occupants, but Curt was torturing an old accordion into revealing the “Sweet Mystery of Life,” Pop was engrossed in a game of solitaire, and Rose was already putting on her hat to go out.

“Before you all scatter for the night,” said the Captain, clearing his throat, “I got something of importance I want to get off my mind.”

“Can’t it wait till morning?” said Rose. “I got a date.”

“You can’t put a red queen on a red king, Pop,” remonstrated Ernie,

looking over Mr. Bossel's shoulder.

"What comes after 'At last I've found thee—'?" asked Curt, pausing on an agonizing note.

"Say, listen here, you all," pled the Captain, nervously stroking his chin. "What I've got to tell you will be as much of a surprise to you as it was to me. The truth of the matter is, we are going to have an addition to our family."

The effect of this statement was electrical. Curt dropped his accordion and Pop's cards flew in all directions.

"Mrs. Myrtle," faltered the Captain in great embarrassment, "has done me the honor to say she's willing to marry me. I'm counting on you all to give her a real warm welcome."

There was an ominous silence, and the Captain proceeded to argue his case.

"I don't want any of you should think I'm disloyal to Grandma. It's just because she was such an angel that I want to try another. Mrs. Myrtle is pretty and stylish—"

"And willing," Curt continued. "I bet you never thought of it till she put it in your head."

"Maybe not," admitted the Captain miserably; "but once the idea got in, looked like it couldn't get out."

"Like as not she heard about your insurance," said Curt. "When are you aiming to marry?"

"She selected the thirteenth of July if it don't fall on a Friday. She says nothing could induce her to marry on Friday the thirteenth."

Pop hopefully consulted the big picture calendar that hung over the mantel.

"Saturday," he reported. "Just a day too late!"

The Captain looked so apologetic and dejected, standing twirling his thumbs, that Rose flew to his side and put her arm around him.

"It's all right, darling. Don't you worry. We'll stand by you, no matter what people say."

"We sure will," agreed Pop huskily, as he came over to grasp the Captain's hand.

Ernie maintained a stony silence. The idea of any one taking the place of his beloved grandmother filled him with righteous indignation. For the first time in his fourteen years he stalked off to bed without kissing everybody good night. But it was not until he sat in the bathtub, gloomily soaping his legs, that the full import of the day's happenings broke upon him. The loss of Pop's job, his own decision to stop school, the disturbing experience in the Park, and the impending arrival of a strange female combined to pucker his brow and square his jaw. For the first time Ernie Bossel faced the formidable responsibilities of manhood.

CHAPTER II

The transition from a scholastic to a business career was less easy of achievement than Ernie had imagined. He had something that no other member of the family possessed, a driving power that made him go after what he wanted with the suddenness and directness of a bullet. But he discovered to his amazement that no one seemed to accept him at his own valuation. For months he tramped the streets looking for a job, answering advertisements, and making himself a nuisance to every one he knew.

Disgusted at last with the lack of acumen on the part of the public, he decided to go into business for himself. Plunging recklessly into his capital, he had some cards lettered in red ink on yellow paper which read:

Need a Boy?
That's me!
Ernest Bossel
Jobs. Bicycle Errands. Dirty Work.
\$.20 a hour.
Magnolia 7231.

These, distributed in St. Thomas Court and Park neighborhood, brought in a few responses, but not nearly enough to exhaust the energies of the indefatigable Mr. Bossel. On the side he delivered papers, drove an ice-wagon, and on Sunday nights set up pins in a bowling-alley.

But one must not conclude that he was cut off from the amusements of life. Wirt's Division was a small world in itself, which offered many diversions. It was bounded on the north by aristocracy, on the south by the proletariat, on the east by industry, and on the west by Holy Rollers. At one end of the Bossels' block was a motion-picture theater in front of which stood a slot-machine capable, in an emergency, of being manipulated with a pant's button; at the other end was an engine-house, and back of that a municipal athletic field, where Ernie was a showy performer.

Whether in work or play existence proved a thrilling melodrama, in which he always cast himself for the leading rôle.

His happiest hours, however, were those spent at home, tinkering with his inventions, working on prize competitions, or indulging in the family hobby of studying trade catalogues. He pored over models of artificial arms with Pop, considered seed catalogues with Curt, and even plunged into the intricacies of "ready-to-wears" with Rose.

From all these activities the Captain alone was immune. Having provided a handsome roof for his offspring, he considered his responsibilities forever at an end, and shamelessly lapped the cream from the family milk bowl with an air of kindly condescension. With Buffy, the cat, in his lap, and Roustabout at his feet, he sat in his big rocker, sipped his toddy, and smoked his pipe, in amiable tranquillity that might have passed for spiritual serenity.

For forty years he had neglected his wife, but at her passing had expressed his inconsolable grief by a conspicuous black band on his brown coat sleeve. Now that he had decided to install her successor, he felt a belated concern about the depleted state of the family budget.

“Ernie ought to be at work,” he announced one night. “Where is the boy?”

“He’s down in the cellar trying to yodel,” said Pop. “I never knew a boy to enjoy his voice changing so much!”

“Tell him to come up here, I want to talk to him.”

But when he appeared it was difficult for the Captain to make himself heard. The Bossels had a disconcerting fashion of carrying on a fourway conversation that made interruptions well-nigh impossible.

“I saw a suit up at Stoner’s for ten dollars,” Curt was saying.

“When did it begin to leak?” Pop was asking Rose.

“Stripes or checks?” Ernie inquired of Curt.

“It leaks all the time,” Rose answered Pop.

The Captain assumed his megaphone voice: “Here! Ernie! Listen to me. I been wondering if you couldn’t get work at Peckham’s Pickle Factory.”

“He’d like that,” said Curt. “His girl works there.”

“What girl?” demanded Ernie savagely.

“That red Hessian who lives next door.”

Ernie blushed to the roots of his hair, but the Captain did not notice it.

“Peckham is a smart man,” he said. “I remember when his father brought him up the river on my boat and they didn’t have enough money to wad a gun. Now Peckham’s one of the richest men in town.”

“How’d he get his start?” asked Ernie.

“In the pickle factory,” said the Captain. “And now he owns one of the finest houses in town; they say he’s worth a million.”

“Ernie can’t get in there ‘til he’s sixteen,” said Curt. “Besides there’s six applicants for every vacancy. They don’t want green hands.”

In August the peace of the family was shattered by the advent of the Captain’s new wife. Mrs. Myrtle was a large, baby-faced woman of fifty whose soft exterior belied the hardness within. As an embodied advertisement of her business she presented a startling appearance. Her face had been lifted, her nails lacquered a deep mahogany, her locks hennaed and waved into permanent fury.

The Bossels were a tolerant lot and in the confused tangle of family life there was plenty of room for the exercise of this virtue. But Mrs. Myrtle refused to be assimilated. She disapproved of everything about the house and undertook to change it. Being superstitious about occupying Grampa's big front room on the first floor, she took the best chamber on the second story, and tucked Pop and the boys in two small rear rooms. But it was what she did to the beloved dining-room that caused the greatest consternation. The rocking-chair, and sewing-machine, the musical instruments, and cherished catalogues were ruthlessly swept out, and even the cat and the dog banished to the back porch.

The last act was not unreasonable, for an enmity existed between Buffy and Roustabout that frequently resulted in a fight. One belonged to the proletariat, while the other was an aristocrat. Roustabout would lie with plebeian nose between his paws in the attitude of deceptive innocence, watching Buffy, then, without warning, would pounce on her and place an offensive paw squarely in her face. No lady could quietly submit to such an insult, so Buffy invariably spit in his eye.

It was upon Ernie, however, that Mrs. Myrtle's disfavor rested most heavily. She seemed to think it her duty to discipline him, and the method used was as obnoxious to the rest of the family as it was to him. No sooner did he take his seat at the table and begin as usual to dramatize the events of the day, than she would say:

"Not so much talk from you, young man." And he would collapse into embarrassed silence.

Soon after her arrival she bought him a book called *Don't* which he faithfully perused. So thorough were its prohibitions that, followed literally, it would have paralyzed him completely.

"Can't you get me one called *Do*?" he inquired plaintively.

"What's the use?" she asked. "You are so awkward and clumsy—I wonder if it would help any if you knew how to dance?"

"I know the holts already," said Ernie, "but I don't know the steps."

"Well, I'll try to teach you," she said, turning on the phonograph and seizing him resolutely by the shoulders. "But don't dance on my feet, and for heaven's sake stop counting."

At the end of the second lesson Ernie could reverse with his eyes open, without getting dizzy, and could avoid two out of three obstacles he encountered. By the fourth lesson the rhythm was in his blood, and from that time on he was an addict.

"Never keeps quiet a minute," Rose complained.

If Mrs. Myrtle's advent was disturbing to the Bossels, it was nothing less than catastrophic to the Captain. His twenty years' seniority proved a lever by

which she gained her every wish. With constant suggestion and innuendo she managed to convince him that he was failing mentally and physically and that his judgment was not to be relied upon.

“You got blood pressure,” she told him one day.

“High or low?” he asked anxiously.

“I don’t say which. But you got it. I can tell by your color. My first husband looked pasty like that before he died; and he was fifteen years younger than you.”

The Captain was greatly disturbed. In a long life of perfect health the only discomfort he had ever suffered was a chronic thirst. When the bride insisted that he give up meat, coffee, and tobacco, to say nothing of his toddy, he confided to Pop that he felt like a flat tire on a rough road.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Myrtle’s activities were not confined to the family. Before long she got into a quarrel with a neighbor that landed them both in court. Mrs. Calloway alleged that Mrs. Katzenbach had, with malicious intent, turned the hose on her, thereby causing a severe nervous breakdown, and in rebuttal Mrs. Katzenbach had told the judge that when a lady finds the word “Huns” scribbled on her freshly scrubbed pavement she has a right to resort to hose-play. The case was eventually thrown out of court, but not until the usually peaceful neighborhood had been split in twain.

The Bossels’ loyalty stood by the Captain’s wife, but the old gentleman lost flesh under the strain, and became increasingly anxious about his health. When at last Mrs. Myrtle announced that she was going to have him clinicked, he was so depressed that he broke over and got tight instead.

In the past, when these lapses occurred, they merely rippled the household serenity. The Captain always brought home his load, and if he sang and danced, or sometimes tried to walk on all fours, he was unfailingly gentle, affectionate, and amusing.

In this instance, Mrs. Myrtle made a tragedy of his fall from grace, locking herself in her room and refusing to accept his explanation that it was a mixture of soft drinks that had been his downfall.

“Lemonade and sarsaparilla and root-beer would throw a stronger drinker than me,” he pleaded. “You should have let me stick to rum.”

During the following months the family morale declined steadily. Curt began staying out of evenings; Rose hinted darkly of matrimony; and Ernie carried his activities to the cellar. Only Pop plodded in the accustomed path, humbly waiting on Mrs. Myrtle, and trying to reconcile the conflicting elements.

Yet it was to him that her advent had caused the deepest sorrow. The one private possession he could claim in the entire world was the back yard. Here everything looked up to him and depended upon him, he was the divinity who

provided food and shelter and boundless affection for every living thing that thrust its head above the sandy soil, or peered in at the alley gate. Every available object was utilized as a flower-pot, old saucepans, tin cans, and bits of discarded gutter harbored orphan slips and crippled shrubs. In the ragged border was a heterogeneous assembly, planted without regard for race, creed or condition, pink phlox and magenta petunias consorting in unholy alliance. Squirrels and cats, sparrows and cardinals, dandelions and roses were equally welcome, his interest being paternal rather than esthetic.

Mrs. Myrtle had seen fit to clean up the back yard, and with the reluctant assistance of old black Uncle Jerry had ruthlessly transferred Pop's treasures to the alley and reduced his hopes to despair.

Things might have gone on thus indefinitely had not Ernie's lively imagination found a way out of the difficulty.

"It's funny how I keep on smelling peppermint," he said one day.

"Well, what of it?" demanded Mrs. Myrtle.

"Nothing. Only it makes me think of Grandma. She always carried mint drops in her pocket."

The Captain sniffled audibly, and Rose said, "Now Ernie, you hush! Can't you see you're making Grampa feel bad?"

"Peppermint and wintergreen," continued Ernie dreamily. "Those were her favorites. Sometimes in the night I wake up smelling them; then I always seem to hear her going down the steps—with a kind of limp, you know, like she was tired."

"You give me the creeps!" protested Mrs. Myrtle. "Don't let me catch you saying such things again."

But he not only continued to say them; he backed up his speech with action. Procuring some mint from a vacant lot, he hid it under the Captain's bed, and that night, when the house was still, he limped several times up and down the stairs.

The next morning at breakfast Mrs. Myrtle asked who it was that came in so late, but no one had been out.

"That's the noise I been talking about!" cried Ernie. "I heard it, too. One light step and one heavy one, wasn't it, Mrs. Myrtle?"

The next ghostly manifestation was achieved by the aid of the old-fashioned clock that stood on the hall mantel. For years it had had a constitutional objection to striking on the hour, and even when the hands told the truth the striker would do its best to contradict it. Trading on this lack of integrity, Ernie, by a little manipulation, persuaded the ancient timepiece to announce the midnight hour by striking twenty-four.

Under these disturbing phenomena, Mrs. Myrtle's nervousness increased. "It's bad enough having the children dislike me," she confided to Pop. "But for

the Captain's first wife to come back from the grave to devil me is more than I can stand."

On Christmas night, when Grampa failed to come home, Ernie took Pop down in the cellar, and told him a secret.

"We are going to lose Grampa for good, the first thing you know," he said anxiously. "He's skeered of Mrs. Myrtle, that's what's the matter with him."

"How skeered?"

"Of the tricks she works on him, to cure him of drinking."

"What does she do?" asked Pop.

Ernie, embarrassed, whispered the awful truth, and Pop shuddered.

"No!" he protested. "She surely didn't do that to the Captain."

"That's what he told me. Said she did it while he was asleep. Stuck a darning-needle right into his nable!"

The two looked at each other aghast. That the gallant Captain should have been subjected to such an indignity, even in the cause of virtue, was beyond belief.

"We orter do something about it," said Pop.

"We're goin' to," announced Ernie with decision.

That night at midnight, when the Captain had not returned and Mrs. Myrtle was sitting up in bed listening for every sound she was terrified by a white object that floated repeatedly past her window.

The next morning, before breakfast, she was packing her trunk and preparing to move beyond the reach of ghostly influences.

When it was found out that she did not intend to return, peace and joy descended upon the household. The family promptly snapped back into its accustomed ways; Pop and the boys moved to their old quarters; the litter returned to the dining-room; the Captain ate what he liked and regained his health; and Ernie once more occupied the spotlight.

It was about this time that one of the local newspapers offered a substantial prize to the best-informed boy of high-school age in the city. Ernie's lamentable ignorance did not for a moment deter him from becoming a contestant. Next best to knowing a fact is knowing where to find it, and he promptly sought the assistance of the person whom he thought most likely to know the answers to the long questionnaire.

Miss Hanks had been teaching in the graded schools for fifty years, five of which she had taught Ernie. She was large and square and as full of information as an almanac. But being versed in the ways of adolescence, and knowing Ernie of old, she declined to impart her information, but made him work for it. She furnished him books on history, science and mathematics, but made him wade through the contents to find the desired answers.

Ernie rushed into the enterprise with characteristic fervor. Experiments in

electricity, patents, catalogues were all forgotten in the new and exciting adventure. All through that spring he worked with ardor and confidence. Each new problem was a challenge to be met and conquered. He did not win the prize, but he got honorable mention and had the satisfaction of seeing his picture in the paper.

“Don’t you mind about the prize,” Miss Hanks consoled him. “You’ve learned more in the last six months than you did the whole time you were in school!”

Before Ernie recovered from his disappointment he had another blow. Rose threw the family into a state of consternation by announcing that she was going to be married. For four years every one had saved and scrimped that she might get her training at the City Hospital. That she should, on the very eve of graduating, give up her profession and embark on the uncertain sea of matrimony seemed nothing short of madness.

Ernie was especially indignant. As self-appointed spokesman for the family, he tried to make her see the folly of linking her fate to the knock-kneed, asthma-afflicted Gibbs. But Rose assured him that Bob was one of Nature’s noblemen, and that his delicate health required devoted nursing. She pointed out that with Ernie and Pop now at home to look after Grampa, there was no reason why she should not follow the dictates of her heart. So eloquent and tearful did she become, that it ended in Ernie championing her cause, and advising her to go ahead and live her own life and let the rest of them go hang.

“And don’t you worry, Sis,” he concluded grandly. “Once I get a start, I’ll be taking care of the whole caboodle.”

So Rose got married in the little Methodist Church around the corner; and she, the groom, the bridesmaid, and Curt chewed gum vigorously during the ceremony, while Ernie, sitting between Grampa and Pop, struggled to keep back the tears.

After Rose’s departure the house seemed desolate indeed, for her removal from the closely forged family circle made a gap that was hard to fill.

The four men were now left to the tender mercies of old black Jeremiah who had been doing as little as possible around the premises for twenty years. The simplest task required a colored assistant, and as Curt said, “Jerry was so lazy he had to sit down to sneeze.” For some unknown reason he strapped his legs from ankles to knees, in a sort of puttee effect, wore a patriarchal white beard, and like his illustrious predecessor was seriously addicted to lamentations.

When Ernie was sixteen Grampa found a regular job for him.

“It’s at Jeb Hart’s Garage and Filling Station,” he explained. “Jeb’s father used to pilot for me. I told him you were the family baby, and he mustn’t work you too hard.”

“Oh, gosh! What did you do that for?” wailed Ernie. “I just got through licking the neighborhood for calling me ‘Mellin’s Food.’ Ain’t you all ever going to treat me like I’m grown?”

The Captain laughingly rumped the boy’s shining hair.

“You’ll always be our Ernie to us, Sonny, no matter how old you get!”

CHAPTER III

When Ernie started on his first regular job, Pop thought it was time to have a long-deferred talk with him about the perils of life. It was hard to find the time and the place and Ernie all together, but one day the feat was accomplished.

“Before you go out into the world, boy,” began Pop heroically, “there’s things you ought to be told.”

“How you mean?”

“Pitfalls,” said Pop darkly. “Girls and liquor and dice.”

Ernie was impressed with his solemnity. Pop’s homely, wistful face, bearing the lines of constant pain, was drawn with earnestness.

“You’ll probably want to try ’em all,” Pop went on; “that’s the human nature of a male, but if you are smart you’ll see they don’t pay. Not that I don’t want you to go with nice girls. Your Mamma was as clean and high-minded a lady as ever lived, and you and me and Curt must never do anything to shame her memory. You understand, Sonny?”

“Yes, sir.”

“As to liquor, a person as bursting with life as you are don’t need anything to raise his spirits. You got something inside you that turns the trick without any help from outside. Don’t you go and tamper with it.”

“No, sir.”

“Just remember that if the Bossels weren’t much, the Calloways were. ‘Way back there in the early days of Kentucky a girl bearing your Mamma’s name, Betsy Calloway, was the first white woman to be married in the State. You belong to fine old pioneer stock, folks that braved hardship and danger and lived clean and decent, and founded one of the greatest States in the Union. It’s up to you to carry on. Can I count on you?”

“You bet you can!” said Ernie, stirred by Pop’s emotion, and rashly ready to promise anything.

From the time he started to work he liked everything about his job except the early hour he was required to be at the Garage. Getting him up in the morning had always been a major operation, but now it was more imperative than before. First Pop called him, then Grampa went in and pulled the covers off, and as a last resort Curt threw a wet towel in his face, and slapped him on the back.

After he got started the difficulty was in stopping him. He was so filled with high spirits that he must needs spill them over on every one he came in contact with.

“He’s the most bumptious kid I ever encountered!” Jed Hart complained to the Captain. “Underfoot every minute, dancing and singing and cracking jokes. He works all right, but he thinks he knows it all.”

“Nothing but a colt,” smiled the Captain fatuously. “Just wait till he gets broke to harness.”

Psychoanalysts might explain Ernie’s boastfulness by claiming that it covered an inferiority complex, but nothing was further from the truth. He saw the best in himself just as he saw it in every one else, and was quite as vocal in expressing it.

He thoroughly liked himself, his family, his friends, his home, and his job, and he was never shy about saying so.

The work at the Garage presented many possibilities for adventure, and whether he was tinkering with the cars or waiting on customers he thoroughly enjoyed himself. The most welcome patrons of the Filling Station were the drivers of Peckham’s delivery cars, which were surmounted by huge green pickles. Ernie would rather have driven one of those outfits than to have been Mayor of the city!

Next in interest were the cars driven by girls. Having exhausted the feminine possibilities of Wirt’s Division, he longed for a wider field of conquest and the Filling Station presented fascinating opportunity for new contacts.

The fact that his personal appearance had undergone a marked change contributed largely to this enjoyment. With the passing of his sixteenth year a becoming sparseness had replaced the too-generous curves of childhood. His shoulders had broadened, his hips narrowed, and the slouchy gait, so deplored by Mrs. Myrtle, had changed into a conscious dignity of carriage that resembled the Captain’s.

One day, when he had been at Hart’s Garage a year, he was sitting alone at the manager’s desk, feet elevated, a hamburger in hand, singing loudly off key, and at peace with the world, when the peremptory honk of a horn brought him to the door.

What he saw caused him to drop his sandwich and rush to the sidewalk. A girl of about his own age was at the wheel of a small blue coupé, and from the impatient way she honked her horn he judged she was in a hurry.

“Five gallons regular,” she said. “Here’s a bill, and please be quick about it.”

Her voice was a rich contralto, and she clipped her words with a new and disturbing intonation. As he filled the tank, he ventured another look at her, and what he saw convinced him that the wind-shield needed attention.

“You needn’t bother about that,” she said impatiently.

“No bother whatever,” he answered her, smearing the glass with cleansing

fluid, and leaving a small peep-hole for observation.

She was straight and slim and exceedingly pretty, and she surveyed the world with a look of devil-may-care haughtiness.

“I wonder what’s eatin’ her?” he thought as he continued vigorously to polish the most minute spots on the wind-shield. He was acutely conscious of his big grimy hands and of the grease spots on his blue shirt; but that did not deter him from audaciously trying to catch her eye. Past experience encouraged him to believe that persistence would win him a smile, and he failed to see that she was getting very angry.

“That will do,” she said at last, and her tone was final.

“Oil?” he suggested hopefully.

“No. But I should like my change.”

There was a sharpness in her voice that made him hurry into the office and return with a handful of silver.

She took the change, then handed him back a quarter.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“For you,” she said.

He stood looking down on her extended hand, too amazed to be offended; then slowly the color crept into his face.

“I’m sorry,” said the girl impulsively.

Ernie’s face broke into a boyish grin. “It was coming to me,” he said, “for being so darned fresh.”

“Then the honors are even,” she smiled back, as she put her foot on the accelerator.

He had no idea what she meant by “honors are even,” but her smile had been so sudden and warm, so young and understanding that it proved his complete undoing. Hers was an entirely new type, too slim and pale, and indifferent, yet every turn of her proud little head, every tone of her imperious voice continued to haunt him.

That night as he went home, his mind was full of disturbing questions. Why hadn’t he known that a classy girl like that would not flirt with a guy at a filling station? Would she recognize him if she ever saw him again? Would she be mad at him, or would she smile that quick funny understanding smile she had given him at parting?

So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he did not see Tilly Katzenbach standing at her gate. Ever since that episode in the Park long ago she had assumed an intimacy that Ernie found increasingly distasteful.

“You ain’t been around much lately,” she said, “not since Ma had the fracas with that old hell-cat.”

Ernie held no brief for Mrs. Myrtle, but he was nevertheless offended at this insult to Grampa’s erstwhile wife. Never before had Tilly seemed so

common and vulgar, and he passed her by with lofty indifference.

At his back door, he stumbled over Buffy and Roustabout, who were indulging in one of their frequent altercations. Whenever the former exercised her divine prerogative of chasing her tail, the act filled her canine companion with fury. At sight of Ernie, Roustabout forgot all disciplinary measures and hurled himself upon the new-comer with such joyous barks that Pop opened the kitchen door to investigate the commotion.

“Come on in!” he cried eagerly. “Rose is here and she’s going to stay and get supper.”

It proved quite like old times with Rose bustling about in a gingham apron, and everybody laughing and talking at once, and the canary doing its best to out-chatter them all.

“Bob, you bring the hot plates into the dining-room,” Rose directed, “and everybody pull up his chair. Now, Pop, ask the blessing.”

Months of Jerry’s cooking had made the family more than ready for Rose’s savory dishes. Fillets of beef, rings of fried onions, greens and bacon, steaming coffee and corn-pone disappeared like magic. There was much chaffing and good-natured banter and the happiness that the Bossel ensemble invariably produced.

Having little else but life to enjoy, they made the most of it. There was some quality in them that refused to be sordid or dull. Life might deny them luxuries but it had no control over their laughter. Grampa might be in the toils of a new female, Pop suffering from asthma, Curt worried over finances, and Rose anxious about Bob’s health; but once they were assembled in the dining-room, with Roustabout and Buffy underfoot, the canary singing and the radio going, everything disturbing was forgotten.

“We’ll get washed up early and all go to a movie,” suggested Rosie. “I can pay for two.”

“I can pay for everybody!” said Ernie with the reckless extravagance induced by his first real earnings.

“Oh, let’s all stay home, and have a sing-song,” begged Grampa.

So they all settled down to their old occupations, Bob Gibbs contributing his bit by playing on a harmonica.

“Let’s swing a hymn,” said Grampa from the depths of his rocker. “‘Rock of Ages’ is a good one.”

They all joined in, Rose’s high soprano mingling with Pop’s cracked tenor, Grampa booming in with a bass, and Ernie trying all three.

Before long Ernie began to feel restless, and his thoughts wandered.

“Where’s that old *Don’t* book Mrs. Myrtle give me?” he demanded.

“I believe it’s under the table leg,” said Rose, “and by the way, you ought to say ‘gave’ and not ‘give.’”

Ernie sighed. He had gotten past “I seen” and “I done” but there were evidently many other dragons along the verbal highway. His recent collision with Romance made him feel the necessity of grappling with them.

“What ails you, son?” asked Grampa. “You don’t look so good to me.”

All eyes were promptly focused on Ernie.

“Liverish,” diagnosed Pop.

“Oh, I’m all right!” said Ernie impatiently.

“You are just saying that because you don’t want to take cod-liver oil. Put out your tongue.”

He presented a blameless member for inspection.

“I guess he’s mooning about Tilly Katzenbach,” teased Curt.

Pop’s usually mild eyes hardened. “Surely no son of mine would be running round with a Prussian. I don’t say they’re all bad, but when they start talking down our country, and throwing their dirty propaganda all over the place, it makes me sore.”

“Now that fellow Hitler has succeeded Hindenberg it’s going to be worse,” said Curt. “They’ve got a organization called the Nazi, and they’ll be up to devilment a plenty.”

“I bet Mr. Katzenbach will be mixed up in it,” said Ernie, intrigued with the idea.

“They are beneath our notice,” pronounced the Captain. “Let’s talk of something more agreeable.”

Through that long summer Ernie worked faithfully at the Garage, buoyed by the thought that each coupé that stopped by the Filling Station might contain a brown-eyed girl with a contralto voice and the imperious air of a young princess. But she did not come, and the thought of her gradually receded to that little secret niche in his memory where he hid all his treasures.

During August he was put on night duty, and found the long hours of inactivity very trying. Few people stopped for gas, and with the exception of an occasional emergency call there was little to occupy his time. One midnight when things were at their dulllest, a telephone call came, asking that a truck be sent at once to pull a car out of a ditch on the Country Club lane.

“You’ll have to go,” said the man in charge; “I’ve got work to do on the books.”

Ernie, glad of a chance for action, flung his tools in the back of a truck and climbing into the driver’s seat, sped across the city and out the River Road. The night was dark and he had trouble finding the right lane, but at last his headlight picked up a small coupé half off the road. When he saw the color of it his heart gained a beat.

Two strangers, however, were in possession; an hysterical little lady in evening dress sat in the car nursing an injured elbow, while a foreign-looking

gentleman fumbled futilely with the gears.

At the sight of Ernie the lady gave a cry of relief.

“What an eternity you have been getting here,” she cried. “My arm is hurt, and I’ve got to get home as quickly as possible.”

“Not broken, is it?” queried Ernie solicitously.

“Not exactly, but I’m sure it’s frightfully skinned.” Then turning to the man sitting sullenly beside her, she said coaxingly, “Gustav, dear, won’t you get out and let this nice young man see if he can start the car?”

The gentleman descended unsteadily, but no sooner had he reached the ground than he clapped his hand over his mouth and disappeared into the bushes.

“Oh, dear!” said the lady petulantly, as she alighted. “I told him not to drink that last highball. How *am* I going to get home?”

“Would you drive in the truck with me?”

“In these clothes? Of course not. You’ll just have to get this car started and take me home in it, and then come back for him.”

“But, lady,” protested Ernie, “I can’t leave my truck here.”

This complication had evidently not occurred to her, and she began to cry again, wringing her hands and asking him what on earth she must do. He decided that she was the kind of lady whose mind had to be made up for her, and he was distinctly flattered when she put herself, her scarf, and the gentleman’s hat in his hands and trustingly asked for advice.

Attaching a chain from the truck to the coupé, he proceeded to pull the car back on the road, and all the time he worked the lady kept up an incessant flow of conversation.

“It isn’t far,” she coaxed. “You can be back in half an hour. You’d do it if you knew how bad my arm hurt me. Feel what a big lump?”

Her voice was soft and coaxing, and the round white arm she offered for inspection showed a bad bruise.

“Is there any one at your house who could come back with me to drive the car and the gentleman home?” Ernie asked, weakening.

“There’s Eloise,” she said doubtfully. “I hate to ask her, but you could trail them, couldn’t you?”

“Sure, if he would come with her.”

“Oh! She can manage him all right. He’s a perfect lamb when he’s tight. Hush, here he comes now!”

The object of their discussion scrambled feebly up to the road and stood leaning limply against the car as she explained their plan. Even at his present disadvantage he bore himself with an air of distinction, and on his face was an expression of contemptuous condescension.

“Quite ridiculous,” he said thickly. “Perfectly capable of taking you home.

Just because a man's not used to these cheap American cars—'s no reason—”

He got no further, for his legs buckled under him and he would have fallen had not Ernie supported him.

“Be all right presently,” he muttered. “Just assist me into car.”

But, instead, Ernie assisted him into the truck, where he promptly collapsed.

“Poor dear!” said the little lady, “he's all in, isn't he? Let me put my scarf under his head. He'd so hate to have his face on the floor like that. Do you think he will be all right while we are gone?”

Ernie was much more concerned about leaving his truck than about leaving the gentleman. In a fever of anxiety to accomplish his errand, and get back as soon as possible, he broke the speed limits, and did not discover until he had reached the city that he had left his keys in the truck.

“They'll be all right,” his companion assured him. “Mr. Bohn will never wake up until you get back. How many miles are we making an hour? I love driving like this!”

She had apparently forgotten all about her arm, and was thoroughly enjoying herself. She chattered incessantly, emphasizing her remarks with eyes and hands, and only pausing occasionally to powder her nose. Ernie had never met any one so expert in verbal acrobatics. She could grasp the tail of a sentence and swing herself into another subject with the agility of a monkey. Her adjectives were for the most part monogamous, having the same noun, but the nouns were disgracefully polygamous, flaunting four or five adjectives at a time.

Ernie thought it funny that a lady, old enough to be his mother, should roll her eyes at him and call him a lamb. To be sure he was only a plain lamb, whereas the gentleman they had left was a dear lamb, and the person they were going to fetch was a precious lamb.

In the course of the conversation he learned that his companion was the widow of an Army Officer who had divorced her for going on the stage, and that she had just lost a filling out of her front tooth; that her daughter was going to be an artist if she didn't marry a rich young man in Boston who threatened to kill himself if she continued to refuse him; that Mr. Bohn had won medals in Switzerland for skiing, and had not been tight for ages, and that none of them had been long in America.

It was a bit confusing, but none the less exhilarating, to be taken into the confidence of such a pretty stranger who regarded him with undisguised admiration.

“You look exactly like an old sweetheart of mine,” she told him. “The same blue eyes and broad shoulders. Funny, isn't it, how little women always adore big men?”

Ernie looked very much embarrassed and asked which was her apartment.

“The Greenhill, across the street there. You wait here and I’ll go up and get Eloise. It won’t take a minute.”

Even before a light flared in an upper window, Ernie’s dawning hope was becoming a certainty. Nor was he disappointed. When the two figures presently emerged from the dark doorway, he recognized the younger one instantly.

“This boy will take care of you,” the lady was saying as they reached the car. “Isn’t he the living image of Bertie Phipps? He’s from Hart’s Garage.”

The girl shot a glance at him as he stood holding open the door.

“Yes, I know him,” she said in the rich contralto voice he remembered. “He’s all right. Go in, Mother, and bathe your arm in hot water. If it doesn’t get better soon, call Dr. Felder.”

“You’ll be gentle with Gustav, won’t you?” implored her mother. “He’ll be so mortified when he knows what’s happened.”

The girl said nothing, but sat bolt upright, her lips in a tight, scornful line.

As in a trance, Ernie drove her back across town, through one deserted street after another. The flickering arc-lights at the intersections cast distorted shadows on the surrounding buildings, and the midnight silence shut them in like a fog. No one could have been more different from his former voluble companion than the grim, preoccupied young person beside him. But she had remembered him; she had trusted him, and nothing else seemed to matter.

Only once did she speak.

“Is he very bad?” she asked.

“Who? Your father?”

“He isn’t my father!” she said vehemently. “He’s a friend of mother’s, more’s the pity.”

“He’s too bad for you to handle alone,” said Ernie.

“I’ve done it before,” she said. “Twice.”

The broad brim of her hat hid her face, but he could feel the bitterness and scorn in her voice, and his blood boiled at the thought of a young girl being sent on such an errand. Just how he was going to get Mr. Bohn and the car and the truck back to town he did not know, but of one thing he was certain, he was not going to leave her alone with that man.

As they neared their destination, he began to have a belated realization of his folly in leaving the truck, and his conscience stirred uneasily.

Nor were his fears unfounded. When they reached the scene of the accident, both Mr. Bohn and the truck had disappeared.

Leaping from the car, Ernie tore frantically up and down the road, shouting from right to left as he ran. But all he discovered was an apparently unimportant note-book that lay open in the mud, on the spot where Mr. Bohn

had been helped into the truck. Thrusting it hurriedly into his pocket, he rushed back to the car to break the disturbing news to Miss Wynne.

CHAPTER IV

Most fulfilled dreams are bought for a price, and Ernie paid for his with his job. The abandoned truck was found in an asparagus bed on a private estate, and Ernie's impassioned explanation to Jeb Hart as to how it got there was wholly unconvincing.

Neither the police station nor the newspapers gave any information as to what had become of Mr. Bohn, and Ernie forbore to inquire at the Greenhill Apartment, not wanting his new friends to know what his gallantry had cost him.

It was not until a week later, when Ernie discovered the note-book he had carelessly thrust into the pocket of his overalls, that he decided it was his duty to return it. Not that it seemed of any importance—just closely written pages in a foreign language, with occasional columns of letters in groups of five, and on one page a queer clock-shaped device with a double border formed by the alphabet. But it would serve as an excuse for a call, so he hopefully donned his best suit, brushed his hair to a shining slickness and presented himself at the Greenhill Apartment, only to be told by the janitor that the lady and her daughter had moved.

"That Dago man give up his apartment, too," he said. "They all moved out at the same time, and didn't leave no address whatsoever."

Ernie's dismissal from the Garage was accepted by the family with characteristic resignation. It was agreed that it was too bad it came at a time when taxes were due, and the stork expected at the Gibbs's house. But, as Pop pointed out, Ernie had done what he thought he ought; the truck wasn't hurt none, and there was no real cause for worry.

But with the subtraction of even his small salary, further economies were necessary, and every one but the Captain tightened his belt to meet the emergency. Curt pawned his watch, Ernie his bicycle, and Pop cut the food budget to a minimum. There was even talk of letting Jerry go, but Jerry indignantly declined.

Ernie found it even more difficult to get his second job than he had his first. The fact that he had worked a year in one place and had no reference counted against him. So he went back to odd jobs, not scorning washing windows and cleaning sidewalks, occupations that were hampered by his interest in every passing car.

"Guess I'm a nut to keep thinking about her," he told himself repeatedly. "I'm nothing but a mechanic to her. She's probably forgotten what I look like."

Despite his preoccupation with his ideal, he was soon casting about for

some more accessible object upon which to bestow his attention, and candidates were not lacking.

Peckham's Pickle Factory engaged hundreds of girls, many of whom lived in the vicinity of Wirt's Division. It was all too easy to accept the proffered society of slipshod young damsels who expected nothing more than evenings in the Park, when they could instruct a big, good-looking novice in the amatory art.

With disregard for the unwritten law of his class that "a fellow mustn't carry two," he flitted casually from one instructor to another, his interest waning in each almost before it had started.

By the time he reached his eighteenth birthday, the depression which had swept the country was at its worst. Factories closed, bread-lines lengthened, and men and women, boys and girls, walked the streets begging for work. Even Ernie's buoyant nature showed the strain. Something seemed wrong with a world in which a big strong chap like himself who wanted above all things to be independent could get no work. He felt like a motor running at full speed with the brakes on.

Heretofore he had always felt that something wonderful was about to happen to him. But this ardent expectancy and gay confidence were shaken as the weeks passed into the months and the months into years and he found no employment. The glamorous world in which he had lived until now, seemed to be changing into a strange place of sordid facts and problems without solution.

His interest in his patent had long since given place to a more absorbing hobby. A month's employment in a telephone company had led him to experimenting with electricity, with the result that a network of wire entanglements adorned the Bossel premises. One long cord led to Rose's sewing-machine, another to her iron; a connection crawled across the ceiling and down the wall to light a lamp by Grampa's chair, while a double-socket furnished heat for an electric pad and fan. An even more ambitious undertaking was the instalment of a home-made dial detector which possessed the highly useless accomplishment of discovering the destination of calls from distant dial-phones.

"You see," he explained to Pop, "by these dots on the paper tape the clicks of a distant dial can be recorded, and the number called."

"You certainly are smart," said Pop.

"I aim to be," said Ernie, "but it don't seem to get me anywhere."

"You watch your chances," advised Pop.

"Not me," said Ernie. "I've got to make 'em. Things don't come to you; you got to go after them."

Pop carefully injected a quid of tobacco into his right cheek before speaking.

“I ain’t pretending to understand about life,” he said, “but I know there’s times when we just got to sit tight. You can’t see where you are going or what it’s all for, but your business is to stay in the saddle and keep pedaling.”

One dreary autumn day found Ernie downtown at noon debating whether he should spend his last dime on a sandwich or a carfare home. He had tramped since morning from one address to another, waiting interminable hours between times, only to be told there was no work to be had. Gusts of cold wind swept around the corners, and low growls of thunder grew louder and angrier. Presently a few drops of rain fell, then came a deluge. It proved to be not a passing shower, but a continuous downpour, the kind that seemed bent on getting inside one’s collar and up one’s sleeves and making everything as uncomfortable as possible.

Before long the city had become blurred and out of focus, and Ernie scurried into a doorway for shelter. His second-hand clothes, neatly pressed that morning, hung in bedraggled folds about him, and the water trickled from his limp hat brim.

As he stood there drenched, hungry, and discouraged, a delivery wagon backed up to the curbing, and the driver jumped down and began frantically dragging out open trays containing small iced cakes.

“Here!” cried Ernie. “You get back in the wagon and pass ’em down to me. I’ll hustle ’em into the store for you.”

“It’s a rush order,” explained the man breathlessly. “Our bakery was an hour late gettin’ ’em done.”

Working furiously, they soon had the trays under cover, while the red-faced proprietor of the shop stood by, gesticulating and swearing.

“I got to repack und deliver all dem cakes by two o’clock. You tell dot damn bakery I’m done. See?”

“Where’s Junior?” asked the driver.

“You astin’ me?” said the man.

“Why can’t I help you?” asked Ernie as he carried the last big tray to safety.

The proprietor of the shop eyed him suspiciously.

“Who might you be?”

“Ernest Bossel. Maybe you’ve heard of my grandfather. Captain Calloway of the *Ohio Queen*.”

“Never heard tell of him. But I got to have help. Would you take a half-day’s pay?”

“Sure! I’ll work for nothing this afternoon if you’ll let me come back tomorrow.”

This evidence of good will produced such a favorable impression on the proprietor that he brought out a pair of cotton pants and a blue apron.

“Them’s Junior’s,” he said. “Put ’em on.”

Hastily exchanging the wet clothes for the dry ones, Ernie flung himself into the task of repacking the trays and hustling them into another wagon at the back of the establishment.

“You go ’long to help unload ’em—to the Union Hotel. See?”

“O. K.,” called Ernie, scrambling up beside the driver, “but say, Mister, who am I working for?”

“Gorman & Son, Confectioners,” yelled the man, as the wagon got under way.

This was the beginning of a business affiliation that had far-reaching results. For a negligible sum, Ernie was expected to wash windows, scrub floors, wait on customers and occasionally substitute for “Junior,” who was given to periodic lapses from grace. Before long, however, Mr. Gorman discovered that Ernie’s talents were wasted on manual labor. He bought him a cheap suit and a pair of shoes, gave him a list of prospective customers, and sent him out to solicit trade.

Nothing could have suited the youngest Bossel better. He spent his evenings studying the society columns for news of coming weddings and balls. He haunted florist shops, hotels, and dance-halls, for any bits of useful information he could pick up. He pored over books on salesmanship, and tried to apply all the instruction given on each prospective customer.

“Dot Bossel boy!” Mr. Gorman told his wife. “He sure was born to be a Elk! Makes friends mit everybody, black and white, rich und poor. I got a mind to raise him a buck.”

At the end of a year Ernie’s stock went still higher, when through his efforts, the firm secured the order for the largest social affair of the season. It seems that Miss Peckham, only child of the pickle millionaire, was to have a coming-out party, on Christmas Eve at the Country Club, and the Club did not furnish refreshments during the winter months. Acting on his own initiative, Ernie called up the factory and asked to speak to Mr. Peckham personally. An icy feminine voice replied that Mr. Peckham was engaged, and could only be reached by appointment.

“That’s just what I am trying to make—an appointment,” said Ernie. “Ask him what time he will see me. Tell him it’s important.” After an anxious wait, the voice called back requesting his name and the nature of his business.

“Ernest Bossel is the name. The business is confidential.”

Another wait before Ernie was informed that Mr. Peckham would see him between two and three.

On the stroke of two Ernie, arrayed in his new suit, of that peculiar shade of blue to which the sun does poisonous things, was impatiently pacing up and down in front of the vast establishment dedicated to the production of fine

foods. As far down the street as he could see one big square building followed another, and in the center was a smaller one with a chaste Greek portico, over which was a colossal sign:

PECKHAM'S
PICKLES & FOOD PRODUCTS

Squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin, he opened the door marked "Administration Building," and asked the first man he saw where he could find Mr. Peckham.

"Got an appointment?" asked the clerk, and on being answered in the affirmative he told Ernie to have a seat in the hall.

Here he sat for an hour, nobody taking the slightest notice of him, while the humming activity of the big plant buzzed about him.

At last an old man put his head out of a door and asked if he was waiting to see Mr. Peckham.

"He is probably waiting to see me," said Ernie affably. "Our appointment was at two."

The old man's manner changed and he led the way into a front room where things were even more hectic than in the hall. Several clerks with papers in hand were milling about, two stenographers were hammering noisily at typewriters, and a telephone was ringing in an inner office.

At a big flat-topped desk sat a powerfully built man radiating energy like a dynamo. His graying hair was carefully espaliered around a bold spot, but his snapping eyes and big strong jaws were full of youthful vitality.

"All right, Jones," he was saying, running a hairy hand over a hairless brow, "get those shipments out by four, not a minute later. And, Miss Smithers, take down this dictation. No, Tom, it's in the lower file, you nitwit! not in the upper one! For God's sake, why doesn't somebody answer that damned telephone?"

Ernie, exhilarated, and impressed with the bustling confusion, and seeing that no one was free, impulsively dashed into the next room and seized the receiver.

"Hello! Yes?" he said. "This is Peckham's. He's busy at the moment. Can I take the message? You want to place an order? All right, sir; I'll get a pencil. Now, go ahead. Five dozen each—apricot, blackberry and quince. Three dozen jars of peanut butter, a dozen bottles of vinegar, six cider, and six tarragon. Yes, sir, I've got it. Out on the next delivery? Yes, sir. Tenth and Jefferson."

As Ernie rose from the telephone, he encountered the formidable person of Cyrus W. Peckham. He was standing, slightly knock-kneed, hat on the back of his head, cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth, and his expression was

far from amiable.

“Who in the hell are you?” he demanded. “I don’t remember seeing you around here before.”

“I’m Bossel, sir—Ernest Bossel. I had an appointment—”

“Well, what do you mean by answering my telephone as if you were an employee?”

“You said for somebody to answer it, and everybody was busy. I’m used to taking orders, and I’m sure I got this one all right. I hope you can deliver it at once. The man said he was in a terrible hurry.”

“We can deliver goods at any time to any place,” said Mr. Peckham pompously. Then, turning to a clerk, he added, “Take that order out to the delivery department and tell them to rush it through. And now, young man,” he said to Ernie, “I’ll give you exactly two minutes to state your business.”

“It’s about your party,” said Ernie, quailing inwardly. “I’m representing Gorman & Son, Confectioners.”

“In the name of Jehoshaphat!” exploded Mr. Peckham, growing purple around the gills. “Do you mean to say you barged in here to devil me about that? I’ve got no time to be thinking of parties.”

“But you’ve got to think of it some time,” persisted Ernie. “It’s only a week off.”

“Well, what of it? A chap from a Chicago firm is coming in to see me in the next day or two.”

“That might be too late,” pronounced Ernie emphatically. “Besides, why patronize a Chicago firm when we are equipped to take care of you here at home? We can manage the whole blowout, decorations, music, refreshments, service—everything.”

Mr. Peckham looked at him appraisingly. “You mean, I won’t have to plan anything?”

“Not a thing. You say the word and we do the rest.”

“Well, go to it!” cried Mr. Peckham, manifestly relieved. “Tell Gorman I want the best of everything. Tell him it’s got to be the handsomest shindig of the season. I’ll show some of those society snobs that Cyrus W. Peckham knows how to throw a party!”

“Leave it to us!” cried Ernie, enthusiastically extending his hand. “We’ll show ’em!”

CHAPTER V

The day of the ball found Gorman & Son in wild confusion. The Peckham order was the most important the firm had ever had. No expense for the occasion had been spared, and Mr. Gorman's cupidity, combined with Ernie's imagination, had resulted in a display destined to outdo anything ever before attempted at the Country Club. The one serious hitch in the otherwise perfect development of plans was that Junior, who acted as head waiter on special occasions, elected to celebrate Christmas at a party of his own and failed to report for work on the morning of the twenty-fourth.

"What's the matter with using me?" suggested Ernie to his distracted boss. "I can wear his clothes and I know all the ropes."

Mr. Gorman regarded the proposition doubtfully, but the time was short and the necessity pressing.

Nine P.M. found our excited young man, groomed to perfection, in Son's evening clothes, receiving the admiration of his family. It was the first time he had ever had on tails, and it must be confessed that his extremely high opinion of his appearance in them was completely justified.

"You look perfectly stunning!" said Rose, who was home for the holidays. "We won't open any of the presents or light the tree in the morning until you come down."

"That will be tough on little Nicky," objected Bob Gibbs, but the Bossels were united in their determination to have Ernie present.

"Seems like only yesterday that we was playing Santa Claus for you," said Pop, smoothing down his coat collar, "and here you are all grown up and looking like you owned a diamond mine in South Africa."

"Maybe I will some day," said Ernie, preening before the mirror.

"The Kohinoor for a shirt stud, eh?" said Curt, but even in his voice there was a note of pride.

When Ernie reached the Country Club he found Mr. Peckham already there in a new dress suit with flaring lapels, pleated trousers, and a wide expanse of bulging white shirt front. The one discrepancy in his costume was a bedroom slipper which enveloped a gouty foot.

Together the two men made the rounds of the Club-House, inspecting the decorations, commenting on the splendid condition of the dancing floor, approving of everything. Hundreds of small Christmas trees blazed with lights, clusters of gaily colored balloons tugged at their moorings, roses were banked everywhere. On the long closed porch, under palms and ferns, were laid the supper tables, and at the far end an improvised fountain sent jets of changing

lights into the flower-scented air.

Mr. Peckham was delighted. "It's as pretty as a show," he declared. "I want the music to play all the time. Understand? One band to take up right where the other leaves off. Where are the cake boxes?"

Ernie led him to the entrance hall where, on a long table, small white boxes were piled, each one tied with a satin ribbon and each bearing in silver the word "Sarah." This was Mr. Peckham's idea. People had cake boxes at weddings, why not at parties? He had carried his point against all Mr. Gorman's protests.

"That girl of mine won't come out but once," he said to Ernie, "and, by golly, she shall do it with a bang! My only regret is that her Mamma can't see it. You see, Sarah is the only one of our children we ever raised, and when Mamma died I said to Aunt Melvy, Sarah's nurse, I said, 'This child is going to have everything I can give her.'"

The guests, as usual, were very late in arriving, and Mr. Peckham paced the floor in anxiety, fearful lest there had been some confusion about the date. But when at last they came, and the dancing began, his spirits soared. All these stylish young people dancing to the music he was paying for; drinking the champagne punch he had provided; coming up and speaking to his little Sarah! He fairly shone with pride and good humor.

Down in the pantry Ernie directed a score of waiters, superintended the unpacking of food, and arranged for the elaborate midnight supper. He felt very happy and important, but vaguely disturbed by the beat of the music overhead. It was almost midnight before he went upstairs to see that the tables were in readiness. As he reached the dimly lighted porch, the full strains of the orchestra burst upon him and he executed a few steps behind the fountain before he realized that he was not alone.

"Sorry!" he said. "Did I bump you?"

A heavy-set girl in a voluminous white dress, with a pearl cap slightly askew, was sitting against the wall in the shadow. Her arms, encased in long gloves, cradled a huge bouquet of orchids and roses, which she held in front of her face.

"Are you sick?" asked Ernie solicitously. "Can I get you some water?"

"I'm all right," she faltered. "I just got tired sitting in there and nobody asking me to dance."

"Oh, say, you oughtn't to feel that way," said Ernie, embarrassed.

"Well, I do! Boys are brought up and introduced, then they move right on. I haven't danced but twice to-night."

One of Ernie's sudden impulses seized him, and without considering the enormity of his social error, he said: "What's the matter with trying this with me?"

She arose with alacrity, and they began a perilous progress around the fountain. She was no better dancer than he, but in the semi-darkness, with the music throbbing in their ears, and the fragrance of the flowers filling the air, youth called to youth, and the dance ended all too soon.

“I better get going,” said Ernie sheepishly when they had finished. “I don’t belong here. I’m Ernest Bossel, the head waiter.”

She looked at him with surprise, but no resentment. “I should have known from your black tie,” she said. “I’m Sarah Peckham.”

Ernie was scandalized. “You shouldn’t be out here! You ought to be in there with your friends.”

“They are not my friends,” she said passionately. “I don’t know any of them except a few girls I went to school with. I told Papa it would be like this! I begged him not to give the party. You are the only man that’s come up to me of his own accord all evening. And you fell over me!”

They both laughed, and Ernie said indiscreetly: “What if I fell for you?”

The effect of his words was amazing. All the humiliation and resentment left her face, and a look of pride and pertness took their place.

“Head waiter or not,” she said, “you are the best-looking man at my party.”

At that moment the music began again and couple after couple glided past the French window.

Suddenly Ernie’s muscles tightened and his eyes widened. “Who is that girl in green?” he demanded eagerly.

“Eloise Wynne. She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

Ernie did not answer. His attention was riveted on the graceful figure in shimmering green. She wore no ornaments, no make-up, no curls, but from the crown of her burnished bronze head to the tip of her sophisticated sandal she gave an impression of smart simplicity and high distinction that made her the most conspicuous figure on the floor.

Ernie could hardly believe that this gloriously disturbing young person was the grim, unhappy girl with whom he had once spent a midnight searching for a lost truck and a drunken driver.

“Some people think she’s too severe,” he heard Miss Peckham saying. “And she’s sarcastic all right. But she’s the only person here besides you, who has been nice to me. When she saw that Dad and I didn’t know people, she came and stood beside us and introduced them. I used to know her at Art School, but that was before they lost their money.”

Ernie was scarcely listening. He was saying over and over to himself, “Eloise Wynne, Eloise Wynne,” as if he were repeating a paternoster.

When the strains of the waltz ceased and he could no longer feast his eyes on the vision in green, he drew a deep breath and, leaving Miss Peckham to her fate, dashed down to the pantry where for the next hour the serving of food and

superintending of a corps of colored waiters taxed his resources and precluded thoughts of romance.

When he was free to go upstairs, and stood once more on the porch, watching to see that every one was properly served, his eyes eagerly scanned the diners.

At a near-by table, chatting gaily with two young men, and laughing at their efforts to adjust their paper caps, was the object of his search.

With reckless confidence, he dashed forward, never doubting that if he spoke to her, her upward glance would be one of amused recognition. But in response to the inquiry if she had what she wanted, he got only a casual nod of dismissal.

The hot blood rushed to his temples as he beat a hasty retreat. Only once before had he ever been so surprised and hurt. That was on the occasion of their first meeting when she had offered him a tip.

Was it possible that she had forgotten their wild ride together? That she had felt no concern as to what his chivalry to her mother had cost him? Anger mingled with hurt pride as he stood at the foot of the stairs, until a loud whisper over the banister brought him to his senses.

“Hey there, head waiter! Don’t send any more food up here. Everybody’s vamoosing!”

Ernie, aghast, went back up the steps two at the time. “They haven’t had their ices yet,” he said excitedly to Mr. Peckham. “Tell ’em not to go! Tell ’em to wait!”

The thought of hundreds of little frozen Santa Clauses going unappreciated filled him with dismay.

“I did tell ’em,” said Mr. Peckham. “It didn’t do any good. They are going to another party,” and he rushed away to bid his fleeing guests good night.

By one o’clock Mr. Peckham and Sarah were left alone in the ballroom. The lights still twinkled in the Christmas trees, the balloons still bobbed merrily, the fountain threw sprays of gold and rose, but the dancers were gone and the musicians were packing their instruments.

“Well, I’ll be dog-goned!” said Mr. Peckham. “All this fuss and fury, and expense, and the party over before it got started good.”

“What must I do with the stuff that’s left?” cried Ernie.

“Carry it to the Children’s Hospital,” directed Mr. Peckham. “I bet they won’t pass it up. And see here, Bossel, wait a minute. Sarah, this is the young man that planned everything so nice for us.” Then, feeling expansive from recent libations, he added, “You tell your boss, Bossel, he’s got a smart young man working for him. I been watching you all evening. You got gumption.”

“I told Mr. Bossel he was the best-looking man at my party,” said Sarah archly.

“Why, Tootsie!” said Mr. Peckham, slapping his leg and laughing noisily. “And me here? But, come to think of it, you are about right. He’d make two of those narrow-shouldered, spindle-legged society fellows.”

“I got my size from my grandfather,” said Ernie proudly. “He says he used to know you, Mr. Peckham. Captain Calloway of the old *Ohio Queen*.”

“Why, bless my soul! Of course I remember him. He brought us up from New Orleans and let me stay on the boat until my father found a place to live. He taught me how to play stud poker! Is he still living?”

“Going strong and still playing poker,” said Ernie.

“What’s the matter with us having some supper?” Mr. Peckham asked Sarah. “Have you had something to eat, Bossel?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Well! Well! Here you, black boy! Fetch that table over here and bring supper for three. And open another bottle of champagne.”

So it was that the Pickle King, his débutante daughter, and Gorman’s head waiter supped together after the handsomest social event of the season.

In spite of the shattered condition of Ernie’s emotions, he could not be indifferent to the high good humor of his host nor the obvious admiration of the daughter.

“The party certainly went over big,” said Mr. Peckham. “Not a hitch from start to finish. Everybody said it was the biggest thing that has been pulled off here in years. But that’s me. I usually shoot the works, don’t I, Tootsie?”

She looked at him fondly. “You’re the grandest Papa a girl ever had, but you’ve had enough champagne, and we ought to be going home.”

He rose reluctantly, and waited while she got her wraps.

“Remember me to the Captain,” he said to Ernie. “And if you are ever out our way, come to Bluff Ridge and see our new house. Biggest place on the River Road, garden, conservatory, and swimming-pool. I’d like to show you around.”

Sarah joined them and they went down to the big new limousine waiting at the door.

“Good-by,” she said, her plain face lighting; then she waved her faded bouquet and called back, “Merry Christmas, Mr. Bossel.”

CHAPTER VI

The apparent rebuff Ernie suffered by Miss Wynne at the Peckham ball had a decided effect upon him. It not only piqued his vanity and challenged his pride, but it made him for the first time class-conscious. Heretofore the fact, carefully kept before him by Pop, that his mother was a Calloway had provided all the assurance he needed. But with Miss Wynne's advent into his life his standards underwent a sudden change. Being head waiter at Gorman's lost its importance, and the diversions of Wirt's Division seemed unbearably tawdry.

A note from Sarah Peckham, thanking him for his management of her party and urging him to drop in and see her some time, offered a welcome opportunity of improving his social position. Pleased and flattered, he donned his blue suit the following Sunday and took a trolley out the River Road.

"Bluff Ridge?" repeated the conductor in answer to his inquiry. "Peckham's new house? Sure. You can see it for a mile. I'll put you off at the right station."

A foot-path led up the hill to the estate, and as Ernie strode up it his spirits soared. It was a crisp winter day, with golden sunlight sparkling on snow-drifts and the air like wine. He had not been in the country for years except to an occasional picnic with a crowd of noisy boys and girls. Swinging along in the open like this, with the blue sky as far as he could see, and the brown branches arched above, some instinct stirred within him and responded to the call of the soil. What would it be like, he wondered, to live always in this clear, clean air, away from the coal soot and car smoke of Wirt's Division? How would it feel to see things growing and changing with the seasons; to know about the birds, and to learn their calls?

A pretentious gateway led into Bluff Ridge, and two crouching lions proved but the first of a number of concrete creatures that peopled the premises. At the right of the drive a stork and a fawn were visible, and at the left a large bird perched on a sun-dial, while at the foot of the front steps two ferocious dogs kept permanent guard.

The house, a remarkable compilation of Greek, Roman, and Gothic architecture, towered pretentiously on the ridge, and at the back of it was a wide terrace that commanded an extended view of the Ohio River. It was by far the most pretentious mansion Ernie had ever seen, and it was with a feeling of importance that he mounted the broad steps and rang the bell.

A colored man, in a livery that had evidently been made for a smaller predecessor, opened the door, but before he could give his name, a voice called

from the hall:

“Whatever he’s sellin’, Sam, tell him we don’t want none. Tell him we got a-plenty.”

“I’ve come to see Miss Peckham,” said Ernie with dignity.

By this time a fat old Negress in a spotless apron and cap was inspecting him critically over the butler’s shoulder.

“You don’t happen to be come callin’, is you?” she asked incredulously.

Upon being assured that that was his modest intention, her manner changed.

“Show de gentleman into de front parlor, Sam, an’ light de fire. What name shall I say, sir?”

“Ernest Bossel.”

“An’ you come to see Miss Sarah,” she muttered with evident satisfaction as she followed him into the room to adjust the Venetian blinds. “You’ll have to ‘scuse dat fool Sam, ‘cause he ain’t got no sense.”

When she had gone, Ernie sat in a high-backed gold chair and saw himself reflected in various long mirrors, image after image of Ernie Bossels sitting, stiff and proper, in his bright blue suit, calling on Miss Peckham, daughter of the pickle magnate.

The big room in which he sat opened into other big rooms, all full of big things. Crystal chandeliers, massive furniture, crimson draperies, and oriental decorations abounded.

“Well! Well!” thundered a voice behind him. “Taking a look around, are you? You couldn’t find anything finer in the city! A hotel up in Atlantic City was selling out, and I bought the whole shebang for five thousand dollars.”

“It certainly is magnificent,” said Ernie, greatly impressed.

Mr. Peckham, strolling about among his possessions, was quite as massive and imposing as any of them. His figure was unwieldy and ponderous, but he moved with an air of authority. After the lapse of ten minutes he pressed an electric bell and the old Negress reappeared.

“What in heck is keeping Tootsie?” he demanded. “Don’t she know she’s got a young man calling on her?”

“Yes, sir, she knows it all right, but Mrs. Myrtle’s washing her haid an’ it ain’t dry yet.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” stormed Mr. Peckham. “Tell her to come on down here. It’s just young Bossel; he’ll understand. She can’t keep a beau waiting all day!”

At the mention of Mrs. Myrtle’s name, a cold shiver had gone down Ernie’s spine. Though years had passed since he saw her, he had no desire to encounter his erstwhile step-grandmother at this crucial point of his social progress.

“Maybe I better come back another time,” he suggested.

“Not at all,” said Mr. Peckham. “I guess you can put up with me for fifteen minutes. I’ll take you through the house, then show you the grounds, and by that time she’ll be down.”

Ernie followed him deferentially. He had never seen anything so imposing as Bluff Ridge, and its owner was fast becoming the ideal toward which his own imagination aspired. A self-made man who had pulled himself up by his own boot-straps from poverty and obscurity to this dizzy height of grandeur.

Of course, he told himself, Mr. Peckham wasn’t like Grampa. The latter might get tight, and be lazy, but he never spat down the register, or used cuss words, or bragged about what he paid for things. The difference between them, he concluded, was that Grampa, in spite of his failings, was a Calloway.

As they walked about the grounds, Mr. Peckham became confidential. “I fixed all this up for Sarah, and now we got it we’re feeling, what you might say, lonesome. You’re the first person that’s called on us since we moved in. We are kind of like fish out of water in this end of town. Of course, if Mamma had lived it would have been different. It ain’t a man’s job to bring a young lady out in society. I don’t know the ropes. I take the child around to concerts and theaters and things. I even took her to a couple of parties. But I don’t seem to know how to get her partners.”

A puzzled look settled on his heavy brow, and he scratched his head reflectively.

Ernie thought of the way Miss Peckham had sat behind the fountain and cried at her own party, and his sympathies went out to her father.

“She’s a mighty fine young lady,” he said gallantly. “A heap sight too good for a lot of these guzzlers that run around to parties.”

“That’s the Lord’s truth,” said Mr. Peckham, beaming upon him. “She’s the fireside kind, likes to sew and cook and look after other folks; only she don’t get much chance with Aunt Melvy ‘round.”

By the time they returned to the house, Sarah Peckham was in the parlor, her damp hair held in sculptured waves by tortoise-shell combs. Her resemblance to her father, in the matter of neck, wrists, and ankles, made her even less attractive in street clothes than in evening dress, but her lips were smiling pleasantly and there was an eager light in her eyes.

“Here’s my baby!” exclaimed Mr. Peckham effusively, pinching her cheek. “I told you he’d come, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but he caught me looking like a fright.”

“That’s all right. He knows how pretty you can look when you are all dolled up. Now you two young people go ahead and get acquainted while I wash up for supper.”

Left alone, they looked at each other helplessly. Then Ernie was inspired to

express his admiration of the new house.

"I suppose it's all right," she said listlessly, "but it's so big and lonesome. I just loathe the country. There's nothing to do and nobody ever drops in. I'd lots rather be back in Parkland where we belong."

"It wouldn't take me long to get used to it!" said Ernie, glancing around admiringly. Already he was telling himself that some day he meant to have a grand house like this with crystal chandeliers and crimson carpets.

"If we had to leave Parkland," Sarah pouted, "I don't see why we couldn't have gone to a hotel and been near the movies. I just love to sit in a hotel lobby and watch the people, don't you?"

"Never tried it," said Ernie, his thoughts straying. "Did you say you went to school with that Miss Wynne that was at your dance?"

"Yes. Art School. She's got lots of talent, but she's rather difficult."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, she's reserved and sarcastic. Not nearly as pretty and sweet as her mother. They say Mrs. Wynne went on the stage. That's why her husband divorced her. Some one told me he left all he had to Eloise, and her mother has spent every bit of it."

Mr. Peckham, returning at this juncture, promptly took over the conversation.

"Now tell us about yourself, young man," he said patronizingly, as he sank into an overstuffed chair, and put his foot on a hassock. He had conceived a liking for the big, friendly fellow, who had proved so efficient at the Christmas party and, having no social position himself, saw no reason why he should not encourage his friendship with Sarah.

Ernie, nothing loath to discuss his favorite subject, launched into a lively account of his various business ventures.

"Every time I got kicked out, I got kicked up," he said with a grin, "and between jobs I worked on my inventions."

"What kind of inventions?"

"One of 'em is a machine to twist pretzels."

Mr. Peckham put back his head and roared with laughter. "Pickles and pretzels! Not a bad combination, eh, Tootsie?"

Sarah looked self-conscious, while Ernie entered into the jest.

"Peckham's pretzels, pickles, peanuts, and pies. How's that?"

"What's the matter with paprika and peppermint and prunes?" shouted Mr. Peckham.

"And we could call 'em 'Peckham's Pantry Parade,' " added Ernie.

They all laughed uproariously as if he had said something funny; then Mr. Peckham had an idea.

"Say what's the matter with you staying to supper? It's New Year's Eve

and nobody but Tootsie and me rattling around in that big dining-room.”

Ernie could see nothing whatever the matter with the suggestion, so he was conducted upstairs to wash his hands, while Tom was instructed to put on another plate.

The bathroom, off the guest-room to which he was shown, looked like the fulfilment of a plumber’s dream. Every gadget known to the trade had been installed, and the towels on the racks resembled prize embroideries at a country fair.

When he returned to the first floor, Mr. Peckham and Sarah were waiting in the dining-room, the former already seated at the head of the table and pounding it with his fist.

“More light!” he shouted. “The first thing you know I’ll be putting my fork in my eye! And I want my coffee with the dinner. Sit down, Bossel, sit there by Tootsie.”

What the dinner lacked in elegance it made up in abundance and hilarity. The two men told stories, cracked jokes, and talked business, while Sarah sat between them chirping approval and trying to curb her appetite.

“Aw, go on and eat,” urged her father. “What am I paying for all this good food for if you won’t enjoy it? Stoke up, child, fat or no fat.”

Sarah gave an agonized look at the chocolate cake and yielded. It was always like that. She would heroically refrain through a whole meal, then take a second helping of dessert!

After dinner, when they were seated around the fire in the library, which contained everything but books, the men smoked expensive cigars while Sarah counted stitches in her knitting.

Presently Mr. Peckham said abruptly: “What’s Gorman paying you, Bossel?”

“Forty bucks a month.”

“Slim pickings, eh? You ought to be doing better than that.”

“I’d like to,” said Ernie, his job at Gorman’s suddenly dwindling into insignificance.

Mr. Peckham eyed him through half-closed lids. “Are you willing to work?”

“If the climbing is good. But I can do more with my head than I can with my hands. I got lots of ideas, Mr. Peckham.”

“Yeah?” said Mr. Peckham dryly. “Well, I employ men to do whatever I tell ’em, anything from driving a delivery wagon, up.”

The thought of those pickle-adorned wagons of Peckham’s stirred an old ambition, but Ernie dismissed it as unworthy.

“I’d certainly like to work for you, sir,” he said. “Gorman’s all right, but there’s nothing ahead for me there.”

“Well, give him a month’s notice, and come to me the first of February. We need help in the processing room. It’s dirty work, but my employees must know the business from the bottom up. Why, I began with sousing cucumbers in brine myself, and look at me now!”

Ernie was duly impressed, and quite eager to understudy the important person before him. He even found Sarah attractive as she sat knitting under the lamp-light, smiling at him from time to time.

“Can’t you give us a piece on the piano, daughter?” suggested Mr. Peckham.

“Oh, I can’t play,” protested Sarah.

“After all the money I’ve spent on your lessons? Nonsense. Play the ‘Melody’ thing.”

Taking her seat at the new grand piano, Sarah proceeded to do her worst by Rubinstein, while Ernie watched the jewels sparkle on her plump white hands, and thought she might be pretty if she weren’t so fat.

“Why can’t we sing something?” he asked as she finished her massacre of the classic.

“Do you know ‘Sweet Mystery of Life’?” she suggested.

Having been treated to daily renditions of it on Curt’s accordion, Ernie had no qualms about attempting it. He stood behind Sarah and let himself go while she chirped a sweet but feeble soprano as she picked out the accompaniment.

Mr. Peckham was delighted, and demanded many encores.

It was near midnight before Ernie could tear himself away from his new-found friends. Their flattering interest and simple kindness, the luxury of their surroundings and the prospect of a better job, captured him completely.

All the way home he planned the grand things he was going to do when he began to make more money. A second-hand Ford, a new suit for Grampa, Rose’s doctor’s bill for a second baby, a coat of paint for the house.

But back of all these dreams was a far more ambitious one for himself. Once his foot was on the ladder of success, what could keep him from climbing rung by rung until he reached that exalted sphere occupied, so far as he was concerned, exclusively by Miss Eloise Wynne?

CHAPTER VII

At a dressing-table, which looked as if it had been achieved by a milliner, Sarah Peckham surveyed herself with modest satisfaction. A quilted satin dressing-gown of a rosy hue fell back from her plump white throat and softly rounded arms, and a halo of perfectly placed ringlets encircled her round face. If Ernie Bossel could only have seen the result of those hideous combs she had worn the night before!

To be sure, he had not seemed to notice them. In fact, he was so easy and jolly that he had made her forget her appearance. Was it she, or her Dad, who had given him such a good time? Would he care to come again if her father was not there?

She picked up the morning paper and scanned the long list of entertainments that were being given for the *débutantes*. Since the big write-up about her party, her name had not been among those listed. A few invitations had come to her, but she had hastily destroyed them for fear her father would insist on taking her to the parties. The golden key with which he had tried so confidently to open the door of society had failed to turn the lock, and, chagrined and humiliated, she refused to be snubbed again.

The alternative of staying at home was hardly less bearable. The huge new house, the strange servants, the changed scale of living, appalled her. She was like a fly embedded in amber, with no hope of escape.

As she looked out of the window across field after field of unbroken snow, she had a sudden sick longing for the cozy crowding of the old Parkland streets where the visits of the grocery boy and the milkman punctuated the frequent calls of neighbors. She missed the church and the Christian Endeavor meetings, the movies, and idle gossip of the neighborhood. Here there was nothing to do but kill time, and she already felt that she must have killed all there was!

Rising listlessly she went to her closet and surveyed the array of clothes carefully purchased for the many occasions that had failed to materialize. Gown after gown on its silk padded hanger, carefully selected and fitted by the most expensive dressmaker in town; slanting shelves filled with shoes of every description, from smart walking boots to afternoon suedes and high-heeled, open-toed satin sandals, all waiting to step out and with nowhere to step. No happy memories lurked in the frills and furbelows—only painful recollections of unbearable hours of humiliation and disappointment.

Suddenly the folds of a white satin caught her eye and she smiled. That was the dress she had on when she met Ernie Bossel. And to think that he

should have been the only man to call on her in the new home! In a wave of gratitude she picked up a writing tablet and gold pencil and made the following enigmatic memorandum:

2 pairs of steel knitting-needles
15 hanks of camel's hair yarn
Color, blue—shade of his eyes

As she finished, Aunt Melvy, sole survivor of the old régime, came in to get her breakfast tray.

"Makin' out de day's meals?" she asked. "Ain't no use tellin' dat new nigger what to cook, he's goin' to do what he likes. Calls hisself a 'chief.' Ain't nothin' but a stuck-up merlatta."

"Now, Aunt Melvy," protested Sarah, "you promised me you wouldn't interfere with him. Dad wants a man cook, and this one's got fine references."

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," said Aunt Melvy, her chin in the air. "I jus' hope an' pray he don't kill your Pa wid all these new mixtries! Who ever heard of combinationin' egg-plant an' cheese and mushrooms? What you done to your hair, Baby?"

"Mrs. Myrtle set it for me."

"It shore looks good. You're real purty when you don't favor yourself too much."

"I wish my hair had been dry when my caller came last night," said Sarah ruefully.

"You didn't need no trap to ketch 'im. I heard him laughin' and carryin' on, and I says to Sam, 'Watch out! He's got a eye on Tootsie!' Where did you pick him up, honey?"

Sarah blushed, but she said with dignity: "I met him at my party. He's going to work at the factory."

"Now ain't that nice? He's one of de purtiest young gentlemen I ever encountered, an' a nice word for ever'body. When's he comin' back?"

"I don't know yet. Has it stopped snowing?"

"Stopped? It's jes' started! Looks like ever'thing is plumb burnt out wif de cold."

"Another long day, and nothing to do," sighed Sarah as she changed her dressing-gown for a dress and put on a new diamond clip. Her footsteps echoed in the empty house as she descended the broad stairs with their iron balustrade of twisted traceries. She crossed the wide hall and sat down at the piano, idly playing over the songs she and Ernie had sung the night before. Then she sat for a long time by the window and watched the snow against the panes, pausing occasionally to glance through a magazine while she guiltily

nibbled cream chocolates. At last, in a desperation of boredom, she took up her knitting, that unfailing refuge of the lazy-minded.

At luncheon she sat in solitary state in the vast dining-room, and tried to satisfy a healthy appetite with lettuce and orange juice. Dieting was the one form of insubordination she permitted herself. Her father might rage and Aunt Melvy fume, but she continued to starve herself at meals, eat between times, and take as little exercise as possible.

All afternoon she lay on a couch, reading about the private lives of movie stars and occasionally dozing off to sleep.

By the time her father came home to dinner, her usually placid disposition had given place to irritation.

"I'm sick of being shut up here by myself," she declared petulantly. "I'd rather have a job in a ten-cent store! At least I'd have some one there to talk to."

Her father looked at her helplessly.

"Why, Tootsie! You mustn't say that! You'll get to know folks around here before long. I'll invite some young people in."

"They wouldn't come," she said sullenly, "and if they did, they'd eat your food, and drink your wine, and not even know I was here."

Mr. Peckham was deeply chagrined. At great expense and considerable sacrifice he had moved to this new neighborhood for the sole purpose of giving Sarah the position due the daughter of one of the richest men in town. Something had gone wrong and he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was.

Not for a moment, however, did he blame Sarah. Like most common, self-made men, he had a romantic sentiment for the weaker sex, and regarded them with gentle consideration. Having for years been the slave of a delicate and domineering wife, who never found anything to her liking, he was prepared to make allowances for Sarah.

"I saw a lot of young people having a good time coasting down our hill as I came out," he said. "Maybe if I sent you out a good bob-sled you could get acquainted with some of them."

"It wouldn't be any fun unless I had some one to go out with me," she said.

"Would you like me to call up young Bossel and ask him to take you?"

"Do you think it would be all right?" she asked, brightening.

"Sure it would. I bet he'd be tickled to come."

But when Mr. Peckham called up Wirt's Division he found that Ernie was at the hospital with his father who expected to have his tonsils taken out next day.

"I'll send him a big box of flowers," said Sarah with quick sympathy.

"That's right. And the very next snow I'll have the sled ready so you two

can go coasting all you like. I can't have my Tootsie looking like a funeral procession!"

The snow-storm continued, until the country was a glistening white wilderness, and the hillsides rang daily with the shouts and laughter of the coasters. On Saturday afternoon Ernie arrived, primed for an adventure that was not to be without mishap. At sight of the big new bob-sled he gave a whoop of boyish delight.

"What a peach! I bet we pass everything on the hill!"

"I haven't coasted since I was a little girl!" cried Sarah with an excited giggle. "I hope I won't fall off."

"Not while I've got hold of you!" he said.

She was all for having Sam drive them over to the hilltop in the car, but Ernie would not consider it.

"That crowd over there would mob us if we came in a car! You get on the sled and I'll pull you. It isn't far."

When Aunt Melvy had tucked her in and given her instructions not to get hurt, Ernie said smilingly:

"You look like a cute little girl with that red scarf about your head, and your red mitts."

"You look like a big kid yourself," she replied, smiling back happily.

The hill was full of youngsters, many of them up from the river flats, with every variety of improvised sleds. Among them, the Peckham's steel runners and ornate body loomed as a curiosity.

"Look at the chariot!" "Get on to the stretcher!" "Where's the corpse?" were some of the ribald comments; but admiration mingled with the jeers.

"Don't mind the rough-necks," said Ernie, laughing. "We'll go down the far side of the hill."

The less precipitous incline lay to the north and offered a wide view of the surrounding country. Meadows rose and fell in unbroken whiteness, except where violet shadows marked the hollows. Every branch and twig sparkled with crystals, and every sound came through the clear air with metallic crispness.

Despite the fact that Sarah hated outdoor sports, and shrieked with genuine terror each time they went down the hill, she found compensation in his encircling arm and his tumultuous gaiety, and became bolder with each trip.

A big fire had been kindled under a tree, and when they paused for her to warm her hands, he caught one of them in his own and chafed it briskly.

"You mustn't get frost-bitten!" he warned.

His face was ruddy with the exercise, and he looked unusually handsome in his leather windbreak and soft cap.

"I know we ought to be going home," she suggested.

“Just one more slide. Would you be afraid to try the steep grade?”

“Not with you!” she said, giving his fingers a slight squeeze.

The older and rougher element had congregated on the more hazardous incline, and the path was already slick with much use.

“I’ll go in front this time,” said Ernie. “Put your arms around my neck and hang on tight.”

She was in the act of obeying when a heavy wooden sled, ridden by two big boys, passed them, and would have crashed into her but for Ernie’s hastily interposed leg.

“Hey, there!” he demanded indignantly, “you ‘bos look where you’re going!”

“Well, keep your fatty off the runway! She takes up too much room,” the bigger boy said angrily.

In an instant Ernie had seized him by the collar and jerked him to his feet.

“You take care how you speak about a lady!” he warned.

“Get your paws off me, you ten-cent boob!” shrieked the other, “or I’ll kick hell out of your shins.”

“Not until you apologize,” declared Ernie, holding him fast.

“Don’t do it, Mike!” yelled his companion. “We can lick him. Come on!”

Little did the boys know that they were tackling the erstwhile champion fighter of Wirt’s Division. In an instant fists were flying and blows resounding, while a circle of witnesses danced about them urging them on.

Sarah, standing in the crowd, watched with terror, and did not draw a free breath until one boy was sprawling in the snow, and the other lying flat, with Ernie’s knee on his chest, stammering an apology.

Ernie rose triumphantly, one trouser leg in tatters, and blood streaming from his nose. It was the first good fight he had had in years, and it recalled glorious conflicts of the past. But he did not like the snarling comments of the spectators.

“Say, you all, listen!” he commanded breathlessly. “This young lady’s father owns this hill. He’s the only rich man in the neighborhood that lets folks coast on his premises. We couldn’t stand for this fellow’s insulting his daughter, could we?”

“No! No!” shouted the fickle crowd.

Sarah pressed through the throng and caught his arm.

“You’re hurt!” she cried. “Here, take my handkerchief, too.”

“Just a bruised leg and a bloody nose. Let’s get out of this.”

Refusing to be pulled on the sled, she trudged beside him, struggling to keep her footing, and trying not to hang too heavily on his arm. With what breath she had left she told him how marvelous he had been.

On their belated arrival at Bluff Ridge they were received with the acclaim

accorded Arctic explorers returning from a hazardous expedition.

The fray was described in glowing detail by Sarah, who made the recital of Ernie's courage and prowess sound like an epic.

"Oh, it wasn't anything!" he protested in embarrassment. "Just a couple of fresh kids."

But Mr. Peckham preferred to think that this stalwart youth had engaged in mortal combat to avenge an unknown insult to his beloved Tootsie. He persuaded him to have a hot bath in the greatly admired black and gold bathroom; he sent Aunt Melvy up to bind his wounds, and detailed Tom to carry him a hot toddy and to act as valet.

When at last Ernie limped downstairs in Mr. Peckham's trousers, and with an increasingly bulbous nose, he was received as a hero.

All through the very good dinner Sarah talked interminably about the fight. She possessed a turtle-like tenacity and could cling indefinitely to a subject that interested her.

When Ernie took an early departure, Mr. Peckham insisted on sending him home in the car.

"I don't want you walking down to the station on that game leg," he said, "especially when it might have been Tootsie instead of the leg that got smashed."

Sarah said good-by with shining eyes. "We had a grand time just the same," she said. "Only I'd rather have taken the insult than have you get hurt."

When the lights were out, she went upstairs and undressed as one in a trance. For a long time after she got into bed she lay smiling into the darkness. Like the Sleeping Beauty, she had been awakened by a prince, and romance and adventure had suddenly transformed her dull, monotonous world into fairyland.

But as she thus dreamed, her new-found prince was rolling home in Mr. Peckham's limousine, thinking only of a bruised shin and a bloody nose.

CHAPTER VIII

From the day Ernie Bossel started work at Peckham's, you would have thought he had created cucumbers and was personally responsible for all the uses to which they could be put. The making of juices, the use of acids, the sugar content of products became matters of supreme import. Day and night he reeked with the odor of cassia-oil, of brine and vinegar. His hands became red and swollen, his eyes inflamed, but his determination to make his fellow-workers accept him at his own valuation constantly goaded him to fresh endeavors.

The highly efficient methods of the big plant were so different from the casualness of Gorman's that it took him months to realize he was a very insignificant cog in a large machine. The men lost no opportunity of helping him arrive at this conclusion, but the girls in the bottling-room were more tolerant. His presence there never failed to create a mild excitement.

"Hey, there! Ernie!" called a raucous voice one day. "Remember the time we skidded off the pergola walk?"

He hurried out of the room. Attentions which would once have pleased him now jarred his dignity. His constant visits to Bluff Ridge were giving him new ideals of conduct, and Sarah Peckham was adroitly initiating him into her newly acquired knowledge of social usages.

"Anybody with your figure shouldn't carry his hands in his pockets," she suggested. "And you ought to stand up when ladies come into a room, and pull out their chairs at table."

"Me?" laughed Ernie. "Say, what do you take me for, a movie actor?"

"There's not an actor on the screen that could touch you, if you'd just put on a little more style!" she replied proudly.

Under this tender tutelage Ernie began to observe and practise the amenities of life, and before long his manner assumed, if not a high polish, at least a dull finish.

Since the night of the fight his status at Bluff Ridge had changed before he realized what was happening. The servants became deferential, Mr. Peckham overwhelmed him with favors, and Sarah assumed an unmistakable air of proprietorship. To his chagrin he found himself occupying the embarrassing position of Sarah's young man.

With the coming of summer there were drives in the parks and excursions on the Ohio in the new motor-boat that was Mr. Peckham's latest pride.

"Why don't we get up a river party?" Mr. Peckham suggested several times, but Sarah always objected.

“We don’t know anybody to ask, and besides, its more fun with just the three of us.”

One summer night when Mr. Peckham was at the wheel giving a perfect demonstration of the wrong way to handle a boat, Ernie and Sarah sat in dangerous proximity in the stern, watching the stars. The dim lights of the city back of them, the mysterious darkness ahead, the soft lapping of the water, and the glamour of the night shrieked for romance. Ernie was in that mellow state where only a touch was needed to make him fall. He simply had to have a hand to hold, Rose’s would have done, or even Tilly Katzenbach’s, just so it was something soft and responsive and feminine that would provide a substitute for what he dreamed.

As if in answer to his need, he saw Sarah’s hand slip toward him along the railing, and he seized it much as a hungry fish pounces on an artificial fly. All the way home the two sat very close and cozy, not talking, but managing to extract considerable pleasure out of the silence.

At the factory, Mr. Peckham continued to push his new employee even faster than circumstances warranted.

“The trouble is,” Ernie told him, “I’ve got more sense than I have education. I see all sorts of ways of improving things if I just had a little more knowledge about the way to tackle ’em.”

Mr. Peckham regarded him keenly out of his little gimlet eyes.

“I believe you’re right! Your suggestions about simplifying processes have saved me money. You’ve got brains but you don’t know how to use ’em. I’ve got a good mind to send you out to the University for a course in food chemistry.”

Ernie’s eyes shone. “Oh, boy!” he exclaimed. “Maybe that wouldn’t be great! You’d never regret it, Mr. Peckham!”

So it happened that from now on Mr. Ernest Bossel divided his time between the factory and the University, and struggled heroically to build a substantial mental edifice on an exceedingly shaky foundation. His energy and perseverance, however, helped him over the difficulties and he made friends with teachers and students alike.

At Wirt’s Division, the family was subjected to endless dissertations about filtration, sterilization, and bottling, about pectin requirements, and Baume testing. Grampa said it put him in mind of a foreign language, and Pop ventured the opinion that the boy would “strain his brain” if he kept on like that!

“He’s training to get into the business,” said Curt shrewdly. “And maybe into the family, eh, kid?”

Ernie loudly denied the accusation, but something uncomfortable stirred in the region of his conscience. For over a year he had neither seen nor heard of

Eloise Wynne, but in his vest pocket was a worn newspaper picture of her in the gown she had worn at the Peckham ball; and in his heart he cherished a memory which neither time nor distance could efface.

Late one autumn evening as he returned from the University, his way led him through the business section of town. It was sleeting and the streets were filled with slush. Belated shoppers dashed in and out of stores for last-minute purchases, and street-cars were crowded with home-goers.

Pausing on a corner for a traffic signal to change, Ernie's attention was arrested by a persistent ringing sound behind him, and looking around, he saw a Salvation Army kettle, and above it a smartly gloved hand vigorously swinging a bell. His glance traveled casually upward, until suddenly he experienced an upheaval of his internal organs and a melting of his soul.

"Why, hello!" said a well-remembered voice. "You are the young man from Hart's Garage, aren't you?"

He could not believe that it was actually Miss Wynne standing there beside the kettle, swinging the bell. He thought he had remembered every detail of her face and figure, but he now knew that his memory of her was like the cold reflection of the moon in water.

"We've often wondered what happened to you," she said. "Did you ever find your truck?"

"A cop did," he replied, still dazed with surprise.

"Then it got you into trouble?" she asked ruefully, continuing to ring her bell.

"Hart fired me," he admitted reluctantly. "But I got something better."

"I am so glad. I mean I'm sorry. You can't imagine how we worried over it."

"And the gentleman," said Ernie, "did he get home all right?"

"Alas, yes," she said with a laugh.

At that moment a gaunt-looking woman in a blue and red uniform came out of the drug-store behind them and held out her hand for the bell.

"Do you feel better?" asked Eloise, putting her hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, yes," said the woman, "the coffee warmed me up something wonderful."

"And you promise, after this, to have a board to stand on?"

Ernie knew that he should be moving on, but his feet refused to budge. He waited until the conversation ended, then said awkwardly:

"I stopped by the apartment once but they said you had moved."

"Yes; we've been living out at Rockwood and Maple Drive for over three years. Good-by, here comes my car."

"You can't make it," said Ernie. "It's too crowded. Better wait for the next one."

“No, I’ll run for it!” she said.

He grabbed her arm and piloted her across the crowded street, but the car did not stop.

“Let me put up your umbrella,” he advised. “You got pretty wet standing on the corner.”

“Not as wet as that poor woman.”

“Say,” he burst out, “that was a swell thing you did for that Hallelujah Hannah.”

She laughed. “I never got a penny in the pot.”

“It wasn’t the money,” said Ernie, ardently; “it was your being so kind. Did you see the way she looked at you?”

But Miss Wynne was hailing the next car.

“Good-by, Mr.—?”

“Bossel, Ernest Bossel,” he said, helping her aboard and automatically following; for though Wirt’s Division lay in the opposite direction, the magnet was too strong for him.

No one would have suspected, looking at the brawny young man clinging to a strap, that an emotional tornado was raging within him.

“Say, you there!” called the conductor. “You put in a quarter.”

“All right,” said Ernie airily, “it’s a Christmas gift to the company.”

He had never felt so happy in his life! The old wound that had rankled ever since the night of the Peckham ball was miraculously healed. He knew now that Miss Wynne had never meant to cut him; that she had simply failed to recognize him, and the fact filled him with elation.

When the woman who occupied the seat with Eloise left the car, he looked at her hopefully, and was not disappointed.

“We never had a chance to thank you that night,” she said, moving over to make room for him. “I can’t bear to think you lost your job on account of it.”

“Best thing ever happened to me,” said Ernie. “I’m at Peckham’s now. Guess you know Peckham’s Pickles?”

“Who doesn’t? Everywhere you look you see them on bill-boards and in electric lights, and on those absurd delivery wagons.”

“Don’t you like those wagons?”

“I adore them. They are so like Mr. Peckham himself, so blatantly vulgar.”

“He’s a wonderful man,” said Ernie loyally. “I’ve good reason to know. He’s helping me with a course at the University.”

“Is he really? Then I take back everything I said.”

For the next few blocks they rode in silence while she stared absently out of the window and he cast utterly fatuous glances at her profile. He had forgotten how bronze her hair was, and it struck him as nothing less than a miracle that her eyelashes matched it exactly.

After a while she looked up and said abruptly:

“Do they ever give commissions for advertising?—at Peckham’s, I mean.”

“We get our ads through an agency. But anything very good that comes in —”

“Mine probably wouldn’t be very good. I’ve never tried commercial art, but I want terribly to make some money.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to submit something,” said Ernie.

“What kind of things do they want?”

Instantly he was all enthusiasm.

“Something concerning our products. A pretty girl serving peanut butter or eating strawberry jam, or something like that—you know.”

“Merciful heavens!” she laughed. “As bad as that? I don’t know where I’d get a model.”

“You’ve got a mirror, haven’t you?” he asked, and instantly regretted it, for she lapsed into one of her sudden reticences and again contemplated the landscape.

“How should I go about submitting the sketches?” she asked presently.

“Better do it in person,” Ernie advised.

“Mr. Peckham wouldn’t see me.”

“He would if I asked him to. I’ve got a pull with the old man. You just give me a ring and I’ll arrange things.”

She looked at him scoffingly, but his blue glance, innocent of guile, confidently met her brown one.

“It’s very kind of you,” she said, “but I’m afraid I haven’t any brilliant ideas such as you suggest.”

“That’s where I come in,” said Ernie eagerly. “I’m as full of ideas as a dog is of fleas. There’s not a day I don’t think up something that would be a knock-out in the advertising line.”

Her lips twitched and she lifted her eyebrows. “Little Boy Blue,” she said cryptically, then, hastily gathering up her packages, she pressed the bell.

“Don’t forget the name,” implored Ernie, following her to the platform. “Ernest Bossel, Re-order Department. I’ll speak to Mr. Peckham about you.”

On the steps she turned and looked at him with a quizzical, demure look.

“It’s nice to have such an influential friend at court. I shall try to deserve your recommendation. Good-by.”

CHAPTER IX

Ernie had to wait six months for that telephone call, but the demands upon him were so pressing that he had little time to consider his personal affairs. The task he had set himself, of maintaining his job while taking a University course, could never have been accomplished had it not been for the unflinching consideration of Mr. Peckham. It only needed that gentleman's confidence to sustain an ambition that was already rampant.

"Bossel's smart all right," the general manager was forced to admit, "but he wants to tell everybody a better way to run his department. I never saw a chap so full of nerve."

Mr. Peckham chuckled. "Puts me in mind of myself at his age. I'd tackle anything and, by golly, I'd come pretty near getting away with it! He'll get that bumptiousness knocked out of him, and make the grade. You'll see!"

Curiously enough, Ernie's lamentable lack of modesty did not make him unpopular with the other employees. He was like a colt in a field of dray horses. His high spirits and enthusiasm were infectious. He was constantly proposing some new scheme that would revolutionize the business, and in several instances his suggestions proved valuable.

One Sunday morning out at Wirt's Division when Ernie was reading the paper, he came upon an item that interested him.

"Say, Pop," he said, "why didn't you all tell me that Mr. Katzenbach was up to mischief?"

"Because you never have time to listen to anything. The papers have been full of Nazi spies stealing American aircraft secrets for Germany."

"This says Hans Katzenbach, former mechanic at the Farmingdale Aircraft Factory, is being held under suspicion. Do you suppose they'll convict him?"

"No. He's out already. They say somebody higher up looks after him. Money must come in from somewhere."

"I wish some of it would come in here," sighed Curt, who was struggling with the family budget.

"Are we much behind?" queried Ernie.

"No. We've caught up with most everything but Grampa's teeth."

"Needn't be in a hurry about them," advised Ernie. "The longer he goes around on his gums, the less he'll think about courting."

"Wouldn't you think a man past sixty—" began Curt, but Ernie interrupted him with a sophisticated shrug.

"A man's never too old to want a petticoat swishing around. Now if you had a wife, or I—"

“Nothing doing,” said Curt firmly. “We got trouble enough without doubling it.”

Ernie sighed as he pushed Roustabout away from his feet and went out to the front porch. The house had never seemed the same since Rose went away, and he secretly shared Grampa’s longing for a cheerful feminine presence at the hearth-stone. The only social life he had these days was at Bluff Ridge, and while the luxury of the place still intrigued him, he did not find Sarah’s company stimulating.

As he stood looking idly down the street, his attention was caught by the actions of a man of military bearing who glanced furtively over his shoulder before he turned in at the house next door.

The dapper figure and foreign aspect of the man were somehow familiar, but it was some minutes before he remembered that he had last seen him lying on the floor of Jeb Hart’s truck. Everything connected with the Wynnes having a special interest for Ernie, he decided to wait around for further developments and find out if possible what business this elegant and supercilious person could have with the disreputable Katzenbach.

Half an hour passed before the stranger emerged from the house, carrying a portfolio. He hesitated a moment at the gate, then seeing Ernie, called to him:

“Would you be so kind as to direct me to a taxi stand?” he asked in slightly foreign accents.

“You can’t get a taxi out here,” said Ernie, coming down the walk. “But if you will tell me where you want to go I’ll tell you how to get there.”

The man seemed reluctant to name his destination. Looking up and down the dusty street, he struck his cane impatiently against his shoe.

“A northbound car would transfer to the east end—yes?”

“Crescent Hill way?”

“I think no. It is to Rockwood I wish to go.”

“Oh! Then you transfer to Oak. That brings you to Rockwood, quite near Maple Drive.”

“I said nothing about Maple Drive,” said the man with a quick suspicious glance, but Ernie’s innocent expression evidently reassured him, for with a punctilious bow he went on his way, leaving his observer to note with envy the easy grace of his carriage and the perfect fit of his clothes.

It was shortly after this that a note came to the factory for Ernie, asking if he could arrange for Miss Wynne to see Mr. Peckham that afternoon.

Full of jubilation, he rushed over to the administration building and proffered his request, only to be met with a peremptory and profane refusal. It was one of the magnate’s busiest days and he declared in loud tones that “he’d be blanked if he’d see any blank man about any blank advertising.”

“It’s not a man,” persisted Ernie. “It’s a young lady, a friend of Sarah’s at

the Art School.”

“Worse and more of it. Tell her our work’s all arranged for.”

“She’s very clever, sir. If you could just spare her a moment.”

“Will you clear out and shut the door?” bellowed Mr. Peckham.

Ernie sighed. He had begun of late to view his patron with more critical eyes, and while in no way swerving in his loyalty, he wished that he would be less noisy and high-tempered, and that he would expurgate his conversation.

The curt refusal of Mr. Peckham did not prevent Ernie, a few hours later, from sheepishly presenting himself and two ladies in the private office.

Mr. Peckham glanced up with a scowl, then he thumped his desk impatiently:

“Didn’t I tell you, Bossel, that I couldn’t see your friends to-day? Have the lady leave her name and address and if we have any work for her we’ll let her know.”

Before he finished speaking, Mrs. Wynne fluttered forward and, looking up at him from under a rose-covered hat, held out a white-gloved hand.

“May I just shake hands with the great Mr. Peckham?” she asked. “You have been a household word for so long that I can’t believe I am actually seeing you!” And in order to better accomplish her purpose, she lifted an absurdly small lorgnette and looked at him in a way that brought him awkwardly to his feet.

“Sorry I haven’t any work for you,” he said abruptly. “Bossel shouldn’t have raised your hopes.”

“But I’m not the artist,” she said with a silvery laugh. “It’s my little daughter who has brought the drawings. I just came along to see what you looked like, and now that I’m here you have scared me into the hiccups!”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” said Mr. Peckham, conscious of a heady perfume that filled his office. “Get her some water, Bossel.”

“Water won’t do a bit of good,” she sighed, pressing a hand to her heaving chest. “Once I get started nothing can stop me.”

“I can,” said Mr. Peckham. “My wife was subject to spells like that, and I could cure her instantly. Just give me your wrists. No, both of them, and stop laughing!”

He towered above her, scowling fiercely: “Look me in the eye, and quit that nonsense. Stop it, I say!”

Evidently surprised by his manner, she stopped laughing as she gazed, half hypnotized, into his glowering eyes.

“Why, they are gone!” she cried.

“Never knew it to fail,” said Mr. Peckham. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Come, Mother,” said Eloise, who had been waiting at the door, frowning with impatience, “we mustn’t take up any more of Mr. Peckham’s time.”

“But I want to look around,” pouted Mrs. Wynne. “Do all those buildings we came through belong to you?”

“Every one of them and five more, in Nashville, Memphis, Atlanta, Birmingham, and New Orleans.”

“How simply marvelous! Would you mind telling me when the business started?”

The heel of Achilles had been touched, and Mr. Peckham, aided by adroit questions, launched into a favorite discourse, while Eloise stood impatiently tapping her foot at the door.

She was one of those unfortunate daughters destined to live under the shadow of her mother’s high-powered charm. While appreciating it to the full, she was nevertheless constrained to offset the maternal sweetness and exaggeration by a salutary dash of lemon now and then.

When Mr. Peckham paused for breath, Ernie said:

“Excuse me, sir, but this is Miss Wynne. She brought her drawings.”

Recalled to the present, Mr. Peckham scowled at him.

“I told you I had no time to look at them!” Then, returning to Mrs. Wynne, he said: “You’ll have to excuse me, but if you would like to go over the plant —”

“I’d perfectly adore it!” she said.

“Young Bossel here will take you.”

“But won’t you come, too?” she pleaded coyly. “It’s you that makes it all so wonderful!”

Mr. Peckham had never encountered anything like this before, and to his surprise he found himself heading the tour of inspection, while Mrs. Wynne tripped beside him on her high heels, indiscriminately dispensing her verbal bonbons, and collecting admiring glances from every clerk, elevator-boy, and workman she passed. She did not seem to share her daughter’s critical attitude toward their host, but took apparent delight in his vehement speech, and dominant presence.

“And to think it all started in a teeny one-story building!” she exclaimed, “less than fifty years ago!”

“That’s a bronze statue of my father,” said Mr. Peckham, “an anniversary gift from the employees. The finest man, barring none, that ever trod shoe leather.”

“And you are exactly like him, only more so,” said Mrs. Wynne. Then, appealing to his intelligence, she added, “If you know what I mean.”

Mr. Peckham didn’t, but he felt sure it was something very complimentary, and he proceeded to enlighten her yet further about the early days of the factory.

While the older people were thus engaged, Ernie moved beside Eloise like

one in a trance. He could think of nothing to say and she did not help him. The easy familiarity which he showed to other girls seemed a desecration here. Even the brush of her shoulder against him as they walked set him trembling. Her features were not as beautiful as her mother's, but they were on remarkably happy terms with each other. When her lips smiled her eyes twinkled, and when her brows clouded there was a wistful droop at the corners of her mouth. It was an exceedingly sensitive face, its soft contours belying its expression of sophistication.

When they reached the courtyard, they sat on the coping to wait for the others to catch up.

"Mother should have been a lion-tamer," she said listlessly. "The fiercer they are, the better she likes them."

"She's tamed Mr. Peckham all right," laughed Ernie. "By the way, I saw a friend of hers recently."

"Who? Gustav Bohn? Where was he?"

"Out where I live, in Wirt's Division. He was calling on one of our neighbors, Mr. Katzenbach."

Instantly her indifference gave place to keen interest.

"Do you remember what day that was?"

"Why, yes; it was a week ago Sunday."

She nodded her head slowly. "I thought so. Did he recognize you?"

"No; but he asked me how to get to Rockwood. Is he a German?"

"He says he's from Alsace-Lorraine. What sort of man is this Mr. Katzenbach?"

"He's a seedy-looking cove with a low forehead and sloping shoulders, and looks like he's always trying to hide behind something. He hasn't got a very good reputation."

"How do you mean?"

"He's been under suspicion for stealing American Aircraft secrets. Didn't you see it in the paper last week?"

Her eyes looked frightened. "Have you ever seen Mr. Bohn out there before?" she asked.

"No, and he may have been there the other day on perfectly legitimate business. Only it did look funny—a gentleman like him mixing up with a rascal like Katzenbach."

"Yes," she admitted, "it certainly looks funny."

A quick look of understanding passed between them, before Mrs. Wynne's high voice was heard telling Mr. Peckham how wonderful she thought he was. She used compliments as Indians use arrows, letting them fly for the mere joy of shooting, and invariably bringing down her prey.

"Get her a jar of those new glacéd fruits, Bossel," said Mr. Peckham, "and

maybe she'd like some of those grade-A sweet pickles."

"What about Miss Wynne's drawings?" asked Ernie with the persistence of a fly.

Mr. Peckham for the first time took a good look at Eloise.

"Why, you were at our party," he said. "I didn't recognize you. You can go up to the advertising department and tell Mr. Carter I said to look at your posters."

"Oh! Thank you so much!" fluted Mrs. Wynne. "I'm afraid I've used up a million dollars' worth of your time."

"What's a million among friends?" asked Mr. Peckham, half crushing her proffered fingers in his mighty fist.

Mr. Carter offered little encouragement about the drawings.

"We get all our ads through an agency," he explained. "There's very little chance for an amateur."

"But she knows how to draw," insisted Ernie. "She's studied here and in Paris."

"The drawings are all right," Mr. Carter admitted, "but they lack punch. We've got to have something that smacks you in the eye. You know what I mean, Mr. Bossel."

"I am afraid I could never do the kind of thing you want," said Eloise, putting her sketches back in the portfolio. "'Smacks in the eye' are not exactly in my line."

"But hold on!" cried Ernie. "If she comes back with some peppy posters, will you consider them?"

"If it's Mr. Peckham's orders," said Mr. Carter with a shrug.

"I knew it was useless," said Eloise bitterly when they were again in the corridor. "I should have studied stenography."

"Not with your talent! You make another set of sketches and let me come up and look them over before you submit them."

"Something that will 'smack 'em in the eye'?"

"Right between the optics," advised Ernie.

When the visitors had gone, Mr. Peckham summoned Ernie to the office.

"What's the name of that party you brought in here?" he asked gruffly.

"Miss Wynne, sir, Eloise Wynne."

"I mean the other one. Her name Wynne, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. Tell that man that's been waiting an hour to come in. And if you ever dare to barge in on me again the way you did this afternoon, I'll fire you. See?"

CHAPTER X

For months life was glorified for Ernie by the daily possibility that Miss Wynne might send for him. Not that she had accepted his offer of help, but there had been something in her manner at parting that led him to think she meant to see him again. Another link had been forged in the very slender chain that bound them together, and he could scarcely restrain his desire to make the most of it.

Meanwhile, Mr. Peckham was giving him more and more opportunities for advancement at the factory. The fact that he had lost his own two sons, and that a fortune-hunter might marry Sarah and thus inherit the business, was an ever-present nightmare. In Ernie Bossel he saw a reliable, hard-working, clean-living chap who was ready to be molded into the kind of man he needed. Sarah evidently wanted him, and, so far as was possible, he was going to see that she got him.

Ernie, grateful but a bit bewildered, could think of no other way of repaying all the kindnesses showered upon him than by continuing his courtesies to Sarah. He took her to picture shows and occasional concerts, and sometimes for a drive in the second-hand car of which he was now the proud possessor.

Further contacts were afforded by the fact that early in the winter Mr. Peckham fell a victim to his old enemy, gout, and was confined to his bed for months. Never was a patient less patient. Like the gentleman in the Psalms, "he moaned in his complaint and made a noise." His only solace was the daily visit of Ernie Bossel, whom he berated for everything that went amiss at the factory, and counted upon to carry out his instructions.

The necessity of having most of his teeth drawn was the last straw. He stated with profane variations that if any fool dentist expected him to carry a hundred dollars' worth of damned hardware in his mouth he had another guess coming to him.

Aunt Melvy was the only one who could cope with him. Thirty years in the family had made her a self-appointed dictator.

"Ef you don't rule dem false teeth, they gwine rule you," she told him.

During the long siege she and Ernie became firm allies. They would meet in the hall and make dark plans regarding Mr. Peckham's welfare.

"Mr. Ernie'll have a seat on God's right hand for bein' so patient wid de Boss," she told Sarah. "Never seed a sick person so safrigious in all my born days. I'd rather nuss a wildcat."

Sarah's anxiety about her father was more than made up for by the joy of

Ernie's daily visits. She hovered outside the sick-room to speak to him, and made every possible excuse to detain him. Sometimes it was to ask advice about the new oil furnace, sometimes it had to do with the radio, or perhaps it was about new automobile tires.

One day, when he was half-way down the stairs, she called to tell him she had seen Eloise Wynne the day before.

"Where?" demanded Ernie, wheeling in his tracks and coming back up the steps.

"Outside the Day Nursery. She goes there twice a week to weigh the babies. She told me about going to the factory to get work."

"Did she say anything about me?" asked Ernie shamelessly.

"Why, yes; she asked me if I knew you."

"Anything else?"

"She said you were good-looking."

Ernie's heart gained several beats.

"That all?"

Sarah's eyes dropped. "I don't like to tell you the rest."

"Why not? It won't turn my head."

"Well, she sort of crinkled up her eyes and said, 'If he's half as smart as he thinks he is, he'll be going places!'"

Ernie swallowed and winced.

"What did you say to that?" he asked.

"I told her you were quite as smart as you thought you were, and then some. If she wanted to throw off on you, she was talking to the wrong person."

"Good girl," said Ernie, absently patting her hand. But there was a frown on his face, and he recalled a certain reference to "Little Boy Blue" that had rankled in his memory for many months.

"They must be very hard up," continued Sarah. "She seems so anxious to get work."

"How did they lose their money?"

"Nobody seems to know. She told me that she was living with an old maid aunt up in Connecticut when her father died and left his money to her, and she went abroad to join her mother. When they came back here, several years ago, they seemed to have everything they wanted, and now I hear they owe everybody."

Ernie's eyes softened. "Poor Miss Wynne, we don't know what she's been up against."

Sarah frowned. "You needn't waste your sympathy. Any girl as talented and pretty as she is can get along. What are you doing to-morrow?"

"The usual thing. Why?"

"I want you to go downtown with me and see if you like a cigarette case

I've picked out for you."

"Now, see here, Sarah! I can't take any more presents! It's nice of you and all that, but I don't need it."

She was standing on the top step, her hand on the banister. Her full lips formed into a pout.

"You've been so good to Daddy, and I thought you'd be pleased."

His hand closed over hers. "Sure I'm pleased to have you think of me. But no matter what I did I couldn't repay Mr. Peckham for what he's done for me."

"Then do it for me," she begged. "I want you to have it—please!"

He patted her cheek, but shook his head.

"No more presents, Miss Santa Claus," he said laughing, as he ran down the stairs.

She was a dear girl, he told himself. Always thinking up something to do for him, knitting him sweaters, embroidering his initials on handkerchiefs, having his favorite dishes prepared. No one could be insensible to such care and solicitude and sweetness. A fellow ought to be very grateful for a friend like that!

If only he could be rid of that foolish obsession about Miss Wynne he might settle down quite happily with such an adoring companion. Every worldly consideration pointed to the advisability of his taking the step. He would fit in perfectly at Bluff Ridge, and the adjustments at the factory had already been made. Not only his own future would be assured but that of the Bossel family as well.

But in swift rebuttal of the thought came the memory of Eloise, of her haunting voice and tenderly mocking eyes, and he felt with the finality of youth that his heart strings would never vibrate to another touch!

Rummaging in an old desk one night, he came across the worn note-book which had lain there for five years, since the time he had picked it up in the Country Club lane. His recent suspicion of Mr. Bohn gave it a new significance, and he studied it closely. The clocklike design, the rows of unmeaning letters, the notes in a foreign language intrigued his imagination.

As usual, when in search of information, he appealed to his old friend, Miss Hanks. She had a small room in a shabby boarding-house, and here she tutored pupils after school hours. He had to wait some time to see her, but he was repaid by her cordial reception.

"Another contest?" she asked.

"No. It's some translating I want you to do for me. Is this German?"

"Yes," she said, examining the script. "Where did you get it?"

"Found it in the road. What's it about?"

She studied it carefully. "The name on the title-page has been scratched out. All I can make out is Baron von Bo—something."

“All right!” cried Ernie. “What else?”

“There’s an address. Camp—something—on Long Island.”

“And these rows of letters? What do they mean?”

“They seem to be a puzzle,” she said slowly, “and underneath is the answer.”

“What does it say?”

“It says to take the second letter of the first group, and the third letter of the second group, and the fourth letter of the third group, and so on down the column.”

“Let’s try it!” cried Ernie excitedly. “Here’s a pencil.”

Painstakingly Miss Hanks followed instructions until she had a sentence in German on the paper before her.

“Go ahead! Translate it!” demanded Ernie.

“It says: ‘Three thousand combat planes under construction at the F.A.F. Blue-prints in possession of H. K.’ ”

For weeks Ernie lived in a ferment. He was convinced now that his suspicions about Mr. Bohn were well founded, and that the initials stood for his disreputable neighbor, Hans Katzenbach. His first impulse had been to turn the book over to the Federal Bureau, but that would inevitably involve the Wynnes, so he decided to wait until he could see them and give them a warning.

Meanwhile, he studied the newspapers, made inquiries about un-American activities, and worked on the system outlined in the note-book, hiding messages in long columns of figures, just for the pleasure of decoding them.

“Working on a puzzle, Ernie?” inquired Pop.

“You bet, and it’s a humdinger.”

“What does the little clock mean?”

“I don’t know yet, but I will some day.”

Just when his preoccupation with this secret seriously threatened to interfere with business, he received the long-looked-for telephone call from Eloise.

“Yes—yes!” he responded eagerly. “I understand, Miss Wynne. Any time you say. To-night?” He paused irresolute, remembering a date with Sarah. “Could you make it to-morrow? That’s swell! Rockwood and Maple Drive. I’ll be there at eight.”

It was a somewhat distraught caller that arrived at Bluff Ridge that evening. Mr. Peckham was downstairs for the first time, Sarah was making an occasion of it, and Ernie was expected to be the life of the party. But while in obviously high spirits, he seemed strangely absorbed in his own affairs, and paid little heed to what was going on about him. The truth of it was that beneath the conversation he kept hearing a cool but rich contralto voice, and

remembering how it lilted on that last syllable of “good-by!”

It was not what Eloise did or said that stirred him, so much as her highly different way of doing them. Again and again he reminded himself that her letting him call meant nothing; it was purely a business matter and would lead nowhere. She was wholly out of his reach, and he was a fool to think it could ever be otherwise. But the unattainable had always intrigued him, and her delicate remoteness held the thrill and fascination of the unknown.

Pop had been right when he said love had nothing to do with common sense; that it was like the measles, and once it struck you, you couldn't do a thing about it.

“We have tickets for the theater to-morrow night,” Sarah was saying. “Dad says he doesn't feel like going. Can't I count on you?”

“I'm afraid not,” said Ernie. “As a matter of fact, Miss Wynne asked me to come up and look at her drawings.”

“I don't see what you've got to do with them! Why didn't she take them to Mr. Carter?”

“She thinks maybe I can help her.”

“Remember me to her mother,” Mr. Peckham broke in unexpectedly. “She's a sassy little trick if I ever saw one.”

“Her head is too full of her body,” said Ernie. “I don't think she can hold a candle to Miss Eloise.”

Sarah's eyes narrowed, and she looked at him shrewdly:

“You've always been sort of crazy about her, haven't you?”

“Sort of,” admitted Ernie with a laugh.

CHAPTER XI

The following night Ernie, with a wildly beating heart, dashed up two flights of stairs at the Kirkland and rang the bell of the Wynnes' apartment. The new abode was far more modest than the Greenhill and gave evidence of being occupied by tenants who had seen better days.

The door was opened by Mr. Bohn who wore a velvet smoking-jacket and held an amber cigarette-holder between his fingers. At sight of Ernie a look of suspicion crossed his face but he gave no sign of recognition.

"I came to see Miss Wynne," stammered the caller, his friendly smile freezing on his lips.

"On business, perhaps?" asked Mr. Bohn, still holding the door partially closed.

"I came because she asked me to come," said Ernie, his anger rising.

"Don't be tiresome, Gustav!" said an impatient voice in the hall.

Eloise came forward and held out her hand. "I hope you will excuse Mr. Bohn," she said, when she had led him into the dining-room and closed the door. "He acts as if every one who comes here meant to kidnap the family. Shall we go over the posters?"

Ernie sat down beside her at the table and looked about him. There was something transient and uncomfortable about the place. He had noticed a trunk in the hall as he came through, and two large hat-boxes stood in a corner, while Eloise's drawings were strewn over the dining-table.

As she sorted them out, Ernie found himself much more interested in the hands that held them than in the sketches themselves. They were slender, graceful hands, full of quick, nervous precision, and the nails were conspicuously natural.

Bringing his attention back to the business in hand, he began silently studying each effort. When he made no comment, she gave a short laugh: "Really!" she said, "your enthusiasm is inspiring!"

"They're swell drawings all right," he hastened to admit, "but they are not ads."

"Why aren't they ads?" she challenged, her color rising.

"They don't make you want anything. Take this one, for instance. It's fruit all right, but—"

She swept it impatiently out of his hand. "That's the very best still life I ever did."

"It's still all right, but we want something that talks. This kid is cute. Couldn't you give him the mumps and make him crying for a Peckham pickle?"

Underneath you could put, 'It's Worth It' or something like that."

Before she could answer, Mrs. Wynne floated in and greeted him with effusion.

"How good of you to come to see my baby's drawings! Aren't they lovely?"

"He thinks they won't do," said Eloise, biting her lip. "He's trying to teach me how to make them cheap and vulgar, and salable."

"Now, darling," said Mrs. Wynne, putting her arm around her, "don't go temperamental on us. This nice young man has had experience. You want to make some money, don't you?"

"Of course I do. I'd whitewash barns to get our bills paid."

"Well, then, stop acting so silly."

"I only wanted to help," said Ernie, greatly embarrassed. "I wouldn't have hurt your feelings for anything!"

She looked up with a smile so sudden and dazzling that he promptly forgot her rudeness.

"You are right, teacher! Go ahead and give me my first lesson."

But Mrs. Wynne had no idea of letting them settle down to work, before she had had a visit with the young man.

"How's our roaring lion, Mr. Peckham?" she asked.

"Still roaring," said Ernie, accepting a proffered cigarette.

"Such a type!" laughed Mrs. Wynne. "Eloise says he's uncivilized, but then so am I! You give him my love and tell him—"

Eloise tried to interrupt her, but she turned on her impatiently: "For goodness sake, child, stop editing me! You either add or subtract something from every sentence I utter!"

"No," said Eloise, "I merely try to put in an occasional period."

"Well, I don't want to be punctuated. I had enough of that from your father's family."

"Much good it did you," said her disrespectful daughter, pinching her cheek. "Heaven knows where you'd be if it hadn't been for me."

"That's God's truth," agreed Mrs. Wynne. "I'd probably be married to that rich old Jew we met in Prague—the one who smelt so badly."

"Mother!" protested Eloise.

Mrs. Wynne adjusted the violets at her belt.

"I forgot to tell you that these came by express from Ted this afternoon with the dearest note. It's too funny, Mr. Bossel, how Eloise's beaux always fall in love with me! I suppose it's because they are a bit afraid of her, and nobody was ever afraid of poor little me!"

Eloise looked exasperated. "Petite," she said firmly, "will you stop being charming for a while and let us get to work?"

After Mrs. Wynne took her reluctant departure, Ernie applied himself with enthusiasm to passing on to Eloise his newly acquired information. At first his remarks met with quizzical amusement, but soon he made it clear to her that he knew what he was talking about.

“You see,” he explained, “we lay considerable stress on getting a central design scheme that will set our firm’s goods apart from all others.”

“For instance?” she asked, her chin cupped in her hands.

“Well, here’s an idea I thought of on the way up. I guess you’ll say it’s cheap and vulgar, but you’ll have to take my word for it, Miss Wynne, it’s what they want.”

“All right, go ahead.”

“Suppose you make a two-color spread of as many of our products as you can get in, and have the main color purple, see? And the selling slogan could be, ‘If It’s Purple, It’s Peckham’s’ or ‘A Royal Color for a Royal Product.’ ”

“But suppose your cans and jars aren’t purple?” she objected.

“We’ll make ’em purple to match your posters. We don’t spare expense for a thing like that.”

“I can see a nice color scheme,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “All shades of purple, with little touches of white and a certain shade of green.”

“That’s right! Let your imagination go! You’ve got what it takes to make a great commercial artist. Once you get a start, Mr. Peckham will push you fast. This time next year you’ll be making real money.”

“I wonder!” she said, with an excited little laugh. “Would you be willing to coach me until I get started?”

Nothing could have suited him better than to be a silent partner in such an enterprise, but there was more serious matter that must first be attended to.

“You remember what we were talking about the last time I saw you?” he asked, half under his breath.

“You mean about your neighbor?”

“Yes. Can any one hear me?”

“Wait a minute.” She tiptoed to the door and listened. “It’s all right. Mother and Gustav have gone out. I thought I heard them go, but I wanted to make sure. What is it you have to tell me?”

“It’s about an old note-book I found recently. It had been hidden away in a desk drawer ever since that night I picked it up in the Country Club lane.”

“Well, what of it?”

“It has Mr. Bohn’s name in it, and a reference to H. K. that may mean Hans Katzenbach.”

“Lots of people have those initials,” she said almost defensively. “Was that all you found out?”

“No. Is Mr. Bohn especially interested in aëroplanes?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“Because the book is full of notes about aviation. It contains the key to some sort of code.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. It also contains the address of a camp on Long Island where you can’t go unless you take a secret oath of allegiance to Hitler. Tell me, Miss Wynne, haven’t you ever suspected that he was mixed up in some sort of shady business?”

She looked at him strangely and began to tremble.

“If I tell you something that I’ve never breathed to any one,” she said, “will you give me your word of honor never to tell?”

“No,” said Ernie, though he would have laid down his life for her. “If Mr. Bohn proves to be what I think he is, I’ve got to help run him in.”

“But don’t you see,” she cried wildly, “my mother will be implicated? He takes her with him everywhere and trades on the fact that she is the widow of a United States Army officer.”

“Then you *do* think he’s a spy!”

“Yes!” she cried with sudden vehemence. “I’ve suspected it for years and I believe he has been using her for a tool ever since we left France. He is cruel and unscrupulous and wouldn’t stop at anything.”

“Have you any proof of his double-dealings?”

“Not exactly, but I’m sure something is wrong, and I am so ashamed and humiliated that we are mixed up in it. That is the reason I’ve stopped going out, and I never have any one come here.”

“Does he get much mail from Germany?” asked Ernie, his mind still occupied with Mr. Bohn.

“I don’t know, because we have a different box. But I know he sends out a lot. Only last week, when he was down with a cold, I mailed a batch addressed to Dr. M—something, German Engineers Club in Berlin. If Gustav proved to be a spy, could they do anything to Mother?”

Ernie tried to evade the question, but her troubled, earnest eyes demanded the truth.

“I’m afraid it wouldn’t be pleasant for her,” he had to admit.

“Then what shall I do?” she cried in despair.

“We’ve got to make her see the truth. Once we get her away from him, the rest will be easy.”

“But she won’t listen. She says I am prejudiced against him and I guess I am. I loathe his suave, polished insults and his gibes at America. But if I say a word against him she gets angry and hurt.”

“Then *I’ll* say it. You get me all the proof you can, and that, with what I know, can’t fail to show her the danger. Can you trust me?”

For a moment she sat irresolute, her breath coming quickly.

“I’ll go crazy if I can’t trust somebody,” she said brusquely.

“Then leave everything to me,” said Ernie with more conviction than he felt. “I’m going to look after you and your mother, too, and if anything further turns up, you phone me.”

An admonitory cuckoo popped out of a clock on the wall to remind him it was eleven o’clock, so he took his reluctant departure. All his life he had lived in an atmosphere of affection and friendly coöperation. He hated secrecy and subterfuge, and the mystery and discord that pervaded the Wynne household was thoroughly distasteful to him. But the thought of Eloise facing a dangerous and compromising situation banished all lesser considerations.

CHAPTER XII

In the dual rôle of art critic and amateur detective Ernie found his days full of absorbing interest, and the culmination of each week was the Saturday night visit to the Kirkland to report proceedings to Eloise Wynne.

She was fast becoming not only the center, but the circumference of his being, and all that lay between was as nebulous as the Milky Way. Even her habit of deflating his ego was more exciting than Sarah Peckham's unflinching adulation. Under her amused glance the "I's" and "me's" and "myselfes" that were wont to fill his conversation acquired a hollow echo, and he began for the first time to hear as well as to see himself.

On his weekly calls at the Kirkland, Mr. Bohn was always in evidence, paying court to Mrs. Wynne, smoking endless cigars, drinking many highballs, and treating both him and Eloise with detached condescension.

The rainy afternoon in spring when Ernie brought Eloise her first check for a poster was a gala one. He had tied it with a bit of newspaper verse to a pot of scarlet geraniums and presented it triumphantly.

"It's the proudest moment of my entire life," she declared rapturously. "What's the poem about?"

Ernie read aloud:

"Geraniums' leaves are dusty;
Their faces and hair are red;
They live in jars and old tin cans
Or any garden bed.

"They are not so very precious
And not so very rare—
But I love them because they are honest;
They are common, and they don't care."

She clapped her hands with delight!

"I adore it! I'll pin it to the curtain, above the window-box where I keep my plants. Wait till I tell Mother about the check."

Mrs. Wynne had evidently been taking a nap, but she rushed in swathed in a pink negligée trimmed with swansdown, her charm at boiling-point.

"You wonderful boy!" she cried, extending both hands. "You must stay and have dinner with Eloise by way of celebrating. Mr. Bohn and I are going out, and she would just love to have company, wouldn't you, darling?"

“Where are you going to-night?” asked Eloise, her lips tightening.

“Oh, to see some friends of his,” evaded Mrs. Wynne. “You and Ernesto can have a cozy little dinner.”

“But he probably has another date,” objected Eloise.

The violence of his denial suggested that he had nothing whatever to do until doomsday.

“That’s lovely,” said Mrs. Wynne. “I can’t bear to leave her here alone so much. She never goes anywhere except to look after her lame ducks. She used to be so popular and now the only men she is interested in are the ones with patches in the seats of their trousers.”

“Trot along, Petite. You forget I’ve joined the working class. This check means more than all the dance programs in the world.”

“I hope it will go to pay for my winter coat. The furrier has been so hateful about it. And, by the way, the landlord was here to-day. He said if we didn’t —”

“Mother, please! Isn’t it time you were dressing?”

Mrs. Wynne surveyed herself in the mirror over the sideboard, with the air of a connoisseur. “Have I got on too much lip-stick?”

“No,” said Eloise. “Your mouth is perfect. All it needs is a little sign, ‘Perpetual Care.’ ”

Mrs. Wynne pursed the mouth under discussion into a charming pout. “I hope your dinner will disagree with you. By the way, what have you in the ice-box?”

“Not much but ice, but we’ll manage.”

“Well, fix something good for Ernesto, because he’s been so kind. Doesn’t he look like Bertie Phipps? You remember, the one in Paris who gave me the gold vanity?”

After she had gone, Ernie turned eagerly to Eloise: “Shall I stay?” he asked.

“If you care to. It’s so like Mother to invite company when there’s nothing in the house to eat.”

“I could go out and get some sandwiches and stuff,” he suggested.

“Oh, I suppose we can find enough here to keep us from starving. Only I warn you I’m not much of a cook.”

The evening that followed was a red-letter one. He had never seen Eloise in such high spirits. A lively color was in her cheeks, and her hair was in slight disorder under a gay ribbon. She wore a working smock and her sleeves were turned back to the elbows. Together they potted about the kitchenette, a small makeshift affair with an ice-box, an electric grill, and shelves of odds and ends of common china consorting strangely with an occasional piece of Sèvres or Dresden. The room seemed hardly large enough to contain Ernie’s

added bulk.

Rain pattered on the window-panes, and the wind howled while they made execrable Welsh rarebit and burnt the toast to a crisp. But there was a cozy sense of intimacy, a vague illusive impression of something shared, and much laughter over nothing. Eloise did not laugh as often as her mother, but when she did, others wanted to laugh, too.

“I’m afraid we shall have to fall back on milk and crackers and fruit,” she said, “and there’s a box of candy in Mother’s room.”

This was the first time they had met on any but a business basis, and it was surprising how many things they found to talk about. Sitting at the small table, making the most of the sketchy meal, they chatted gaily.

“Tell me more about your family,” she said. “They sound like a story-book.”

Under the inspiration of such appreciation, he launched into a dramatic account of Grampa, Pop, Rosie and Curt; and their various doings lost nothing in the telling.

“And your father really reads Leviticus to find out what he should eat?” she asked.

“He sure does. Won’t touch rabbit because the Bible says to lay off animals that ‘cheweth the cud but parteth not the hoof.’ ”

“How delicious! But doesn’t he know that was meant for the Jews?”

“I’ve told him, but he won’t take any risks. Pop’s a saint. He wouldn’t do anything he thought was wrong if all the world said it was right.”

“It must be wonderful to have a family,” said Eloise wistfully. “I have no one in the world except Mother. Sometimes I think if I could just have a dog or a cat it would be different.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because we are always moving. You see, for my first six years I lived in Army posts. Then I had a few years on my aunt’s farm, and after she and father died I joined Mother in Europe. It seems to me I spent most of my childhood in hotel lobbies talking to strangers and playing with elevator boys. The worst times were at night, for after Mother went to the theater I used to sit up in bed and eat candy and read the Paris *Herald* and cry because I was so lonesome.”

“But didn’t your mother ever take you with her?” asked Ernie indignantly.

“I wouldn’t have gone if she had let me. I’m afraid I wasn’t a very sweet little girl. I hated to sit on gentlemen’s knees and have them pinch my cheeks and tease me. And I particularly hated the women who bombarded me with questions.”

“I guess you saw too much of life before you knew what it was about,” said Ernie. “I don’t wonder you got balled up, poor little kid!”

His eyes were so tender as he leaned toward her, that she laughed abruptly: "Oh, I guess it was good for me to learn to depend on myself. That's when I first began to sketch, and to make a world of my own. Why, I can just shut my eyes any time and think myself wherever I like. Sometimes I am on my skates at Davos Platz and the world is a gorgeous fairyland of sparkle and shine; sometimes I am back in the Louvre, seeing all those gorgeous pictures; or riding a donkey at Luxor with a little cross-eyed girl I used to play with there."

A pang of jealousy seized Ernie. He did not know the places she mentioned, and he had never felt the need to fly from the present to the past.

"You've been by yourself too much," he said.

"But I like to be by myself. There's a mystery about things that you never discover when people are around. People are so noisy. They crowd out so many worthwhile things like books and stars and flowers. I believe I could live alone on a desert island."

But in spite of this lofty independence and the melancholy satisfaction she seemed to derive from her isolation, Ernie shrewdly guessed that she was a very lonely girl, and that she was getting a good deal of pleasure out of his companionship.

"Say," he said suddenly, "how do you know when a thing is bad taste?"

She laughed at the unexpectedness of his question.

"You might ask yourself if Mr. Peckham would like it," she suggested.

He frowned. "You don't get the Chief right," he avowed. "He may be noisy and common sometimes but he's a big man all right."

"The biggest boss of the biggest plant of the finest State in the Union," she mocked, her voice a pompous imitation of the millionaire's.

"No, really," laughed Ernie. "He's a fine man: grand to the employees; and as for me, why, he treats me like—"

"A son?" she finished with a quizzical look. "By the way, I met Sarah Peckham on the street not long ago, and she was singing your praises."

"She's a nice girl," Ernie said, wincing. He had somewhat neglected Sarah of late and his conscience hurt him.

"I feel awfully sorry for her," went on Eloise. "Don't you think it would have been better if they had stayed in their own environment, Mr. Bossel?"

"I wish you'd stop calling me Mr. Bossel," he said, by way of changing the subject. "Pretty near everybody in town calls me Ernie."

"What a well-known person you must be!" she said with a lift of the eyebrows he had come to know too well.

"Honest, Miss Eloise, not even the darkies call me Mr. Bossel!"

"Well, they should. But I'll say Ernest if you will say Eloise."

The permission staggered him.

"I'd just as soon think of calling the Virgin Mary 'Mame'!" he said, with

such sincerity that she laughed.

"You are a funny boy," she said; "so chesty about some things and so humble about others. I think you are the most naïve person I've ever met."

"I don't know what that word means. Say it in English."

"Ingenuous."

"I pass again."

"Artless."

"Oh! I get you. You mean simple."

"No, Ernest, I don't mean that at all. What I want to say is that you are natural and sincere and straightforward. You see, I am so used to artificial, sophisticated people, who say what they don't mean, that I haven't quite known how to take you."

"I guess you think I'm more like Mr. Peckham than I am like Mr. Bohn," he said, still nettled.

"You are not like anybody but yourself. It's so hot in here. Shall we go into the sitting-room?"

Heretofore Ernie had been received in the dining-room or the hall, and he looked about the sitting-room with curiosity. Like the rest of the apartment, it gave the impression of cold, impersonal transiency. Except for the few survivals from an ever-shifting past in the way of a handsome Chinese cabinet of gold lacquer, a large oil-painting of Mrs. Wynne, and a few costly knickknacks, it might have been any one's hotel room.

The only real hint of the character of its occupants was in a table holding a typewriter, a bottle of Scotch, and a box of cigars, behind which was a desk chair and a filing cabinet.

"That's Gustav's corner," explained Eloise. "I don't know why he sees fit to keep so many of his things over here instead of in his own apartment."

The subject which they had been avoiding all evening thus having been introduced, Ernie asked if anything had come up since he was last there.

"Yes," she said. "I think he is trying to get Mother to move to Chicago."

This was a contingency Ernie had not anticipated, and his heart sank.

"We've got to do something before that takes place," he said firmly. "Do you think he is really in love with her?"

"I suppose so. She's always had men crazy about her, but the others were fat and rich and middle-aged, and constantly did things for her. With Gustav it's the other way round. He's always working her for something. She often comes to me in tears and says she's got to have money, and she will not tell me what's it's for."

"And you think she gives it to him?"

"Where else could it go? She doesn't pay our bills."

"Then you think she cares for him?"

“I am not sure. She used to be crazy about him. You see, he is younger than she is, and when we first met him on the Riviera he was very handsome and popular and he gave her a great rush. This is how he looked then.”

She rose and took from the mantel a large, crystal-framed photograph of a dashing young officer in uniform, with a small mustache slightly upturned over cynical lips.

“He was smooth-looking all right,” commented Ernie. “What is this written underneath?”

“*‘À votre beaux yeux.’* ‘To your beautiful eyes.’”

Ernie thought he had never seen anything more romantic, and he felt that Eloise was unsympathetic when she laughed.

“But you don’t know him,” she explained. “He’s sneaky and two-faced. I can’t abide him.”

“You are probably jealous,” said Ernie, “and afraid they will get married.”

“Thank heaven, they can’t! He has a wife in Alsace-Lorraine who won’t divorce him. When he was ordered to America to open some sort of branch office here, Mother had a sudden attack of patriotism and decided that I ought to be brought up under the dear Stars and Stripes, so she left the stage for good, and we all came back to this country.”

“And you’ve been together ever since?”

“Yes. Moving about from one city to another, wherever Gustav’s business takes him. He always gets an apartment in the same building we do and is underfoot every minute. Sometimes I think Mother gets tired of him, too.”

“Then what makes her go on with it?”

“Oh, she’s got to have some one to fuss over her, and he makes her think he needs her. She’s so trusting she even believes the weather man! I think Gustav uses her for a tool.”

“Poor little lady!” said Ernie, rising to look at the portrait of her over the buffet.

The artist had painted her as a Dresden shepherdess, with painful attention to details.

“It looks like a box-top,” said Eloise, “but the frame is nice. That’s where Petite belongs, in a handsome gold frame.”

Ernie was studying the painting seriously.

“I like it,” he said slowly. “It’s got a sort of wistful, defenseless look. I’ve often seen her look like that.”

Eloise glanced at him in surprise.

“I apologize to the artist if he makes you feel that!” she said gratefully. “Not one in a thousand ever sees that side of Mother.”

They stood side by side looking at the portrait, Ernie reluctant to tear himself away. Finally he turned toward her.

“I’ve had a wonderful time,” he said. “I don’t think I ever really knew you until to-night.”

“No,” she said, “I don’t usually want people to know me.”

“Some one will just the same.”

“Who?”

“The man you fall in love with.”

“Pooh!” she said with her old light banter. “I don’t intend to fall in love—ever.”

“Don’t you be too sure!” he said impressively, taking her outstretched hand and refusing to release it.

“Thank Mr. Carter for the check,” she said, backing away from him. “Tell him I will have the other poster ready next week.”

“I’ll come for it,” said Ernie, as he started down the stairs, leaving her silhouetted in the doorway, the light behind her making a golden halo of her hair.

CHAPTER XIII

The visit Mrs. Wynne had made to the factory over a year ago marked an epoch in the life of Mr. Peckham. He had not seen her again but he had become clothes-conscious, and developed a sartorial ambition that was encouraged by Ernie, who had now adopted the despised Mr. Bohn as his fashion model.

“You owe it to yourself, sir, to have plenty of good clothes,” he told his chief. “Whenever you take me out for lunch I hear people saying, ‘That’s Cyrus W. Peckham, the pickle king.’”

Mr. Peckham smiled complacently and proceeded to buy recklessly, reserving the right to wear his new possessions when and where he pleased, especially his spats and high hat and cutaway coat.

“What’s become of that little friend of yours and her drawings?” he asked Ernie one day.

“She’s coming on fine. We are buying her posters right along. By the way, her mother asked to be remembered to you.”

“She did, did she? I shouldn’t mind seeing her again.”

Ernie had followed up his supper at the Wynnes’ by taking Eloise out twice in his car, once to get wild flowers, and again to sketch an old barn she had taken a fancy to. But Mr. Bohn had gone abroad soon after their eventful evening together, and now that Eloise’s posters were finding a ready market, the two excuses for his calling were gone.

Hope was a meager diet to live on, but he had glimpsed an ideal, intangible and remote, which for him was more important than anything else in the world. He wanted one thing so much that he was willing to accept or refuse whatever was necessary in order to obtain it in the end. Business advancement seemed the straightest path to his goal, so he flung himself into his work with all the strength of his mind and body.

Ever since he had begun to help Eloise with her work he had seen less and less of Sarah Peckham. Spasmodic twinges of conscience would send him out to Bluff Ridge, where a slight coolness on Sarah’s part would be followed by a too-generous forgiveness. She still pursued him with invitations and embarrassed him with presents, and he was at a loss to know how to meet the situation.

“Next Saturday is your birthday,” she announced one night. “I always remember because it comes on the Fourth of July.”

“We ought to celebrate,” said Mr. Peckham, as usual taking things into his own hands. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“You don’t mean it! Well, I’ll tell you what—I’ll throw a party at the Grand Hotel. What’s the matter with asking Mrs. Wynne and her daughter to join us? That will make five, and I’ll set you up to the best meal the house can provide.”

Sarah demurred, greatly preferring a quiet dinner at home, without guests, but she was overruled, and persuaded to extend the invitations.

The answer came promptly, written on highly scented note-paper, and stating in flourishes that Mrs. Wynne and Eloise would be delighted to come, and would Miss Peckham remember Mrs. Wynne to that nice, big Papa of hers?

Mr. Peckham was enchanted. The prospect of renewing acquaintance with the aristocratic little lady who had played up to him that day in the office was wholly agreeable. Never since the departure of Mrs. Peckham had he cast a favorable eye on a female, but the daring coquetry and the charming femininity of his erstwhile visitor had made a considerable dent in his armor of indifference.

The pleasure with which he anticipated the dinner was mild in comparison to the ecstasy with which Ernie prepared for the event. Surely never did a young man achieve a birthday under more thrilling circumstances! A white flannel suit, white shoes, and a new tie were purchased for the occasion, and he held a dress rehearsal on the eve of the party for the benefit of the family in Wirt’s Division.

The consensus of opinion was that he looked wonderful. Grampa lent him his gold cuff-buttons, Rose put perfume on his handkerchief, and Curt gave him a pair of silk socks. The only point upon which no agreement could be reached was whether or not he should wear a flower in his button-hole. The argument waxed fierce, Grampa and Pop being pro, and Rose and Ernie con. An agreement could never have been reached had Ernie not remembered to apply the test as to which Mr. Peckham would prefer.

The moon has illumined many lovers, but it is doubtful if its rays ever fell upon a more infatuated youth than Ernie Bossel that hot summer evening as he went up to Rockwood in a taxi to get the Wynnes. He would have braved the torments of hell if need be, to have Eloise see him in that new outfit.

“*Quel magnifique!*” cried Mrs. Wynne on beholding him. “If I were twenty-two to-night, the other girls wouldn’t have a chance! Aren’t his eyes blue, Eloise?”

“Like forget-me-nots,” said Eloise, buttoning her glove, but behind her teasing there was an unmistakable look of approval.

Beside her butterfly mother, she looked trim and smart and a bit austere, in a plain white linen, with a tricky little pill-box of a hat covered with lilies of

the valley, and a bunch of the same flowers tucked in her belt. The fear and anxiety were gone from her face and she seemed very gay and jaunty and debonaire as she took in everything with her bright, amused glance.

All the way down to the hotel she and her mother kept up a running fire of nonsense. They seemed to have in common a love for the beautiful foolishness of things. They teased each other and they teased Ernie. He didn't always know what they were laughing at; as for instance, when he boasted of having made more sales than any other man in his department, Eloise looked solemnly at her mother and said, "*Facile princeps.*" Just why that made them laugh he couldn't imagine, but their happiness was contagious and he laughed, too, and was content.

On the mezzanine floor of the hotel Mr. Peckham and Sarah were waiting, both dressed as if for a large private dinner. The grandeur of the former was slightly dimmed by the intense heat, and he was in the act of refreshing himself with a cold drink.

"What'll it be?" he asked of Mrs. Wynne as he extended his free hand.

"A Rob Roy," she said, then, turning effusively to Sarah: "It was so perfectly sweet of you to ask us to dine on this blistering night. Ernesto should have had more consideration for us than to have been born on the Fourth of July, shouldn't he?"

She fluttered to a mirror, and powdered her nose, retouched her lips, and critically surveyed a microscopic pimple on her chin, then returned to her host.

"Well! How's the Big Boy been making it?" she asked. "You look as if you'd been up to mischief! There's a little devil in your eye!"

He ran a stubby finger between his neck and his wilted collar and assured her he never felt better.

"I've ordered dinner on the roof-garden. It's hot enough to fry an egg down here. Shall we go up?"

The best table on the floor had been reserved, and the party made its way toward it, with Mr. Peckham pompously leading. The fact that people whispered his name as he passed pleased Mrs. Wynne quite as much as it embarrassed the girls.

"I didn't order the dinner," he said, when they were seated and several waiters were hovering in attendance. "I want everybody to have what they like. Let's begin with you, little lady. What'll you have?"

She studied the menu with frank avidity. "Persian melon first, then jellied Madrilène, then lobster salad, and—"

"Mother!" protested Eloise. "You can't possibly want all that on a summer night!"

"But I do! And a Crêpe Suzette and black coffee."

"She shall have them all," said Mr. Peckham, charmed by the fact that this

fragile creature should have such a lusty appetite. The late Mrs. Peckham, having by frugal economies helped him amass a fortune, had been averse to dissipating it in frivolities, and poor Sarah had to live on starvation rations to keep her flesh within bounds. It was a luxury to him to give his passion for hospitality free rein.

“And what shall we have to drink?” he asked. “Sherry or claret?”

“Champagne for a birthday party!” cried Mrs. Wynne. “And we will drink Ernesto’s health.”

Ernie sat through the dinner fairly drugged with happiness. The fact that the affair was being given for him and that Eloise and her mother were there in his honor almost overwhelmed him.

The Wynnes knew exactly what to do and what to say, and they immediately put the men at their ease. No one could have suspected they were mother and daughter, for Mrs. Wynne was playing her familiar rôle of an ingénue flirting with an elderly admirer, and seemed to have no trouble in overlooking the gaucheries of a gentleman as obviously rich as Mr. Peckham. In fact, as the evening wore on she became increasingly merry, and exploited her skill in skating over thin ice with amazing rapidity. The innocence of her expression enabled her to say quite outrageous things without giving offense, and it was not until she overstepped the proprieties that Eloise protested.

“Isn’t it horrid of her to go pure on me right in the middle of a story?” Mrs. Wynne protested to Mr. Peckham.

He glanced uneasily at Sarah, who sat in sullen aloofness, waiting for dinner to be over. She couldn’t eat the rich food, she did not understand the jokes, and she hated the way Ernie’s eyes followed Eloise’s every movement.

Mrs. Wynne for the time being transferred her flirtation from Mr. Peckham to the lobster, but when that conquest was complete she returned to her host.

He and Ernie were discussing world affairs and she plunged recklessly into the subject.

“My poor little brain is so mixed up, I don’t know what to believe,” she said. “I don’t know whether I am a Royalist or a Loyalist, or a Liberal or a Conservative, a Republican or a Democrat. And even if I knew all that there would still be Fascists and Nazis and Communists to decide about.”

“The important thing for you to remember,” said Eloise, “is that you are an American.”

“Of course she is,” said Mr. Peckham, “one hundred per cent. Have another drink?”

“Just a teeny, weeny one. Two fingers—not mine! Yours!” The glasses were refilled and Mr. Peckham cleared his throat and proposed a toast to the guest of honor. He had reserved this courtesy for the end of the dinner for it was not to be a mere compliment, but the announcement of another promotion

for Ernie. The speech had been written with Sarah's assistance and he had carefully memorized it, but in the excitement of delivering it and in the very genuine emotion it roused in his bosom, his eloquence was arrested in mid-flight, and he had to make a forced landing.

"Hurray for Ernesto!" cried Mrs. Wynne, coming to the rescue. "May he be as successful as he is good-looking!"

Ernie had thought he could be no happier, but when he heard of his promotion and saw them all lift their glasses to drink his health, he was so overcome that he spilled his own champagne all over the table.

"Let's dance!" cried Mrs. Wynne, to cover his confusion. "Choose a partner, Ernesto."

For a moment he hovered between love and duty. Ever since the music started he had dreamed of having Eloise in his arms, but there sat Sarah, heavy, awkward, and hopeful.

"Shall we try it first?" he compromised, turning to Mrs. Wynne. "I'm not much good at it."

Notwithstanding his awkwardness, he found it exciting business steering that incredibly light bit of femininity through the crowd. She was all soft lace and airy ruffles, and she didn't dance in the least like anybody's mother.

"Hold me closer," she advised, "and let yourself go! That's it! Swing it!"

"A dummy could dance with you!" he panted.

"Could Mr. Peckham?"

"I bet he'd die trying."

"Poor darling, he's simply famished for a good time. I love to make him laugh."

Ernie found it difficult to dance and talk at the same time, but managed to gasp out that he had never known Mr. Peckham to fall for any one as he had for her.

"Flatterer!" she said. "He's just grateful to me for playing with him."

"Sometimes I think you are pulling his leg," said Ernie.

Her laugh rang out with such infectious merriment that other couples smiled in sympathy.

"Perhaps he likes to have it pulled!" she said demurely.

"You and Miss Eloise are always kidding somebody," he complained. "I guess you think I'm mighty dumb, don't you?"

"I think you are adorable!" she said, swinging away from him and looking up through mascaraed eyelashes. "When you open your eyes at me for all the world like a little boy, I could kiss you!"

"Help yourself!" said Ernie with a grin; but she assumed a more dignified position and curbed her exuberance.

"I must behave," she said. "Eloise will be shocked. Even when she laughs,

she disapproves. She thinks I'm bad form."

"I don't see anything wrong with your form," he said defensively.

"Oh! but you're not a Wynne. They were all so elegant and proper, and such noble characters. Don't you think noble characters are frightfully depressing?"

"Not when they are like Miss Eloise."

"You sweet boy! She is grand, isn't she? How I ever happened to have such a child I can't imagine. Shall we sit down? You've rubbed all the shine off my silver slippers and got my belt up around my neck. I must look like a fright."

Before Ernie could apologize, a red-faced man approached and greeted Mrs. Wynne as an old friend. She introduced them and was starting to move away when he detained her.

"May I have a word with you?" he asked.

Her hand tightened on Ernie's arm.

"Of course," she said, "what is it?"

The man scowled at Ernie, then, seeing that he had no intention of stepping aside, he said abruptly:

"Is Gustav returned?"

"No; he lands to-morrow and is due here on Tuesday. Why?"

Again he looked at Ernie, and again Ernie felt that restraining pressure on his arm.

"Tell him not to report at our office until I send for him, and not to send any mail there. Do you understand?"

"No," she pouted, "I never understand anything you tiresome men say. But I'll tell him."

"And one thing more," he added. "Tell him to inquire for a package at the general delivery department at the post-office. I want him to have it as soon as he arrives."

"Then why don't you send it to the apartment and I will give it to him?"

"My way is better," he said firmly. "*Auf wiedersehen.*"

Ernie could scarcely wait to get Eloise alone and tell her what had happened, but when he returned to the table and saw the dumb, expectant look in Sarah's face, he held out his hand to her. After all, it would only be a few more minutes to wait, and his reward would be ample.

But when he and Sarah had concluded their stumbling performance and returned to the table, the others were preparing to leave.

"May I take the roses?" asked Mrs. Wynne eagerly. "I love them next to orchids."

"Next time it shall be orchids," promised Mr. Peckham, gallantly presenting her the flowers.

While they were waiting at the elevator, Eloise contrived to get a word alone with Ernie. The gaiety had left her face and she had lapsed into the somber, unhappy mood he knew only too well.

“What did that man say to Mother?” she whispered.

“A message to Mr. Bohn—something about not coming to his office. Who is he?”

“Mr. Conrad, connected with the German Consulate.”

They exchanged a significant glance.

“If anything develops,” he said, “you’ll call me?”

“I have no right to take up your time,” she said, with a new note of formality in her voice.

“I’ve got more time for you than for anything else in the world,” he began, and just then the elevator arrived and they were swept apart.

“I am taking the Wynnes home in my car,” Mr. Peckham announced to Ernie. “You bring Sarah in a taxi.”

On the sidewalk as they were saying good night, Ernie contrived to get another word with Eloise.

“You are the only one who hasn’t congratulated me,” he said.

She looked up at him strangely, her shoulders squared, her chin up, and a puzzled look in her beautiful eyes.

“Should I?” she asked cryptically, then she turned quickly and got into the car.

As Ernie and Sarah drove home, she was moody and preoccupied. He preferred to think her bad humor was caused by her father’s flirtation with the widow, rather than by any shortcoming of his own, but his conjecture was wrong.

“Don’t you think it affected for Eloise Wynne to leave off make-up when every one else uses it?” she asked.

“Not if she doesn’t need it.”

“Sometimes I like her, and then again I don’t,” Sarah went on. “One minute she’s friendly and the next she freezes you.”

“Life hasn’t been any too easy for her,” said Ernie, longing to be warmer in her defense, but knowing that Sarah would resent it. “She has had rough sledding ever since she was a kid.”

“But she’s getting good orders at the factory now, thanks to you. She told me about them when you were dancing with her mother. She said such nice things about you that I just couldn’t help telling her about—us.”

Ernie’s features set into an expression of frozen incredulity. “You told her —” he began.

“That we had been going together for over two years and that I didn’t need to be told how wonderful you are.”

The air in the taxi stifled him, he put his hand to his throat, and swallowed violently.

“And what,” he stammered, “did she say?”

“She said I was a very lucky girl,” Sarah answered complacently.

CHAPTER XIV

Few things are more trying to ragged nerves than the prolonged sound of street drilling. The repairs which Rockwood was undergoing had a dire effect upon the occupants of at least one apartment in the Kirkland.

In the heat and dust and insufferable noise of that interminable summer, the barrier which existed between Eloise and her mother in the person of Gustav Bohn became almost insurmountable. The old bond of affection still held, but no confidences were exchanged, and a state of armed neutrality existed.

As for the object of their discord, he behaved as if drills had been invented for the sole purpose of annoying him. He fussed and fumed and raged, and even went so far as to abuse the workmen.

“He’s so high-strung and nervous, the poor lamb!” condoned Mrs. Wynne. “This order to move to Chicago has upset him terribly.”

“You are not considering going, too, are you?” Eloise asked anxiously, pausing in her mother’s bedroom.

Mrs. Wynne surveyed her short plump hands with their ruby-tinted nails and flashing rings.

“I haven’t decided,” she evaded. “Gustav vows he won’t budge a step without me, and yet he really ought to be there for business reasons.”

For the hundredth time Eloise wondered what was the tie that bound this ill-assorted pair. The old conflagration had apparently burned itself out, but there was still enough warmth in the dying embers to cause considerable trouble.

Like many Germans, Gustav was a sentimentalist and at the same time a tyrant. While dominating her mother soul and body, he never failed in the little gallantries so dear to her heart. On the seventeenth day of each month he brought her flowers, commemorating the day they met, and when away he sent her daily telegrams which she frequently had to pay for. He was one of those grim, unhappy men whose pleasures must always be fed by sympathetic feminine hands. Mrs. Wynne’s gay patter and unquestioning acquiescence to his demands seemed to satisfy some need of his nature.

She, on her part, was enormously flattered by the domineering dependence and sulky jealousy of this grim cavalier with the sardonic smile and compelling eyes. The knowledge that he was a baron and a well-known figure in European social circles added greatly to his value in her eyes.

“You surely aren’t going to the Nursery this hot day?” she said as Eloise put on her hat. “The babies must hate being weighed all the time. They don’t care if they are overweight.”

"I'm not going to the Nursery. I am going to the Stanleys. Yesterday they were eating flour and water out of tin cans."

"How messy! Are you taking them soup bowls?"

"No. Soup."

Mrs. Wynne shrugged. "There's always something to bother about, isn't there? No sooner do we stop agonizing over the Chinese than some busybody comes along and ruins our appetite telling about steel traps. Do you know where that book is I am reading?"

"What is it called?"

"I've forgotten. But it's by the man whose things are always censored. So far I've found it disappointing."

Eloise found the book and then proceeded on her way. As she passed the front room she saw Gustav at his desk, doing something with a penknife to a book. When he heard her in the hall he hastily secreted his handiwork in a drawer and pretended to be reading a paper. How she hated the mystery with which he managed to perform the simplest act!

It was noon when she returned, hot and weary, from her errand of mercy, and she climbed the long flights of stairs with a heavy heart. Despite her boasted independence of people and things, she was finding the monotony of the days and the self-imposed isolation very trying.

Since the night of Mr. Peckham's dinner she had avoided Ernie Bossel, putting him off when he wanted to call and declining invitations to go driving. If he had made up his mind to marry Sarah Peckham, she told herself, the less he saw of other girls the better it would be for Sarah.

Notwithstanding her virtuous determination to keep out of the picture, she could not deny that she sadly missed the stimulating society and frank admiration of the said Mr. Bossel. A wholly adoring friend is a comforting solace to one unduly bruised by the buffets of life, and she constantly had to resist the temptation to call him up or write to him.

As she turned the key in the front-door lock and entered the dark hall, she heard voices in the dining-room and realized that she was the subject of discussion.

"It doesn't seem fair, does it," her mother was saying, "to make Eloise give up a regular job and go to Chicago? Of course, if she marries Ted Saunders it will change everything, for his family knew the Major, and they think I'm a monster. Is that you, darling?"

Eloise went in and sat down listlessly. The prospect of sardines, doughnuts, and hot chocolate did not appeal to her. Instead of serving three square meals a day, her mother compromised on two three-cornered ones, depending on the dinner with Gustav at a restaurant to supply the deficiency.

"We were just talking about you, precious," said Mrs. Wynne uneasily.

“Gustav was asking what you had done to Ernesto. He hasn’t been here for a month.”

“It is not that I deplore his absence,” said Gustav, lighting a cigarette. “His vitality exhausts me. After five minutes in his presence I feel as if I had swum the Channel.”

“I imagine he spends a good deal of time at the Peckhams’,” said Mrs. Wynne. “Sarah seems rather keen about him. She’ll be frightfully rich some day, and I’m sure she’s awfully good, but she does wear such atrocious shoes.”

“The path of virtue is usually trod in flat heels,” said Gustav. “I imagine young Bossel would put up with a good deal for the Peckham millions.”

“But Ernest isn’t like that,” Eloise protested hotly. “He’s impulsive and easy-going, but he isn’t mercenary, is he, Petite?”

For once her mother sided with her. “Heavens, no! He’s as ingenuous as a child. He probably sees something in Sarah that we don’t. She isn’t bad-looking if she weren’t so fat. Anyhow Ernesto has good looks enough for them both. He does so remind me of Bertie Phipps, that blue-eyed officer we met at Cannes, or was it Nice?”

“Your memory is like a mirror,” said Eloise.

“Except for ex-suitors,” amended Gustav.

“What were we talking about?” Mrs. Wynne broke in brightly. “Oh, yes, Ernesto’s love-affair. He and Sarah might make a very happy couple.”

“They doubtless would, enjoying the indoor pastime of the middle-class, boring each other.”

Eloise rose impatiently and was on the point of leaving the table when something in her mother’s face arrested her. It was a strange appraising look she had never seen her give Gustav before.

“There’s nothing the matter with the Peckhams,” she said defensively. “They are good, religious people.”

“The odor of sanctity,” sneered Gustav, “can be the worst smell in the world, next to pickles.”

“My Papa kept a grocery,” said Mrs. Wynne, “out in Vincennes, and if my pretty legs hadn’t landed me on the stage—”

Gustav reached over and raised her hand to his lips.

“I should never have met you in Monte Carlo!” he finished effusively.

“Can’t we have a window open?” said Eloise petulantly. “It’s stifling in here.”

“Gustav can’t stand the noise.”

“Well, we can at least have the shade up. That doesn’t keep out the noise.”

“Don’t touch it!” warned Gustav. “I fixed it the way I wish it to remain.”

Again Eloise saw her mother look at him with that new expression in her face, but neither of them spoke.

After Gustav had left and Mrs. Wynne had gone to her room to rest, Eloise took her sketch pad and paints into the living-room to finish a drawing. In accordance with Gustav's latest whim, the room was almost hermetically sealed, and she immediately raised the blind and flung up the sash. Even the dust and noise were preferable to the unbearable suffocation. She looked down at the only green thing in the street below, an old sycamore whose dusty leaves hung listless under the blazing sun. Tired workmen wielded picks and shovels, and the droning drill kept up its disturbing noise.

How sordid it all was, she thought. Yet, a few miles away the sky was clear, the air fresh, and flowers bloomed under green trees. Somewhere birds were singing, butterflies dancing, and little brown streams wandering through leafy woods. A sick longing swept over her for beautiful places and the gracious amenities of life.

For months now she had lived in a torment of doubt and suspicion. To her excited mind, every one about the place was watching the apartment, gossiping about her mother, suspecting Gustav.

Her eyes fell on the few dejected plants on the window-sill, and she touched the faded blossoms of the geranium. Half aloud she repeated:

“They are not so very precious
And not so very rare—
But I love them because they are honest;
They are common, and they don't care.”

What a jolly time she and Ernest had had the evening he brought that plant! How freely and intimately she had talked, and how fully he had seemed to understand! And all the time he was probably contemplating this rash step which could lead only to unhappiness. A sick feeling of disillusionment swept over her, and she decided that men were all alike and that henceforth she would face her problems and heartaches alone.

She went wearily over to Gustav's desk and arranged her painting materials. This was the tenth poster she had done for Peckham's, but the usual joy in her work was lacking.

Needing a bit of paper on which to try her brushes, she picked a scrap from the trash basket, then stopped to examine it curiously. It was a small square, evidently cut from a printed page, for parts of sentences appeared on both sides.

“Moons of Jupiter,” she read, “Pleiades constitute,” and on the other side, “Satellites of Saturn.”

She looked again into the trash-basket and on top of cigar stubs and some burnt paper she found the duplicate of the square she held in her hand, only on

this scorched piece were the barely distinguishable words, “Cassiopeia” and “asteroids.” For some moments she sat in deep thought. Gustav had never evinced any interest in astronomy; what possible reason had he for cutting out these sections? And where was the book from which he had cut them?

It was all very queer and disturbing, and she found it hard to settle down to work with the mystery unsolved. After a while she got up and moved aimlessly around the room, trying to find a clue. At the bookcase she paused, scanning the shelf reserved for Gustav. There were several volumes on aviation, Ludwig’s *Bismarck*, several volumes of Marcel Proust, and at the end, in an inconspicuous gray cover, a book entitled *The Testimony of the Stars*.

Involuntarily she reached for it and opened it. The inside was hollow, a block having been neatly cut from the center. Within the cavity were two slips of closely folded paper.

With trembling fingers she opened them and read:

French military mission in this country is purchasing five hundred new war planes. Total cost over sixty million dollars. (Copy of code message 1171—July 6th.)

Reliably reported one hundred fifteen two-motored Glen Martin bombers of a type which represents improvements on an old model, purchased by French military mission in this country. (Copy code message 1172, sent Aug. 15.)

She read the slips twice, then hastily replaced them and put the book back on the shelf. Here at last was the proof she needed! The doubts and suspicions were now certainties and it was only a question of how to proceed. Of one thing only was she certain, not a soul must know of her discovery until she had convinced her mother of the danger she was in.

She lay down on the couch and pressed her fingers against her burning eyes. All the time she was thinking, “He can’t frighten me any more! No matter what comes, I shall never be afraid as I was before!”

As she lay trying to decide what should be her next step, the door-knob turned softly behind her. Assuming sleep, she waited, but nothing happened. Peeping cautiously through half-closed eyes, she saw Gustav enter and tiptoe softly to the desk. He had his hat on and seemed in a great hurry. He had evidently come back for something, for he moved her canvas and paints and, not finding what he wanted, cautiously emptied the trash-basket.

She could not see what he did next, but as he tiptoed out of the room she saw him fold something in his handkerchief and thrust it into his pocket.

CHAPTER XV

Eloise waited until Gustav had had time to get downstairs, then she went to the window and peeped through the curtain. She saw him go into the street, look casually up and down, and then make a dash for a taxi that was evidently waiting for him at the corner.

“What are you doing?” asked Mrs. Wynne, coming in from the back room. “Whom are you watching?”

“Nobody now, but I rather think some one has been watching us.”

“What do you mean?” cried Mrs. Wynne, wide-eyed.

“For two days now I’ve seen a man walking up and down across the street, and every now and then he looks up at our window.”

“How absurd! You really should curb your imagination, dearest. Why should any one be watching us?”

“On account of Gustav. Mother—”

“Not another word. I told you I wouldn’t let you say horrid things about Gustav. He’s in trouble enough as it is.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Something about back pay, and moving to Chicago. Don’t you want a game of besique? It’s too hot to sleep.”

“No, Petite. I must talk to you seriously. Do you know just what business Gustav is in?”

Mrs. Wynne’s brows contracted and she bit her lip.

“He’s told me loads of times, but I’m so stupid. Something to do with government affairs.”

“What government?”

“How should I know? One thing’s certain, he’s a very important man.”

“Important to whom?”

“To the people he works for. You should see the way every one treats him wherever we go.”

“And where do you go? I’ve often wondered where you spent your evenings.”

“Oh! at movies and at Mr. Conrad’s, and once a week with an old friend of Gustav’s he used to know in Bucharest.”

“What’s the friend’s name?”

Mrs. Wynne hesitated. The pupils of her eyes contracted slightly.

“Mrs. Weiner—Zaida Weiner. She has a sort of salon and you meet all sorts of interesting people there.”

“You’ve never mentioned her to me before.”

“Haven’t I? I suppose it’s because Gustav is such a fuss-box about having his affairs discussed.”

“Are the people you meet there foreigners?”

“Nearly all of them. I was talking last night to the most adorable Major — something, who has spent years in Iceland. He knows everything to be known about Eskimos. I asked him why he didn’t write a book about them and he said he had—five! You can’t imagine what a relief it is to get with Continentals again, even if one doesn’t speak German.”

“But you speak French as well as English.”

“Yes, with an excellent American accent. But Gustav says I can say more with my hands and eyes than most women say with their lips.”

“What do people do at Mrs. Weiner’s salon?”

“Oh, most of them sit around a big table and talk, but a few of us play contract in the next room. I don’t see why you are asking me all these silly questions.”

“Because I don’t want you ever to go there again.”

“How absurd! There is no reason I should stick at home all the time just because you choose to do so.”

“Then go somewhere else. You don’t have to be mixed up with a group connected with the German Government.”

Mrs. Wynne gave her a startled look.

“Why on earth do you say that?”

“Because I have reason for my suspicions. Tell me honestly, Mother, haven’t you ever thought something was wrong?”

“I don’t know what you mean!” cried her mother with the candid gaze of a lying child.

“Then I’ll tell you. Gustav is under suspicion as a spy, and if he gets into trouble you will be involved.”

At this her mother flung herself into a chair and burst into tears.

“I haven’t done anything wrong and I don’t believe he has. Some one has been filling your ears with silly tales, and you were only too ready to listen. You have always been jealous of him and you want to get rid of him.”

“But suppose I have proof of what I say? Suppose I know where he keeps copies of secret codes he has sent to Germany; that he has business dealings with a man who was arrested for stealing blue-prints from an aircraft factory; that—”

Mrs. Wynne put her hands over her ears.

“Stop! Stop it! I say. It is not true!”

“But it *is*. And you’ve got to decide what’s to be done. Rightly or wrongly, Gustav is under serious suspicion. If you go with him to Chicago, nothing can save you from being drawn into a very dreadful lot of notoriety.”

Mrs. Wynne's face went haggard and she looked her full forty-five years.

"He told me he had enemies. He said they would try to put me against him; and just when he is about to get his divorce and we were planning to be married!"

Eloise knelt before her and held her fluttering hands.

"Do you really care for him so much, Petite?"

"I've got to have somebody! If you marry Ted Saunders and leave me, I'd be utterly alone. And I can't live alone, Eloise. I just can't face it!"

"But if I promise you not to marry Ted?"

"Then it would be some one else."

"Not necessarily—I'll promise anything you like. Let Gustav go, and you and I will get a nice little home in the country—"

"But I loathe the country! What on earth would I do cooped up there, with you working all the time? No, no. Gustav needs me and I need him. We have the same tastes. Why can't things go on as they are?"

"If you go with him to Chicago, you'll go without me."

Her mother looked at her in consternation. "But you know I can't go without you. And besides, you couldn't go on living here without me. I'd never allow that."

"You couldn't help it. I am twenty-two next month, and self-supporting!"

"And you would be willing to forsake me, after I gave up my career and came back to this stupid old America on your account?"

"Oh, no, you didn't, Petite. You came because Gustav was coming, and you know it."

Thus cornered, Mrs. Wynne flung herself upon the floor in a fine histrionic exhibition of abused motherhood.

"I am going straight to Gustav," she sobbed. "He will be able to explain everything."

Eloise looked down at her in exasperation. Emotional orgies had ceased to terrify her as they once did.

"If you mention one word of all this I'll go to the Federal Bureau and tell what I know."

The tears dried on Mrs. Wynne's cheeks, and she sat up and pushed back her hair. Fear gave place to self-pity and she stopped acting.

"Eloise! What are you saying? You wouldn't do that!"

"But I will! A word from me and he would be arrested before night."

"Hush! For God's sake, don't say it! You must help me protect him. Do you suppose—if—if—they took him they could do anything to me?"

There was no play-acting now. Self-pity had given place to abject terror and she was shaking violently.

"They certainly could if you stay with him," said Eloise.

“But what can I do?” whimpered Mrs. Wynne. “He said if I ever tried to leave him or told what I knew, he would—Oh, Eloise, I am so unhappy I could die. It’s been terrible!”

With a rush of compassion, Eloise gathered her into her arms. “Defenseless,” Ernest Bossel had called her, and that’s what she was, a poor, foolish little animal unwittingly caught in a trap from which there seemed no escape.

“I don’t see how you can care for him!” said Eloise.

“I don’t love him as I did, but he won’t let me go. He’s determined not to let me out of his sight for fear I’ll tell something. If he should find out I’d talked to you—”

“Stop crying, Petite. Try to get hold of yourself. We must get him off to Chicago, and let him think we are coming later. Act as if nothing had happened. Don’t let him know that we are watching him.”

Her mother clung to her. “And you’ll never marry and leave me? You’ll always look after me? And never drag me to the country?”

“No. Yes. No. I promise anything you ask. Get up, now, and make yourself pretty. He mustn’t see you looking like this when he comes back.”

With nerves twitching, brain reeling, and a feeling of complete exhaustion, Eloise went to her work. But the thought that her mother no longer loved Gustav steadied her hands, roused her courage, and made her forget for the time the terrible heat and the maddening drone of the drill in the street below.

CHAPTER XVI

For the first time in his life Ernie faced a situation that threatened to be too much for him. The line of least resistance has a way of leading to an abyss, and with each acceptance of Mr. Peckham's favors he found himself nearer the brink. On the strength of his rapid advancement he had rashly assumed new responsibilities: the care of Rose and the children while Bob Gibbs was at a tuberculosis hospital, the instalment of a furnace, and the paving of a new street in front of the house. However embarrassing the complications with Sarah Peckham might be, Ernie was in no position to break with her until his debts were paid.

Fortunately his conscience, while not perfectly clear, was not seriously clouded. He liked Sarah and was genuinely sorry for her, but he had never professed a fondness he did not feel, and her recent confession to Eloise filled him with surprise and resentment. Just as soon as conditions permitted he meant to disentangle himself from the distasteful alliance, but just how it was to be done he did not know.

His perplexity and low spirits were the cause of considerable concern to his family.

"You ain't favoring yourself these days," Pop told him anxiously. "I'm scared they're working you too hard."

"He works himself," said Grampa. "I don't know where he gets all that energy."

"He does things he doesn't have to," said Rose. "He walked the floor for hours last night with the baby because she had the croup."

"He's a nut," said Curt. "Always tending to other people's jobs. He better spend more time courting that rich Peckham girl who telephones him all the time."

Ernie gave his brother a withering glance. Little any of them guessed of the difficulties he faced or of the fires of unrequited love that consumed him.

Mr. Peckham in the meanwhile, delighting in the way he took advantage of each fresh opportunity, continued to shower favors upon him.

"The boy's making good," he told Sarah. "Once he goes after an order nothing stops him till he gets it. He's executive, too. Men are working under him that's been with us years. And, by golly, they like it!"

"I wish he wasn't so busy," complained Sarah. "He never has time to do things any more, and when he comes out he seems so preoccupied."

"Just what your Mama used to say about me," chuckled Mr. Peckham. "Once he gets there, he'll know how to have a good time. You'll see."

“But he’s changed,” persisted Sarah. “He’s not nearly as jolly as he used to be. He seems worried about something.”

“Maybe he wants to get married,” her father teased.

Since sampling Mrs. Wynne’s stimulating society at the birthday dinner, Mr. Peckham had shown unmistakable evidence of rejuvenation. He walked with a swagger, wore brighter ties, and indulged in clumsy efforts at persiflage. More than once he made tentative suggestions about seeing the Wynnes again, but his proposals met with no encouragement from Sarah.

Finally he consulted Ernie.

“I guess I couldn’t give another dinner,” he said, “unless it was somebody’s birthday.”

“Why not ask them to tea?” Ernie suggested eagerly.

When the matter was broached at Bluff Ridge and Sarah’s objections overruled, the question of refreshments arose. Sarah stood firm for sandwiches and tea but her father and Aunt Melvy contended for a more elaborate repast.

“Ef you ast people to feed with you,” argued the latter, “fer de Lawd’s sake, give ’em something to eat. Your Pa’s dead right. With all our money we ought to have chicken salad and ice-cream.”

At last a compromise was reached on tea, sandwiches, and mint juleps. On a golden day early in October the blinds were drawn, the crystal chandeliers lighted, and the radio set at full strength. At the last moment Mr. Peckham burned a potent incense which seemed to demand white candles and holy water.

When the guests arrived, there were three of them instead of two.

“This is Mr. Bohn, Mr. Peckham,” said Mrs. Wynne brightly. “I knew you would be happy to welcome any friend of mine.”

Mr. Peckham critically appraised the fastidious elegance and bored condescension of the stranger, but his hospitality was at stake, so he grasped his hand with a viselike grip and bade him come in and make himself at home.

Ernie rose from the deep couch where he was sitting with Sarah and greeted the guests with self-conscious embarrassment. It was the first time he had seen Eloise since the dinner party, and he was shocked to see how thin and pale she looked. Something serious must have happened and he could scarcely restrain his impatience to get her alone and question her.

Mrs. Wynne fluttered about the room, making twittering comments on everything.

“I’d no idea you had such a grand mansion! Like the Cluny, isn’t it, Gustav? All we need is a guide in uniform.”

“Priceless,” murmured Mr. Bohn.

Mr. Peckham took it all in good faith.

“They are genuine antiques all right,” he assured her. “The man in Atlantic City said they were worth twice what I paid for them, but I guess he was lying. The chandeliers come from Paris, France.”

“Think of it!” said Mrs. Wynne, biting her lip.

“May I sit beside you?” asked Eloise, dropping down beside Sarah. “Tell me what the girls are doing in the art class.”

This left Ernie and Mr. Bohn to themselves, a situation which neither seemed to relish.

“It’s good to have cool weather at last,” said Ernie, falling back on the one infallible topic.

“Yes. One feels rather done in, after your obnoxious American summers,” said Mr. Bohn, who gave the impression of having tried everything and found it wanting.

“I suppose you wouldn’t stand for it, where you came from?” said Ernie.

Mr. Bohn shot a suspicious glance at him, but Ernie’s smile was disarming as he added:

“France must be a fine country from all I hear.”

They were relieved of further conversational effort by a solemn procession of servants bringing in the tea things. Sam led with a huge tray of beaten brass, holding a silver service and cups of excessively floral porcelain. Behind him stalked Aunt Melvy carrying two platters of ornate sandwiches, and bringing up the rear, was a young mulatto with a tray of frosted silver goblets.

When everything was arranged on the tea-table, Sarah took her place behind the kettle and began nervously to pour. The mental strain of remembering how many lumps, and whether lemon or cream, proved too much for her, and when she put all three in one cup, Eloise came to the rescue.

“I love to pour,” she said. “Would you mind letting me?”

Sarah gladly relinquished her place, and when the cups were quickly and deftly filled, Aunt Melvy was shocked to see the foreign gentleman come forward and pass them, just as if she and Sam were not there for that express purpose. Ernie was quite as surprised but less critical. That was evidently the way gentlemen behaved at teas, so he rose and followed Mr. Bohn’s example.

When every one had been served, conversation dropped to zero. Mr. Bohn’s presence seemed to cramp the style of every one present. Mrs. Wynne, usually ready, if necessary, to hurl a family skeleton into a pause of the conversation, seemed strangely nervous. Sarah toyed with her food in awkward self-consciousness, and Ernie and Eloise avoided each other’s eyes.

“What ails your boy friend?” Mr. Peckham asked Mrs. Wynne when he had gotten her into the conservatory ostensibly to see his goldfish.

“He’s worried, poor dear.”

“Peeved I’d call it. J. Lucy! He thinks I’m poaching.”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“That’s for you to say.”

She gave him a look calculated to reassure a far more timid admirer than Cyrus W. Peckham. He took a deep breath and moistened his lips.

“Say,” he said, “if I send the car for you some day, will you come out and go for a ride in my motor-boat?”

“Just try me!” she said.

While things were thus progressing in the conservatory, Ernie seized the opportunity to get Eloise off to himself.

“Would you like to see the grounds?” he asked.

“Yes,” she cried eagerly. “Let’s all go for a walk.”

But Sarah demurred on account of her thin sandals, and Gustav refused to be divorced from his second julep.

“I’ll show her around,” said Ernie magnanimously. “We won’t be gone long.”

Eloise followed him somewhat uncertainly through the French window and down the wide steps.

“I don’t think she quite liked us running off,” she said.

“But you really should see the view of the river from the terrace. Come around this way.”

Yellowing poplars and reddening oaks hemmed them in on every side until they reached the coping at the edge of the bluff. There the ground dropped precipitously to the valley below, and beyond the twisting river lay enchanting vistas of hill and dale, all drenched in October sunlight.

“The glory of it!” Eloise cried, throwing off her hat and lifting her head. “This is what I’ve been homesick for for months. See the way the sun illuminates everything!”

“You should see what it does to your hair,” he said. “Ripples of gold all over the brown waves.”

She laughed with sudden gaiety. “Why, Ernest Bossel! You are talking like a poet. What’s come over you?”

“Lots of things. Tell me, how have things been going at home?”

“Particularly hellish. Why talk about them?”

“Because I have to know. Why haven’t you let me see you?”

She raked the dead leaves at her feet into a little pile with the toe of her shoe.

“You are too busy to be bothered with my affairs. Are those wild ducks?”

“Yes. Go ahead. Tell me what’s happened.”

There was little chance of reticence in the face of such persistent questioning.

“I’ve had it out with Mother. She’s convinced at last, but she begs me to let

things go on as they are for the present.”

“But every day counts. We’ve waited too long as it is.”

“She doesn’t think we have sufficient evidence.”

“We have the note-book.”

“That was made long ago and the code has probably been changed by now.”

“Surely you have some other evidence.”

“I did have. I found copies of codes hidden in a book, but when I went back to look for them he had taken it away.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this?”

There was another silence between them, then he asked:

“Can’t you persuade your mother to tell what she knows?”

“Nothing can induce her. But she has promised me not to go to Chicago—that is, on certain conditions.”

“What are they?”

“That I stay with her and never marry.”

Something dropped like lead in Ernie’s heart.

“You didn’t promise that?” he asked, aghast.

“I just did. I’d agree to anything in the world to get her out of the clutches of that man.”

“There’s only one way to do it. You’ve got to make her face the music.”

“It’s no use. I’ve talked myself hoarse, and it only leads to a scene. We get right back where we started.”

“Then I’ll talk to her,” said Ernie with determination. “When can I come? To-morrow?”

“No; Gustav will be there. Wait till Saturday. He’s going out of town for the week-end and won’t be back until Monday noon.”

“I’ll come both times,” said Ernie.

She shook her head.

“Can’t I ever come except on business?”

“I’m afraid not,” she said ruefully.

“But why? Don’t you want to see me?”

“It isn’t that.”

“Then what is it?”

“You know perfectly well.”

He swallowed painfully. “See here, Eloise,” he burst out, “there’s something I got to explain to you!”

“Spare me the details,” she said. “I know the plot. Ambitious young man marries employer’s daughter. Is the date set?”

“I tell you, Eloise—”

“Never mind. All’s fair in love and business.”

“But I don’t love her! She’s a fine girl all right, and I want her to be happy, but you know how I’ve always felt about you.”

“An undying affection that only money could kill,” she scoffed. “You and Sarah won’t need much love, when you’ve got so much of everything else. It’s the poor devils who haven’t any money who need oodles of love to keep them going. It’s just as well that things have turned out as they have. Your devotion would have been wasted on me.”

He looked at her with sudden suspicion.

“You mean you are already in love?”

“I mean it’s high time we were going in,” she said.

But he was not to be put off.

“Is it that chap from Boston?” he demanded so fiercely that she laughed.

“You’ve no right to cross-question me like this,” she said, rising. “Let me pass.”

“Not till you tell me one thing. Don’t you care a snap for me?”

“A whole bag full of snaps,” she teased.

Suddenly love engulfed him, that mad, reckless love of a boy for a maid that reckons not of the past nor the future but demands fulfilment now, at any cost. He seized her by the arms and pulled her to him.

“Let me kiss you,” he demanded. “Just once!”

She shook her head.

“But why?”

“Because I don’t wish it. I had to get over being affectionate when I was a child. It disturbed Mother’s make-up.”

“How do you know I won’t kiss you anyway?” he said fiercely.

Her lips twitched but her brown gaze met his blue one with unflinching resistance.

“Let me go, Ernie. Some one will see us! This foolishness must stop. After you have talked to Mother on Saturday we mustn’t see each other again.”

“You mean you won’t have me any more for a friend?”

There was something so tragic in his voice that her mood changed to tenderness.

“You’ll always be my friend,” she said, “perhaps the best I ever had. That’s one reason I’m going to stop seeing you. Your whole career is at stake. You mustn’t endanger it by getting mixed up in our horrid affairs. The best thing you can do is to forget us.”

“But, Eloise, you don’t understand—I tell you—”

His frantic speech was cut short by a stentorian voice summoning them from the house:

“Hey, there! You two! We were just about to get out a search-warrant. Your mother’s ready to go.”

CHAPTER XVII

The business of enlightening and convincing Mrs. Wynne was not going to be easy, but Ernie welcomed any occasion, however painful, that he could share with Eloise. He wanted above everything to make her understand about Sarah, but now that she was fixed in the belief that there was an understanding between them, she refused absolutely to discuss the matter.

When he arrived at the Kirkland, Eloise met him in the hall with a frightened face.

"A strange man has just been here," she whispered. "I'm sure he was a German. He plied Mother with all sorts of questions, but she denied everything. I could see he suspected us both. I was frightened to death."

"What did he ask you?"

"About Gustav. How long he had lived here. What was his business. Who were his friends."

"And your mother wouldn't talk?"

"She just cried and declared she didn't know anything."

"But doesn't she see what danger she's in?"

"Yes, but she's more afraid of Gustav than she is of the Government. The man knew about Gustav's friendship with Zaida Weiner, and that he had something to do with Hans Katzenbach, but he was evidently looking for more definite proof."

"And we are going to furnish it!" cried Ernie with decision. "Have you told your mother I know?"

"Yes, and she was furious."

"See if you can get her to talk to me," he urged.

"She won't come," reported Eloise, after making inquiries.

"Then I'll go to her," said Ernie, striding across the hall and knocking peremptorily on her door. A feeble voice bade him enter and he found the little lady sitting on the side of her bed in a pink and white negligée. Her face was swollen from crying and her hair was in disarray.

"No! No!" she burst out at sight of him. "I won't talk to anybody!"

Eloise tried in vain to quiet her, she only pushed her away and declared in a hysterical voice that she wanted to be left alone.

"See here!" said Ernie firmly, seating himself on the bed, "this is no time for foolishness. Something has got to be done. Are you going to work with us or against us?"

"I'm not going to do anything," she sobbed. "I wish everybody would stop asking me questions and acting as if I'd done something wrong."

“You are wrong in the eyes of the law if you let Mr. Bohn use you and your apartment for un-American activities.”

“But I told Eloise I would give him up. You mustn’t ask me to talk. I can’t do it. I don’t dare!”

“Very well, then. You needn’t. We’ll get the information elsewhere. All we ask of you is to keep Mr. Bohn from suspecting that we know, and to get him off to Chicago as soon as possible.”

“I shall have to make him think we are coming later. If he finds out—”

“He mustn’t. We are going to work to get the goods on him, but we want him to be somewhere else when they catch him. You take a bromide now and lie down. Leave things to me. I’ll take care of you.”

She leaned gratefully against his shoulder and dabbed at her eyes with her ball of a handkerchief.

“You see how it is,” said Eloise hopelessly, when they were back in the living-room. “I believe Gustav has threatened to do something terrible to her if she tells what she knows.”

“I doubt if she knows much more than we do,” said Ernie. “Have you looked through Mr. Bohn’s other books?”

“Yes, and gone through his trash-basket every day. He doesn’t suspect me yet, but he evidently thinks some one is watching him.”

“Do you think he suspects me?”

“I’m not sure. He asks a good many questions about you and is always upset when he finds you’ve been here.”

Ernie thought for some moments before speaking.

“Do you ever overhear him telephoning?”

“No. He usually calls up from his own apartment; but his long distance calls come over our line.”

“Why is that, do you suppose?”

“I don’t know. But every Monday morning, about ten o’clock, I have to go over and tell him he’s wanted on long distance.”

“If we could only find out where those messages are coming from,” Ernie began, then he stopped abruptly. “Eloise, I’ve got it! I’m going to tap your wire!”

“How can you?”

“Almost anybody can with the right apparatus. All I’ve got to do is to locate the box in the cellar, scrape the insulation from a bit of wire, and attach a receiver to the exposed parts with metal clips and extensions.”

“But isn’t it against the law?”

“Yes, and it should be. It’s a dirty business. But if we can obtain information that will lead to Mr. Bohn’s arrest without having your mother implicated, I shan’t care. When does Mr. Bohn return?”

“Early Monday morning. Could you get it fixed by then?”

“Easy!” cried Ernie with suppressed excitement. “I’ll install the wires tomorrow. Then on Monday morning, before I go to work, I’ll come by and see what I can pick up.”

“And what am I to do?”

“Meet me in the cellar about the time the call is due. Bring a pencil and paper so you can take down the message if we are lucky enough to get one. It’s a long chance, but it’s worth taking.”

The plan worked well. Under the pretext of repairing the telephone, Ernie spent some time the next morning installing his apparatus. The janitor, already an admirer of Ernie’s, readily accepted his explanation of his actions, and even furnished a candle to facilitate matters.

Monday morning found the conspirators hiding in the dark cellar waiting for Mr. Bohn’s weekly call.

It was a nervous business, and Ernie realized the risk he was taking. But anything that challenged his skill and threatened to baffle him held an appeal. The bright eye of danger had but to wink and he was keen to follow.

“I can’t bear for you to do this,” whispered Eloise. “It may get you into no end of trouble.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied, holding the receiver to his ear. “I’m having the time of my life. If we can get the goods on that guy, the rest won’t matter.”

“I shouldn’t let you do all this for me!” she said with emotion.

“Yes, you should, too. You know I— There’s the signal! Get your pencil!”

They waited breathlessly.

“All right, Western Union,” he said. “This is Belmont 1776. Yes. I’m expecting a message for Mr. Gustav Bohn. A code cable? From the German Engineers Club in Berlin. O. K. I can take it.”

Ernie put his hand over the mouth of the telephone and turned frantically to Eloise. “Take down the numbers as I call them off,” he whispered, “five to a group, one group under the other. All right, operator. Let her go.”

A.A.4.z.7 stop
A.A.5.y.6 stop
A.A.6.x.5 stop
A.A.7.w.4 stop
A.A.8.v.3 stop
A.A.9.u.2 stop

Signed, O.M.

Eloise scribbled madly, rechecking the letters and figures as Ernie repeated

the message.

“Is that all?” she asked, disappointed, when he finished.

“Yes, and it may be more than enough,” he said excitedly. “Let me see that paper. Just as I hoped. It’s the same form as the key in the note-book! Two letters and a numeral, then a letter and a numeral. We’ve got something at last!”

“What are you going to do next?”

“Hustle this message and the note-book down to the Federal headquarters as soon as I can.”

“And will they come after Gustav?”

“I hope I can hold them off until he gets to Chicago. But they will be trailing him. You slip upstairs, and don’t let any one know what’s been going on. When Mr. Bohn comes, tell him no call came in to your apartment.”

“Don’t try to see me again,” pleaded Eloise. “You must keep away.”

He watched her grope her way toward the stairs and waited until she had gotten up without detection, then he went back to the telephone box and after disentangling the wires and hiding the tools under his coat, hurried cautiously to the basement exit.

At the door a bulky figure barred his passage and a gruff voice bade him put up his hands.

“What’s the big idea?” he asked as he complied with an air of surprised innocence.

“Is that a gun sticking out of your pocket?” demanded the man.

“No!” scoffed Ernie. “It’s some wires and an old telephone. I been installing a new one.”

The officer satisfied himself that the statement was true, but he still eyed him suspiciously.

“What telephone company do you work for?”

“Well,” began Ernie with the blandest expression, “I used to be with the National, but since then—”

“That’ll do,” interrupted the officer. “Is your name Bohn?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know a man by that name?”

“I do.”

“Does he live here?”

“Yes, on the third floor.”

“A friend of yours, eh? I think we’d like to ask you a few questions, young man, up at Federal headquarters. I’ll have to ask you to come out and step in my car.”

“Thanks for the lift,” said Ernie airily. “I was on my way down there myself.”

CHAPTER XVIII

In the office of the F.B.I. Ernie's self-confessed offense was overlooked in the excitement caused by the information obtained. The note-book and the intercepted message proved a greatly desired link in a chain that had been tightening for months about a suspected spy ring in the city, and the new evidence was promptly despatched to Washington.

"When will we hear from it?" Ernie asked.

"Can't say," was the answer. "Espionage business has to be handled like dynamite. If one word of this leaks out, the whole bunch may clear out before we can do anything. It's of the greatest importance that you keep out of Bohn's sight. Avoid him in every possible way, and don't go with any one he knows."

The next few weeks were interminable for Ernie. Not daring to communicate with Eloise, he did not know what was taking place at the Kirkland, and a thousand fears assailed him. As long as Mr. Bohn was with the Wynnes he had been told to avoid the house, and yet with Mr. Bohn's removal the only excuse for his presence would be gone!

The serious problem of the moment was Sarah Peckham. From no apparent cause she had developed symptoms that threatened a nervous breakdown, and her father was distracted.

"I understand broken legs and toothaches," he confided to Ernie, "but this nerve business gets my goat. I've consulted specialists, and can't any of 'em locate the trouble. You got any notion what's troubling her?"

Ernie, feeling somewhat guilty, ventured the suggestion that perhaps she had been dieting too strenuously.

"That's the ticket!" exclaimed Mr. Peckham. "I bet you've hit it. Her Mama was up to that trick before she died. Why women would rather be feeble than fat is more'n I can figger. Me and you have got to take Tootsie in hand."

"Maybe a trip would do her good," Ernie said.

"I been thinking about that. Her teacher up at the Art School is taking a bunch of girls over to Paris, France, and he's been deviling me to send Tootsie. I believe I'll put it up to her."

Sarah declined to consider the proposition; she hated traveling; there wasn't time to get ready; she didn't want to leave Daddy and Ernie.

Every week-end Mr. Peckham insisted on Ernie's going home with him and together they tried to cheer her up, and to induce her to make the trip. Their efforts bore little result. She refused even the small diversions that were suggested and pleaded ill-health as an excuse for her inertia.

Mr. Peckham's sentiment for the beguiling Mrs. Wynne had to feed upon

the effusive acknowledgment of weekly floral offerings, while Ernie's passion for Eloise had even less to sustain it.

Things would probably have continued thus indefinitely had affairs not reached a climax at Bluff Ridge about Thanksgiving time.

Ernie had persuaded Sarah to take a short walk in the crisp autumn air, and they had just reached the terrace when the inevitable subject of the European trip came up.

"It would be a wonderful chance for you," Ernie was saying, "not only to get well, but to study in one of those fine big studios. Eloise Wynne says—"

"Why are you always quoting Eloise to me?" she replied petulantly. "I can't see that she's gotten so far."

"But she only had a year in Paris. If she could have stayed—"

"And do you want *me* to stay?" she regarded him with reproachful eyes.

"If it would get you well," he replied lamely.

"Well, it wouldn't. And I'm not going. You might as well stop talking about it."

They walked on in silence while Ernie's mind reverted to a golden afternoon in October when he and Eloise had stood on this very spot and watched the sun transform the world into an abode of glory. He recalled the black triangle of wild ducks against the azure sky, the glints of gold on her bright hair, the provocative yet forbidding mockery of her eyes when he held her by the shoulders and threatened to kiss her. What if he had? Mightn't things have been different?

A disturbing sound beside him brought him back to the present.

"Are you crying?" he asked in surprise.

Sarah dropped her head and refused to answer.

Particularly susceptible to feminine tears, he put his arm around her and tried to comfort her.

"There! Don't cry! Nobody's going to make you go if you don't want to."

"But you don't care!" she burst out. "It doesn't make the least difference to you whether I go or stay."

At this moment Aunt Melvy, laboring up the path from the station, and seeing Sarah in tears, hastened to join them.

"What ails my baby chile?" she asked solicitously. "Done sprung yer ankle?"

"She's not feeling so good," faltered Ernie. "She's got a headache."

"I have not!" she said, pushing his hand away.

Aunt Melvy's practised eye took in the situation at a glance.

"You stop bein' mad at Mr. Ernie, Tootsie! Some day you-all be gittin' married, and Aunt Melvy be cookin' fer you. You quit bein' all frowned up before yer Pa sees you. You know how he takes on when you cry."

But Sarah continued to sob as Ernie led her across the lawn. At the side porch she paused.

"I'm going upstairs," she said, "and I'm not coming back. Tell Daddy anything you like."

"But, Sarah—" he began and got no further, for she wheeled suddenly and flung her arms about his neck.

"I can't stand it!" she sobbed. "I'd rather be dead than go on like this. Tell me why you don't like me as much as you used to."

"But I do," he said, gently disentangling her arms. "You wouldn't say such things if you weren't nervous and upset. You'll feel better when you've had your dinner."

"Food would choke me," she declared. "Tell me, Ernie, I've got to know: If Eloise Wynne were out of the way, do you think— Would you care for me?"

"I don't know," he evaded, greatly embarrassed. "I'm not seeing her these days. You stop worrying. Forget about Paris. Things will work out O. K."

"Then you don't love her?"

His eyes faltered before her pleading gaze.

"Oh, Ernie, I'm so miserable I want to die!" And covering her face with her hands she fled into the house.

Never before had Ernie been so profoundly stirred. Even Eloise was forgotten for the moment in his concern for Sarah. It was dreadful to see her so humiliated and wretched, so lacking in pride. He longed to help her; yet being kind to her was the very thing that had caused her unhappiness. He must get out of her life; make her forget him. It was the least he could do.

Making his way to the sun porch, he found Mr. Peckham stretched on a wicker chair, absorbed in the voluminous sheets of the Sunday paper.

"Those damned Germans!" he burst out when Ernie joined him. "Sending money and men over here to spread their rotten propaganda. Just been reading how they worm themselves into our organizations and stir up trouble. You haven't heard any fool talk among our people, have you?"

"Not among the men, sir. Some of the women have been circulating pamphlets."

"I bet that red-headed girl in the sorting-room was one of them. They tell me her father was arrested a while back for stealing aéroplane secrets from a factory up in Long Island. Where's Sarah?"

"She's gone to bed. She's feeling bad," said Ernie uneasily.

Mr. Peckham ran his hands over his bald head. "I'll be jiggered if I know what to do with that child. If those fool doctors had any sense, they'd have diagnosed her case long ago. What's the matter? You ain't going?"

Ernie murmured something about reports he had to prepare for to-morrow.

"Let 'em go!" said his boss. "Sundays are made for rest. We're expecting

you for dinner. And besides, I've got something to talk over with you."

So Ernie stayed—at least, his body did, while his thoughts flew in all directions seeking a way out of his dilemma. The time had come when something must be done. Love and ambition were at grips, and he knew that any decision meant sacrifice. On the one side lay immediate success and surety not only for himself but for his family; on the other, poverty and uncertainty and a very slight possibility of gaining something priceless.

Mr. Peckham, booming out his platitudes and discussing affairs at the factory, did not notice until dinner was nearly over that his guest was not eating.

"Here, Sam!" he called. "More food for Mr. Ernie, and bring me a box of fresh cigars. These taste like mummies."

When they returned to the sun porch and were having liqueurs, Mr. Peckham ventured to inquire after Mrs. Wynne.

"I haven't seen her lately," said Ernie. "But Mr. Carter tells me Miss Eloise is making good on her posters. He's taken ten out of a dozen."

"Tell him I say to take 'em all. He can chuck what he don't want in the waste-basket. I promised her mother to help her."

Ernie got up to go, but Mr. Peckham detained him. Something seemed to be on the old man's mind, something he was finding it hard to put into words.

"How long have you been with us, Bossel?"

"Three years next February."

"Well, I've been watching you pretty close, and I like the way you are coming on. You're like me, born to boss. Why, I could start to-morrow working for the President of the United States, and next week he'd be working for me!"

"He'd have a swell boss," said Ernie. "There's nothing I can ever do to pay you back for what you've done for me."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Peckham. "And I've just started. I said to myself, I lost my two boys, and here's one that can take their place. I ain't one to meddle, but if you and Sarah—"

He broke off, blew a mouthful of smoke into the air, then went on: "Well, I've about decided to put you at the head of the Sales Department. You are pretty young, but if you can swing it, you'll be settin' prettier than any young chap I know."

Ernie's heart pounded. Here was a goal, higher than any he had dreamed of, just within his reach. The work was congenial, the advance in salary would make the entire Bossel family comfortable.

He drew a deep breath and looked at Mr. Peckham gratefully.

"That's sure swell of you," he began, then he heard a voice that hardly seemed to be his adding, "but I'm afraid I can't take the job. I'm thinking of

leaving town.”

“You ain’t sick, are you?” said Mr. Peckham anxiously.

“No, not exactly.”

“Then what in hell are you driving at? You in any kind of jam? Been playing the races, or gettin’ in debt?” He laid his hand on Ernie’s knees. “If that’s it, I’ll see you through. Boys will be boys, even the best of them.”

“It’s nothing like that,” said Ernie. Then, seeing that some sort of reason for his extraordinary decision was necessary, he grasped at the only straw on the pool of his confusion.

“I’m thinking of going out West,” he said; “maybe to California.”

Had he proposed an excursion to Mars, Mr. Peckham could not have been more astounded.

“It don’t make sense!” he protested. “Here I am jumpin’ you up the ladder three rungs at a time, and paying you double what you ever got before, and you talk about quitting! What do you want to do out West?”

“They say there are lots of openings out there,” said Ernie feebly.

“Openings! In the name of Jehoshaphat, what’s got into you? You ain’t a damned fool, Bossel, but you are certainly talking like one.” He paused for breath, then looked up shrewdly: “Have you and Tootsie been having a spat?”

“Not exactly, sir.”

“I can make that all right. She’s keen about you, boy. I know she’s a mite spoiled, but that’s my fault. You see, I had to be Mama and Papa both to her. I guess I’ve sort of overdone it. Then Melvy has babied her, too. Does she know you are thinking of going away? Is that what upset her?”

“No. I haven’t told her. It was about her going away.”

“Well, neither of you are going!” said Mr. Peckham with finality. “I’ve had enough of this damned foolishness.”

“But I’ve decided, sir.”

At this Mr. Peckham’s temper, which had been straining at the leash, broke all bounds.

“If you walk out of my factory after all I’ve done for you, you walk out of my home, too! I won’t have a vacillating, ungrateful, business hobo taking my girl on a wild-goose chase out West.”

“I can’t blame you,” said Ernie miserably. “I better not see her again. Would you mind telling her?”

“You bet I’ll tell her. And so far as I am concerned, you can start West right now!”

With a fierce gesture of dismissal, Mr. Peckham rose and stalked into the house, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER XIX

When Ernie failed to go to work next morning, the Bossel household buzzed with excitement. Curiosity was rampant, but Ernie's grim demeanor discouraged questioning.

"If you weren't fired, I'll be hanged if I can see what you're quitting for," said Curt at the breakfast table.

"Mr. Peckham probably got into one of his tantrums. If he can't get along with you, he can't get along with anybody," said Grampa.

"Mr. Peckham's all right," grumbled Ernie defensively. "I just want to go out West and see what it's like. I'm leaving a little money in the bank for you all to draw on until I can send something regular."

"It beats me," said Curt, "when everything was going so good and you getting promoted so fast. Did the old man give you a reference?"

"No. But I'll get work all right."

"That's what you say. It ain't so easy."

"But why do you have to go away? Why don't you try for work here?" asked Grampa.

"Quit deviling him, you-all," protested Pop. "He's got reasons he ain't saying. If he had to quit, he had to, and if he's got to go away, he's got to, and that's that."

Ernie was grateful to him. The events of the previous evening had been so swift and devastating that he was at a loss to account for his own actions. Leaving home was the last thing he wanted to do, and the thought of putting a railway journey between him and Eloise Wynne was insupportable.

"I might go up to Cincinnati and try to land something," he said, his yearning for California weakening. "There's a train leaves at eight in the morning. I think I'll take that."

Rose, who had exhausted every argument against his going, dejectedly offered to get his clothes washed, and Pop said he would press his pants.

"You can take my suitcase," said Curt.

"Mine's bigger," said Grampa, blowing his nose.

Thus the family, though stunned and disapproving, rallied around him and helped him with his preparations. After all, he was their Ernie and he must do what he thought best, no matter how foolish it seemed.

"You can come back from Cincinnati for holidays," said Rose, trying not to cry.

"Yep, and for Pop's birthday," added Ernie.

When little Nicky, Rose's four-year-old, volunteered to feed Roustabout

for him while he was gone, his morale sank to zero. The thought of the faithful little beast standing on his hind legs at the front window every night waiting for him to come home was almost more than he could bear.

He rose abruptly and fled to the yard. A pre-taste of homesickness overwhelmed him, for the friendly, homely atmosphere of Wirt's Division; for the bustling confusion and briny smells of the factory; for the luxuries of Bluff Ridge.

All the old familiar things acquired a new and priceless significance. But deeper than these was the dread of leaving a city that held Eloise. Even though he could not see her, it was something to know that when she needed him she could call him, and that the tie between them was not completely broken.

If he could only see her once more, he thought, to say good-by, and to assure her that no matter how far he went he would come back the moment she needed him.

Following an irresistible impulse, he seized his hat and rushed to the car line. Just how he was going to see her without encountering Mr. Bohn, or what he was going to say to her, he did not know, but see her he must at any cost.

As he left the car, he spied her familiar figure in the street ahead, and rushed to overtake her before she should enter the Kirkland.

"Ernest!" she cried on seeing him. "You shouldn't be here!"

"But I've got to talk to you. Where can we have a few moments alone?"

She hesitated. "We might go to the service entrance. There's a bench there. Come."

He took the bundle she carried and followed her to the side street and into the doorway. He had never seen her face so tired and pallid, and dark circles made her eyes look larger than usual.

"Is it news from Washington?" she asked, with suppressed excitement.

"No."

"Then you must go at once. Gustav is in a terrible state. Something must have happened to put him on his guard. He's leaving to-day for Chicago. We were up all night helping him pack."

"Then he's going for good? How is your mother taking it?"

"Marvelously. She pretends that we are coming later."

"What time does he go?"

"They wouldn't tell me. He sent me out on an errand, I imagine to get rid of me. I must hurry back."

"I won't keep you long," pleaded Ernie. "I just came to tell you I'm going away, too."

She looked at him with consternation. "What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving Peckham's. Going to Cincinnati to start all over again."

Her hand flew to her lips. "But I don't understand. What's happened?"

“I can’t go into it now. You’ll just have to trust me when I say that I had to clear out. But I’m coming back whenever you need me. You’ve got to promise to send for me.”

“I can’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“How do you mean, not fair?”

“Not fair to Sarah.”

“Sarah’s out of the picture,” he burst forth impetuously.

Her face went whiter, if possible, than it had been before.

“You don’t mean that you’ve left the factory on my account?”

“Never mind about that. It’s all a mess. Mr. Peckham was good to me and I was grateful, and—and they sort of took things for granted.”

“But you didn’t have to give up your job! This is terrible! There must be some other way.”

“It’s too late to think about that. Nothing matters now but you—Eloise—” Emotion choked him, and his eyes had to say what his lips could not utter.

“But I won’t have it!” she cried. “You must go back to your work. I shouldn’t have let you care for me.”

“You couldn’t help it,” he said, finding his voice. “Even at the first, when you high-hatted me and offered me a tip, I couldn’t be mad at you. And when you snubbed me that night at the Peckhams’ party—”

“I didn’t even know you were there!”

“No matter. You’ve laughed at me and made fun of my bragging. I know you’ve put up with me on account of my helping you. But nothing you ever did or said could keep me from loving you.”

“You talk as if I’d just made use of you,” she protested indignantly. “Do you suppose I would have let you come here as you have if I didn’t consider you my friend?”

“Then for God’s sake give me a break! I know my people are poor and plain, but they are grand, just the same.”

“That’s more than I can say of mine,” she said with a momentary smile.

“I know I’m down and out now,” went on Ernie with ardor, “but I shan’t stay so. You deserve some one ten times as good as I am, but nobody could ever love you more.”

He was humble at last with a heart-breaking humility that made his voice shake and his lips quiver.

Eloise looked at him with compassion, then she leaned forward and pressed his hand in both of hers.

“It’s no use, Ernest,” she said gently. “My life belongs to Mother now. Go back to Peckham’s, and perhaps some day you and Sarah—”

With an angry shrug he was about to dissent, when she suddenly drew him back into the shadow of the doorway.

“Look!” she whispered excitedly. “Gustav is leaving. Mother is evidently going to the depot with him. Careful! Don’t let them see you!”

They flattened themselves against the wall as the couple hurried down to a taxi, followed by the janitor loaded with traveling bags. A moment later a door slammed and the cab drove rapidly away.

“He’s actually gone!” cried Eloise jubilantly. “After all these years of hiding and pretending, we can begin to live again!”

“But what about me? Aren’t you going to give me any hope?”

“No, Ernest,” she said, almost impatiently. “I told you I promised Mother if she gave him up I’d never leave her. And she’s done it, and done it for me! If I went back on my word, she’d go straight to him again. You’ve told me yourself that he may be arrested any day. She’s getting rid of him just in time. Will you forgive me if I go now? I want to get the apartment straight and have lunch ready by the time she gets back.”

“Haven’t you got any heart?” he demanded savagely.

She paused and looked at him. “I sometimes wish I hadn’t,” she said. Then, without a backward glance she fled into the apartment.

Ernie was so angry and unhappy by the time he reached home that he went straight to his room and flung himself face downward on his bed. He was a fool, he told himself, ever to have dreamed she could care for him. Yet her eyes had been divinely tender and she had let him hold her hand. Perhaps she was sorry for him, just as she was for all those weak and sick creatures she was forever looking after. Perhaps she considered him just another lame duck!

He dug his head into the pillow and his body shook with hard, dry sobs. Thwarted love, frustrated ambition, pity for Sarah, and chagrin over his seeming ingratitude to Mr. Peckham, combined to overwhelm him. How long he lay there he did not know, but after a time he heard a timid tap on the door.

“Ernie, boy, it’s Pop. Here’s a letter come for you. Special delivery.”

“Put it down anywhere.”

“Ain’t you hungry?” asked Pop, tiptoeing in. “Rose is heating your lunch over in the oven.”

“Tell her to throw it out. I don’t want it.”

After a moment’s silence Pop ventured again:

“You ain’t done anything what you might be ashamed of, have you?”

“No, Pop. It’s not that.”

“Praise be! Mebbe if you could bring yourself to talk about it free, it might kind of ease your mind. Has it got to do with a girl?”

“Two of them,” muttered Ernie from the depths of his pillow.

Pop sat down on the side of the bed and patted his shoulder, and as he did so the tumult in Ernie’s soul subsided and the sobs ceased to rend him.

“I ain’t aiming to force your confidence,” said Pop, “but I’m here to listen

if you got a mind to get anything off your chest.”

Ernie flung himself over on his back and looked at the wizened face so full of tender sympathy. Suddenly the flood-gates opened and he poured out his troubles in a torrent of incoherence.

“I don’t excuse myself,” he said in conclusion. “Maybe I let Sarah think I liked her more than I did. But I felt so sorry for her and for Mr. Peckham. Now I have hurt ’em both. And think what my leaving the factory is going to mean to you all! Bob Gibbs is never going to be any better, and there’s Rose and the children to be taken care of.”

“We’ll manage somehow,” said Pop. “Time’s got a way of unraveling tangles.”

“It can’t unravel mine if I don’t get Eloise Wynne. Nothing else in the world matters to me.”

Pop gave a prodigious sigh. “Oh, come now; that ain’t any way to talk! Ever since you was a curly-headed kid we’ve been trying to give you what you wanted, but now you are grown up, it can’t go on being like that. When you can’t get what you want, you got to take what you can get.”

“But you don’t understand, Pop! Eloise needs me. There’s bound to be trouble ahead for her, and she hasn’t got a soul to help her. I know I could make her happy!”

“Not if she don’t love you. You ought to understand because of Miss Sarah. Pull yourself together now and quit being licked. It ain’t like you, son.”

“All right,” said Ernie, resolutely getting out of bed. “Don’t worry, Pop. I’ll get my second wind. Where’s that letter?”

He broke the seal with indifference. Any news that might come to him now seemed of no importance, but a special delivery was too unusual an occurrence in Wirt’s Division not to arouse interest:

DEAR ERNIE:

Daddy has given me the choice of going abroad for a year or staying here and not seeing you. I’ve chosen the former. I leave for New York to-morrow morning to join Mr. Dalton. Our party sails on Wednesday. Of course I know why you are leaving the factory and I am frightfully unhappy about it. I have never seen Dad so broken up about anything. Please, please, go to him and say you’ve changed your mind and want to come back. Don’t answer this, as I’ve promised not to write to you again. Perhaps at the end of a year, everything will be different.

Your devoted friend,
SARAH PECKHAM

Ernie read the letter through twice, then he turned to Pop.
“Tell Rose not to go on with the packing. I’ve decided to stay.”

CHAPTER XX

At midnight the Bossel household was roused by a violent ringing of the telephone. Night-clad figures emerged from every bedroom, and Roustabout set up a barking calculated to waken the neighborhood.

“Bob must be worse!” cried Rose anxiously.

“Maybe the drug-store’s on fire,” said Curt.

“Hope it’s nothing to do with Mrs. Myrtle,” said Grampa.

“Here! Give it to me!” cried Ernie, seizing the receiver. “Hello! Yes! . . . Yes, I understand. . . . All right, I’m coming, right away!”

“What is it, son?” called Grampa, looking like an oversize Teddy-bear in his outing cloth pajamas.

“A friend of mine’s in trouble,” called Ernie as he bounded up the stairs.

“Must be something wrong at the Peckhams’,” said Rose. “Why don’t you go with him, Curt?”

Ernie wasted no time explaining. Flinging on his clothes, he tore downstairs and out the back door.

The old car, unused to having its night’s rest disturbed, at first refused to stir, then, when Ernie flooded the carburetor, it bucked and backfired and showed every intention of exploding.

“I’ll crank her,” offered Curt, but fifteen minutes passed before they got the machine out of the garage.

“Sure you don’t want me to go along?”

“No, I can manage. Tell Pop not to worry.”

Once started, the car careened on its way at a pace that might have proved disastrous had the streets not been deserted.

When the Kirkland was reached, Ernie rushed up the two flights of stairs and found Eloise waiting on her landing.

“It’s Mother!” she said, looking white and frightened. “She’s never come back!”

“Not since this morning?”

“No. Something must have happened. I hated to call you like this in the night, but I didn’t know where to turn.”

“Did she take her traveling bag?” he asked, following her into the apartment.

“No, and I’m sure she didn’t intend to go with him. Oh, Ernest, I’m so frightened! Do you suppose Gustav forced her to go with him to keep her from testifying against him?”

“He may have. I’ll telephone the Federal Bureau. I suppose they keep some

one there at night.”

“What if Mother should be caught with Gustav and arrested and sent to prison?”

“There’ll be time enough to face that when it happens. The G-men will be able to give us some information. I bet they know where Mr. Bohn is this minute.”

“And if Mother’s with him they’ll think she’s an accomplice. Isn’t there something we can do?”

She looked so wan and spent and terrified that he wanted passionately to take her in his arms and comfort her, but wisdom told him it was a head and not a heart she wanted at the moment. So he seized her arm and marched her into the kitchen.

“I bet you’ve eaten nothing since breakfast. You are shaking all over. Where do you keep the coffee?”

“Please—we haven’t time.”

“We’re going to take it. Put on the kettle while I telephone headquarters. Things may turn out better than we think.”

Mechanically she obeyed his order, then came into the hall, cup in hand, and stood beside the telephone as he talked.

“They’ve caught him all right,” he said at last. “He was taken in Cincinnati, just as he got off the train.”

“And Mother?”

“They said nothing about her, and neither did I, for fear of rousing their suspicions. Maybe she went to some friend’s.”

“She wouldn’t stay all this time. She’s been gone fifteen hours. Something awful must have happened to her.”

“Not necessarily. I’ll go to police headquarters and ask what accidents have been reported, then I’ll make a round of the hospitals.”

“Yes, yes! And tell them she wore a brown dress and a mink coat, and a red hat. Tell them how little and pretty and helpless she is. Beg them not to stop until they find her.”

A ring at the door-bell brought them both into the hall.

Ernie opened the door. “It’s a telegram,” he said. “Shall I open it?”

“Yes.”

“It says, ‘Safe in Cincinnati. Hope to return Monday or Tuesday. Do not worry. Mother.’”

For a moment Eloise stood rigid, then she began to sway, and before he could reach her she sank to the floor, striking her head against a corner of the table.

“Eloise! Darling!” he cried, springing to her side.

She did not answer, but lay limp and unconscious, with blood streaming

from an ugly gash on her temple.

In a frenzy he rushed to the telephone and roused the janitor.

“Where’s the nearest doctor?” he demanded. “Here in the house? Send him up to No. 8 right away. Yes, yes, Mrs. Wynne’s apartment. Hurry!”

It seemed hours before a fat old man, still half asleep, put in an appearance.

“I put her on the bed and have been applying cold cloths, but the bleeding won’t stop,” Ernie explained frantically.

“Huuh!” said the doctor, examining the wound. “It will take more drastic treatment than that. Half a dozen stitches at least will be necessary. Heat some water for a hypodermic while I get out my instruments.”

Ernie ran to the kitchen where the kettle was still boiling. Every pot and pan brought poignant memories of the first meal he and Eloise had eaten together. The thought of her lying in the next room with that gash in her head sickened him.

It was not until the old doctor had finished his surgery that he looked around suspiciously.

“Where is Mrs. Wynne?” he asked.

“She went up to Cincinnati yesterday and was detained,” said Ernie.

“Then I think I’ll take Miss Eloise out to the hospital. It would be difficult to get a nurse at this time of night, and we can’t leave her here.”

“I can stay with her,” said Ernie eagerly.

“No, you can’t! She’s had enough sedatives to keep her asleep for several hours, but I want a woman to watch her.”

“My sister’s a trained nurse. Why can’t I take her out home to her? It wouldn’t be as far as the hospital.”

“What’s your sister’s name?” asked the doctor dubiously.

“Mrs. Bob Gibbs, 1500 Wirt’s Division, telephone Magnolia 4456. I wish you’d call her up and tell her we are coming.”

The doctor returned from the telephone reassured.

“It’s all right,” he said. “She says she nursed for me once. Why didn’t you say it was Miss Rose Bossel?”

They bundled Eloise in a blanket and Ernie carried her downstairs. Even his anxiety and compassion could not dull the thrilling fact that her bandaged head drooped against his shoulder and that her soft, limp body lay helpless in his arms.

The doctor went with them out to Wirt’s Division, holding Eloise on the back seat while Ernie drove as if he were transporting spun glass.

Lights were lit at the Bossels’, and the family waiting, when they arrived. Whatever explanation the doctor had seen fit to give had evidently satisfied them, and their only desire now was to befriend Ernie’s friend.

“Take her in Grampa’s old room,” directed Rose, bustling about

efficiently. "Then she won't have to be carried upstairs. The bed's ready. Poor child!"

"Keep her quiet, and let her sleep as long as possible. I'll leave a tablet in case she gets restless. Have you a hypodermic syringe?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Very well. Reassure her if she wakes. Tell her I'll leave a note for her mother when she returns. If you need me, call me."

The rest of the night Ernie paced the hall, ready to fly to Rose's assistance if the patient stirred. In the long morning hours he had ample time to reflect on what had happened in the last two days. He had broken with Sarah Peckham, quarreled with his benefactor, lost his job, gotten involved in a spy plot, and been refused by a young lady whom he had later practically kidnapped.

At 6 A.M. Grampa came down as usual for the morning paper.

"You surely haven't been up all night?" he asked Ernie as he came in from the porch. "How's the young lady?"

"I'm waiting to hear. What's that big head-line? Let me have the paper a minute, will you?"

But the Captain never relinquished the morning paper to any one until he had retailed the most important news.

"It's about that spy business," he said. "Listen to this:"

CAPTURE OF IMPORTANT SPY

Baron von Bohnheim, who has been living in America for several years under an assumed name, was arrested yesterday as he stepped off a northbound train in Cincinnati. He has been—

"Go on!" cried Ernie impatiently.

"You can wait till I turn the sheet, can't you? . . ."

has been under suspicion for over a year. No tangible evidence had been found against him until an old note-book bearing his name was turned in at the Federal Bureau. It proved to be the key to a code. Messages coming to Bohnheim from Germany were intercepted and decoded by means of the key, and proved to be of a highly incriminating character. Von Bohnheim is thought to be a member of a vast spy ring engaged in stealing Army, coast-guard, aeroplane secrets from the United States and in transporting them to the German Reich. With him, at the time of his arrest—

"Ernie," called Curt, "you are wanted on the telephone."

CHAPTER XXI

Eloise Wynne opened her eyes on unfamiliar surroundings and looked about her inquiringly. Her face felt strange and swollen and one eye was partially closed.

“Where am I?” she asked, putting a hand to her bandaged head.

The strange young woman sitting beside her bed smiled reassuringly.

“You are all right. This is Ernie Bossel’s house and I’m his sister.”

“But what am I doing here? What happened?”

“You had a fall, dear, and hurt your head. We are taking care of you until you are able to go home.”

At mention of home, things came back with a rush.

“I am able now!” she cried. “Where’s Ernest?”

“He had to go to town, but he will be back soon. Will you let me bathe you and give you your lunch before he gets here?”

The medicine Eloise had been given dulled her senses and deadened her fears. She languidly submitted to the skilled service of her companion, and even evinced some interest in lunch. It was a new and pleasant experience to be cared for like this, and she obediently did as she was told, like a child.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“The clock struck twelve, so it must be one,” said Rose. “I’m going now to fix you a nice tray, and you are to eat everything I bring you. Sure you are warm enough?”

Left alone, Eloise lay propped in the big four-poster bed and looked about her. Never had she seen a room so full of homey possessions. On top of the big hook-rug were numerous small ones. Framed photographs, mostly of Ernie, adorned the flowered wall paper. There were too many rocking-chairs, too many ornaments, too much of everything. But a cheerful wood fire blazed under the white marble mantelpiece, blooming plants stood in the windowsills, cheerful sounds and the odor of freshly made coffee came in from the rear of the house, and a sense of permanence and security pervaded the place. For the first time in years a real home enfolded her, shutting out all the ugly, frightening things of the past months.

A whimpering sound at her bedside made her look down. A small woolly black dog stood on his hind legs begging to be noticed.

“Roustabout?” she whispered inquiringly.

A frantic tail acknowledged the recognition, and with some assistance the visitor managed to scramble up on the bed, where he curled himself in the bend of her elbow and pressed a cold nose against her bare arm.

“May I come in?” asked a man’s gentle voice at the half-open door. “Jerry has stepped out so I’m bringing in your tray. I’m Ernie’s father. Maybe you’ve heard him speak of Pop?”

“Indeed I have,” she said. “And you see I’ve made friends with Roustabout.”

“He hasn’t got any manners,” said Pop, viewing the culprit with fond censure. “Shall I put your tray on the dresser or the machine end? The table seems to be kind of occupied.”

“Right here on the bed, if you don’t mind. I’m sorry to be such a nuisance.”

“A nuisance?” Pop repeated with gentle surprise, as he balanced the tray on his one hand. “Why, this is one of the very nicest things that ever happened to us. Would you like the shade down a bit?”

“No, I love the sunlight. Can you tell me if they’ve heard anything more of my mother?”

“Well, yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “The morning paper says she was with Mr. Bohn when they arrested him in Cincinnati yesterday.”

Eloise’s face blanched and the cup she held clattered in the saucer.

“Did—did they arrest her?”

“We don’t know particulars,” he said evasively. “Ernie’s gone to find out now. She’s safe—that’s the main thing.”

“But she had no money to go to a hotel or buy a ticket home. And there was no one to help her.”

“There’s always Some One to help us,” said Pop with simple piety. “You stop worrying. I know it’s hard to have your props knocked out; but maybe it took something like this to make your mother see the truth.”

“She isn’t bad!” said Eloise, wringing her hands. “She’s just weak and easily influenced. They can’t do anything to her, can they, Mr. Bossel?”

“I expect they’ll let her off,” he comforted her. “Ernie told me what a sweet, trusting little lady she is. Won’t you try to eat your lunch now? It will get all cold.”

She looked down at the dainty tray. The dishes, to be sure, did not match, but the food was appetizing, and a wave of hunger swept over her.

“When I have my lunch, may I go back to the apartment?” she asked. “I must be there if she comes.”

“Eat your lunch first, and we’ll see.”

A whistle was heard without, then quick footsteps.

“That will be Ernie!” cried Pop. “Sounds like he’s got good news.”

The next moment the door flew open.

“Rose said you had waked up and were all right!” he cried joyfully. Then, with a rueful glance at her discolored face: “Poor kid, you *did* get a bump!”

“It was dumb of me to pass out. What about Mother?”

“She’s all right. The G-men have been in touch with the Cincinnati Bureau. They say there was a prompt hearing, that Mr. Bohn was held, but they let your mother go.”

“Then where is she?”

“Probably on her way home.”

“Then I must be there to meet her. What time is the train due?”

“Not for a couple of hours. Go ahead and eat your luncheon. Hello, here’s Grampa!”

Again the doorway was filled, this time with the Captain, carrying Rose’s little girl. His pink face was glowing and his white hair standing out like an undeserved halo.

“The baby has brought you a posy,” he said, bending gallantly over Eloise’s outstretched hand. “We are mighty glad to have you with us. I had the honor of seeing your mother once. I said then she was the prettiest woman in town. By Jupiter, I believe I was mistaken!”

“Now, Grampa,” warned Ernie.

But Eloise laughed. “Let him say all the pretty things he will. I can use them right now! Will the baby come to me?”

Grampa put her on the floor and started her toward Eloise, her gift clutched in her chubby hand.

“One leg learned to walk before the other one,” said Ernie, watching her with avuncular pride.

Eloise put the baby alongside Roustabout, where she was soon happily engaged trying to break her watch.

“You must all clear out now,” directed Rose. “She wants to get dressed to go home.”

“Could I have just a word with Ernest?” said Eloise.

When they were alone, she said with averted eyes: “You’ll have to tell them all how grateful I am. And as for you—”

“Cut it out!” he said almost brusquely. “Save your strength for necessities.”

“But I’ve got to thank you. Your family have been wonderful. You were right when you called them ‘grand.’ ”

He sat down limply. For years he had subconsciously feared the effect his people would have upon her. Their lack of sophistication, their plain, casual way of living, their unworldliness, were far removed from the life she knew. But they were part and parcel of his very existence and a repudiation of them would have been a second repudiation of himself. Hearing her kind words about them, seeing her in Rose’s kimono, propped up in Grandma’s bed, brought tears to his eyes.

But that unequivocal “no” still reverberated in his mind, and he sat looking

at her as a shipwrecked sailor watches a disappearing vessel which has failed to heed his signal.

“Ernie, please,” she faltered, “I can’t bear to hurt you.”

“Then stop being kind to me! Leave me alone and I’ll get over it.”

She sat up in bed and seized his hand.

“I don’t want you to get over it!” she burst out. “I thought I could keep you from knowing, but I can’t.”

For a moment he was too dazed to speak, then he slipped to his knees beside the bed.

“Eloise!” he whispered, “what are you saying? What do you mean?”

“I mean I love you, and if it weren’t for Mother, I’d marry you, job or no job. Look out! Don’t hurt my head!”

She might as well have tried to stop a torrent. All the pent-up love of years swept over the barriers, and kisses rained on her lips and cheeks and throat.

“My darling! My darling!” he kept saying. “Have I died and gone to heaven? How long have you cared for me?”

“Ever since that night I said I was never going to fall in love, and you said, ‘Don’t be too sure!’ A chill went down my back, and from that moment I knew.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because of Sarah Peckham. I thought you and she were engaged. And later, when I knew better, there was my promise to Mother. And that still holds, Ernie. I can give you no hope.”

“Now that I know you love me nothing else matters. I can wait.”

“We’ll wait together,” she said softly, her lips against his cheek.

On the way to the Kirkland, they did not discuss the matter further, but sat very close in blissful silence. There was no looking backward or forward now, only an ecstatic acceptance of the present.

As Ernie helped her up the long flight of stairs, they heard voices from the apartment above; one a man’s heavy guffaw and the other a gay unmistakable trill.

“She’s come!” cried Eloise, rushing ahead and flinging open the door.

The next moment Ernie saw her enveloped in her mother’s arms, while he found himself staring into the surprised face of Cyrus W. Peckham.

“Your poor dear head!” Mrs. Wynne was saying. “Dr. White told me all about it, but he says the scar won’t show in the least.”

“But, Petite! What happened? I’ve been almost crazy.”

“Such a ghastly experience! You’d never guess what I’ve been through! If it hadn’t been for this dear man—” She put her hand on Mr. Peckham’s coat lapel and beamed upon him.

“How in the world did you get back?” asked Ernie. “There’s no train at this

time.”

“We flew!” she said. “It was simply marvelous! And I wasn’t frightened a bit, was I, Mr. Peckham?”

“But tell me everything from the beginning,” demanded Eloise impatiently. “Why did you go with Gustav?”

“He made me. He said we were being followed and that some one would get me as soon as he left, and ask me questions. He actually *locked* me in the drawing-room! Did you ever *hear* of such a thing! I thought I should *die*! He promised to send me back by the first train from Cincinnati, but those horrid officers nabbed him the moment he got off the train. And they took us both up to the Federal Bureau, and asked us a million questions. I was simply petrified, and Gustav not a bit of help in the world.”

“How long did they keep you there?”

“All night long! It was simply hideous. And then I had an inspiration. I just implored the officer to let me telegraph a friend, and after ever so long he consented. And this darling man, who had just come from seeing his daughter off to Europe, actually chartered a plane and flew to my rescue!”

“And they let you come with him?” asked Eloise.

“It wasn’t so easy as that,” said Mr. Peckham. “I spent the rest of the night sending telegrams to Senator Burford and our Congressman, and some Army people she knew at West Point. I couldn’t have gotten her off at that, if the person who turned in the evidence against Bohn hadn’t given a statement that she was being used as a tool, and was otherwise not involved.”

“And Gustav?” asked Eloise. “What became of him?”

“The skunk!” broke in Mr. Peckham. “He’s right behind the bars where he belongs.”

“He looked so pitiful,” Mrs. Wynne began to whimper, but Mr. Peckham stopped her.

“None of that, little lady. You promised me you’d put him out of your mind. He’s not worth the dirt under your feet and the sooner you forget him the better.”

So enamored of his protégée was Mr. Peckham that he seemed scarcely aware of the presence of Eloise and Ernest. All the way back in the plane he had gorged on compliments, and even managed to swallow the statement that his nose was like the prow of a noble vessel. By the time they crossed the Ohio River his subjugation was complete.

“Mr. Peckham!” said Eloise, flagging his attention, “please listen a moment. I’ve something important to tell you and Mother. You are Ernest’s best friend, and she’s mine. We want you to know we are engaged.”

“How perfectly lovely,” almost shrieked Mrs. Wynne, and in the next breath, “but you promised me—you gave me your word of honor—”

“I know. And I shall keep my promise until you release me.”

“But here! Wait a minute. I don’t understand,” sputtered Mr. Peckham, turning to Ernie. “I thought you were hell-bent on getting a job out West.”

Ernie laughed excitedly. “No job in the world could take me out of Kentucky now!”

“How long has this been going on?” demanded Mr. Peckham.

“Ever since I was born!” burst out Ernie. “I didn’t know what I was loving until I saw Eloise six years ago. Then I knew for sure, and I’ve never thought about anybody else since.”

“And all the time you were coming to my house you had this up your sleeve?”

“Yes, sir; up both sleeves.”

“Did—did Sarah know before she left?”

Ernie’s eyes dropped. “Yes, sir, I think she suspected it all along.”

Mr. Peckham scratched his head in perplexity. “It’s too thick for me,” he said; “but if you are going to stay in Kentucky and want your job back, it’s waiting for you.”

“Do you mean it?” cried Ernie, flushing to the roots of his hair, as he seized Mr. Peckham’s hand.

“Sure I mean it. There’s more than one way of getting you for a son-in-law!”

Mrs. Wynne shook a coy, protesting head.

“Go on home, you naughty man, and get some rest; you must be half dead,” and handing him his hat she pulled him into the hall.

Ernie lost no time in gathering Eloise into his arms. Big as he was, he could scarcely contain the happiness that overwhelmed him.

“Please, please!” she warned, then she laughed: “It’s all right. Petite’s got the hiccups, and Mr. Peckham will need some time to cure them.”

Transcriber's Notes

A small number of corrections to spelling and punctuation have been made silently.

[The end of *Our Ernie* by Alice Hegan Rice]