



A COMPLETE NOVEL

**WIFE IN LAW**

BY MARTHA OSTENSO

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## WIFE IN LAW

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**C**LIFF swallows, flashing and wheeling in and out of their nests in the clay bank that rose sheer from the highway, sketched upon the June twilight a swift and mysterious code with the dark strokes of their wings. Indian paintbrush burned like ruddy tapers, tall brambles of wild rose were heavy with shadowed bloom among the rank sweet grasses of hollows on the other side of the road. The fragility—the strong height and depth and width of this land! Hildred drew a tremulous breath and involuntarily touched Jim’s arm where it rested in an attitude of contentment below the steering wheel of the car.

He glanced at her, grinned happily, and thrust his jaw down sideways toward her. Hildred laughed and kissed the smoothly-shaven, tan skin.

“You’re so handsome in this light, darling,” she said softly, laying her bare dark head against his shoulder. “I’d almost rather just sit here in the car with you and watch the stars come out than go where I’ll have to share you with all those others.”

“That’s what I’d like myself. But Grandpappy’s diamond wedding can’t be passed up by young Mr. and Mrs. James Kelso. There’s a big jump between people who’ve been married for sixty years and a couple who’ve been hitched for only six days, but it won’t hurt us to get an idea of what we have to look forward to.”

“You’re cheerful, darling, aren’t you? *I* don’t look forward to being ninety.”

“Not even with me? Of course, you’ll only be a fresh young thing of eighty-eight,” he mused. “I’ll be a doddering ninety-one. Do you think you can take it?”

“I think so—a year at a time!” Hildred laughed.

“As a matter of fact, I’ll bet that at least forty or fifty of my relatives who’ll be there will come more out of curiosity to see you than to pay their respects to old Gram and Gramp. I can hear ’em, in their minds: ‘The lovely, the sophisticated, the etcetera, Hildred Roberts, promising young star of the New York stage—how did she come to marry Jim Kelso, that ex-football lout, that glorified hick, that dairy farmer de luxe from the rolling prairie and the wide open spaces?’” He laughed with boyish triumph. “Why shouldn’t they wonder? When they get an eyeful of you, Hildy, they’ll wonder all the more!”

Hildred drew her black velvet evening jacket more closely together over the white chiffon knife-pleats of her gown. That shiver, she told herself, had been silly, quite unwarranted.

“Will there really be forty or fifty of them, Jim?” she asked.

“Maybe more by this time. I’ve been away for over a month, remember.”

“No—seriously, dear. I didn’t realize—”

“But I told you, didn’t I!”

“Yes, I know. But after all, it’s been only two days since we got here. If I had had a chance to meet a few more of them—besides your father and mother and your brothers and sisters, I mean—I wouldn’t be so scared, perhaps.”

“Scared? For the love of Mike, Hildred! You don’t know Gram and Gramp. They’re tops! You’re going to love ’em. Nothing to be scared of there.”

“I don’t mean scared, exactly,” Hildred said, her eyes following the descent of the road to the orderly groves and gardens that marked the outskirts of Amaranth, the neatly-valleyed town. “I’m sure your grandparents will be darlings. Your mother is—and so is your father, even though he is a state senator! And your sisters and brothers—well, I don’t know how people could be more attractive, and *good*—that’s what they are, Jim, and I’ve met them only once!”

“Sure, they’re all right, the gang.”

“They’re more than that. They’re real and kind and—they didn’t seem to think there was anything funny about your marrying me so suddenly on your

vacation.”

“Why should they?”

“Kate seemed to think it was all very romantic and exciting.”

“I think so myself.”

“But to meet *fifty* Kelsos—all at once, Jim—” She laughed, spread out her hands, palms up.

“**W**ell, fifty, or maybe sixty—what of it? Forget about the Kelsos, darling! It’s you and I, now, isn’t it? You belong to *me*, don’t you? Don’t go writing a play or something about the Kelso gang. You’ve put all that behind you. You’ve come out here to *live* and—”

“You can trust me, Jim. I’m *going* to live!” The car slowed down and Hildred fixed her eyes on the break in the tall privet hedge which marked the graveled entrance to the estate of old Rufus Kelso. “It’s too bad we had to be late at our first party, isn’t it?”

“Well, Gramp knows it’s all I could do to get here at all! I told him that when I called him earlier. The old boy knows what it means to lose a registered cow in delivery. You see, Johnson and I were worried this afternoon—”

Hildred smiled. “Yes, I know, dear. I’m learning, a little at a time. The cow’s name is Black-ear Bess—blue ribbon at the fair last year—Holstein—sired by—”

“Rhode Island Red, perhaps?” Jim laughed as he backed his car into a graveled space among white rose bushes.

Hildred stepped down, turned quickly to meet Jim as he came from the other side of the car, and felt the rough tear of the hem of her dress on a rose thorn.

No, no! she thought hurriedly. No morbid superstitions now! Not here—not this evening!

She stooped, carefully gathered up the accordioned yards of gossamer white.

“What’s the matter?” Jim stood above her, peering down. “Tear your dress? That’s a shame, kid. What—”

“Never mind. I can mend it when I get in. It was my own fault. I should have seen that rose bush.”

Hildred looked up at him through the dusk that still had a blush of pink in it among the rich and curded gloom of the trees; her lashes winged back and upward across her heavy lids in a way which seemed studied but was actually a natural and unstudied survival from her childhood, a poignant time of fear and beauty.

Jim drew her with vehement force into his arms. "Darling," he muttered, "don't ever look at anybody else like that, will you? Your eyes—"

"Jim!" She laughed protestingly against his lips. "They'll see us—two old married people—"

"Six days married," he reminded her cheerfully, "—anyhow, it wouldn't be the first time they've seen such a thing right on this spot." With a wide grin, he glanced up at the tree above them. "See this oak? It was a kid when ma and pa plighted their troth in its shade. Aunt Maria swears the whole damn' family was peeking through the curtains when it happened."

Hildred took his arm, sedately gathering her long skirt up from the dew.

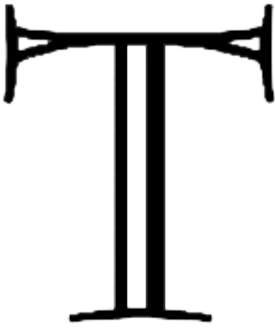
"Look, dear," Jim said, "before we go in, I want to show you something."

He led her through the garden at the rear of the house to the old carriage shed, gray with age now, heavily ivied. The dim interior smelled mustily sweet of ancient harness and leather and nameless things; cobwebs festooned the corners. An old fringe-topped surrey stood there, and a cutter with a high curved front, ornate with faded red and gilt trim and handsome carvings. Sleighbells, harness, whips and tasselled fly nets for horses, hung on the walls. But the thing that Jim wanted to show Hildred was a little sled, its crimson paint flaking, which also hung there.

"I got this for Christmas when I was ten," he grinned, "and grandma has kept it ever since I outgrew it."

"When you were ten!" Hildred said softly, running her fingers over its dusty surface. "Oh, Jim, what a darling little boy you must have been!"

She turned suddenly, her eyes full of tears, and clung to him with her arms tight about his neck. "Jim!" she whispered passionately. "I love you so—I love you so!"



HE red-brick house, built by Rufus Kelso in the early eighties, with its high shoulders, its sentinel turret and the eyebrowed brick trim over its windows, was ugly and lovable—lovable for the mossy time implicit in the crevices of its two great chimneys, for the damp and solid mat of ivy that overspread one wall of a sportive, afterthought wing. Hildred sat in a pleasant high-ceilinged and cretonned guest room of this wing, and with needle and thread repaired the damage to the hem of her gown.

The house, on the floor below, was alive with music and laughter and quenchless voices of the past, the present, and the unstayable future. Hildred had sped upstairs in the wake of Jim's sister, Kate Lowry, who had exclaimed ruefully about the tear in the dress, but during the few moments Hildred had paused in the broad entrance hall the unconfined joyous tumult of the Kelsos and their friends had rushed upon her like an overwhelming wave. Now, after she had assured Kate—and how dear Kate was, small and round and bubbling and dark, so different from her large blond brother Jim, although they both had eyes of fabulous blue—now, after she had convinced Kate that she was able to mend the dress without help, Hildred was alone in the room.

Alone, but inexorably attended—by thoughts alien to this room! Her fingers trembled over the warped chiffon, the tangled thread.

*I was fifteen then. Dad had died two years before, and I remember how terrible I thought it was that mother should marry again so soon. But they made me go with them on that trip down to Aunt May's, in Virginia, where they were going to be married. Alex always drove too fast. The big tree split the car in two at that curve, people said afterwards. I heard them say that, but I didn't care much. Because mother and Alex were both killed and I should have been. But I didn't know that I should have been killed too, until I came out of the cast more than a year later, when Aunt May cried and told me that I had to know. I'd never be a whole woman, she told me—it was something about the fracture of the pelvis, and the perforation of the inner organs. She spoke so delicately, but what difference did that make? I asked her, point blank, "Does the doctor say I can never have any children?" Then she nodded and said, "He asked me to tell you, my dear. You're past sixteen now, and you'll understand. You must never be married. I mean, my dear, you must*

*never try to have a baby. The doctor says you wouldn't be able to carry it long enough to—I mean, normally, my dear. You understand me, don't you? And it would be very dangerous to try. He thinks it would probably prove fatal to you.” Aunt May was kind. “You'll come and live with me, and go to school. Your mother left enough so you won't have to worry about college and what work you want to take up. We shall be very happy together.” I went to college then, and I went on the stage, and I was very happy in my success—for a while. It was my beautiful carriage, they said, and my funny, halting walk, that they admired. My halting walk—a lovely affectation, they called it, an appealing mannerism that I had learned how to use. If they had ever known the truth! It was my halting walk that made me catch my dress on that white rose bush tonight. My halting walk, that comes upon me once in a while—an affectation!*

Someone appeared quietly in the doorway, so quietly that Hildred, glancing up from her thoughts and her work, was at once drawn away from both. The girl's rather blunt features would have had merely commonplace prettiness but for the vital radiance that illumined them. Her figure was lithe, full-breasted, strong-legged. Her riotously curly hair was of such an improbable bronze hue that it could be nothing but natural, and when she came closer Hildred saw that her eyes complemented the color in a deeper shade. Her skin was luscious and smooth as a peeled ripe peach.

“**Y**ou're Jim's wife, aren't you?” the girl said, shyly extending her hand. “Kate wanted me to see how you were getting along with your dress. Maybe I can help you.”

“Oh, thank you, but I'm almost through. It was so clumsy of me—stumbling into that bush! I'll have to find a dressmaker to do a better job on it before I wear it again.”

The girl looked closely at the hem. “I—I think I could do it for you. I'm really pretty good at sewing.” Suddenly, she blushed and laughed deprecatingly, then sat down on the edge of the bed. “Oh, dear, I haven't even introduced myself! My name is Esther Fay. I live at Harry Clarke's farm, six miles north of town. Harry is my second cousin. I teach the country school near his place.”

“You look very young for a teacher—”

“I'm twenty. This is my first year teaching. I took a normal course when I



finished high school.”

“You like teaching?” Hildred asked absently.

The girl’s lips curved in a grave smile. “Well—in a way. I’ve always liked children, and since I have to work for a living anyhow, I’d rather teach than do anything else. But I don’t want to spend my whole life teaching. I’m engaged to be married—” She glanced ingenuously at the modest little diamond on her ring finger. “We have to wait another year, till we have enough put by for furniture and things, and a year does seem terribly long.”

Hildred laughed. “It’ll pass. Does your young man work here in town?”

“He’s signalman in the granite quarry over near Birch Falls—that’s twelve miles from here. But he comes over two or three times a week. Leonard Clement—that’s his name. He makes fairly good pay, but the outfit he’s with hasn’t been operating full time lately. He couldn’t come down tonight, because they’re having some trouble with the hoist and he has to help fix it for work tomorrow.”

“That’s too bad. I should have liked to meet him,” said Hildred.

She was surprised to find that she meant it. Something loamy and bounteous about this girl had captivated her at once. She was somewhat startled by the thought that Esther Fay was enough like the Kelsos to be one. Yet, because she was not, she was not intimidating as Kate Lowry and Dora Gilport, Jim’s sisters, unconsciously were.

“I’m sure you’ll meet him,” Esther said eagerly. “I’m going to bring him out to see you very soon, if you’ll let me.”

“Of course. We’ll be looking for you.”

“That’s one thing about the Kelsos,” Esther went on simply, “they aren’t snobs. They have more money than anybody else in the county. They weathered the terrible drought last year, because they had enough to carry them over. And still—they aren’t the least bit uppity.”

“A little money shouldn’t make people uppity,” Hildred said, secretly amused at the girl’s forthright manner. “But I know it does sometimes.”

“My father’s place was completely burned out by the drought. He had to sell his land for almost nothing. He’s living with my brother now in the city, and I send him a little every month out of what I make, because my brother has his own family to look after and he isn’t making much money.” Esther hesitated, flushed again as she looked at Hildred. “My mother was lovely, too. She died when I was nine years old, but I remember her—very well.”

"I was fifteen when I lost my mother," Hildred said.

The girl got up quickly from the bed. "Oh, goodness, here I am talking about myself as if I'd known you for years. I thought I was going to be so scared of you—they told me all about you being an actress and everything—and so beautiful—" She clasped her hands impulsively. "But you look like a person *anybody* could talk to!"

"I hope so," Hildred smiled. "It's the way I want to look." Waltz music rose now from below. "We ought to be getting downstairs, oughtn't we? Oh, dear, I've got this thread all snarled up again—"

"Let me help!" Esther knelt quickly beside Hildred, and with deft fingers straightened the strand of silk. No, no, Hildred said to herself, inwardly trembling, this is not a symbol of anything. It means nothing.

"There," Esther said, "it's fine." She looked up with wide, tawny eyes. "Let's not go downstairs for just a minute. Tell me how you met Jim. I've always worshipped Jim—ever since I was a kid. We all did. But of course he went to college and all—and I couldn't, though my father wanted to send me if there'd been enough money. But now—I think it's grand that he met a person like you!"

"That's sweet of you," Hildred said with an abstracted look. "Well, I'll tell you all about it some day. There isn't very much to tell, really."

No? Only the silken blue nights on the Caribbean, with Venus lustrous as a small other moon. Only her own soul-and-body weariness after that long run of *False Dawn*, Vincent Eden's greatest play. Only her secret, never-told terror of being forever alone, locking her heart securely, bitterly, in from the sweet, shared storm of love. No, there wasn't much to tell! Nothing except that Jim Kelso had taken her into his strong arms that midnight on the after-deck of Bolger's yacht, and she had felt herself sinking into an oblivion of joy. Nothing but Jim's almost incredulous rapture at finding his love returned. She was lost, then—it was too late to tell him. He would not listen when she cried against his breast that there were things he ought to know about her. That dear, pathetic misunderstanding of his! "I don't want to hear anything but that you love me!" he had whispered with passionate earnestness. "It's you I want, Hildred. Nothing else matters—!" In a brief, wild flurry, her stoic renunciation of years had died, and she was lost—lost from herself, given over in one reckless and throbbing moment to Jim Kelso, to the warm safety of his arms. Safety? For six days now, she had in her happiness refused to listen to that inner, mocking voice whispering, "This is only a lovely dream!"—to that

goading, warning voice telling her to go back before it was too late!

Esther was looking at her, with shining, expectant eyes.

“No, there really isn’t much to tell, Esther,” Hildred repeated, laughing lightly. “I guess I have Mr. Bolger to thank for Jim. We’d been together on the yacht only two weeks, and—well, neither of us seemed to realize it till it happened. Perhaps it was what we sometimes call Fate. If Jim hadn’t gone to college with Mr. Bolger’s son, and Dick Bolger hadn’t sent me flowers back stage—Jim and I would never have met!”

“Oh, it’s all so romantic!” Esther said wistfully. “I hope some day Len and I can be together somewhere like that although I guess it won’t be on a yacht!” She paused and listened. “There comes another car!”

She went to the window. “It’s Doctor Brant Henderson. You’ll like him. Jim has probably told you about him, because he’s one of Jim’s best friends. He’s awfully quiet and sort of stern looking—but so kind when you get to know him. Shall we go down now?”

“You’d better run on, Esther,” Hildred suggested. “I’ll powder my nose and fix my hair a little. It got rather blown in the car.”

When she was alone, she stared at herself in the old-fashioned pier glass. Yes—the lovely figure, straight and vulnerably slender as a young tree; the too-fine, almost black hair, swept simply into a nape knot, with tiny moisture-horns curling forward at the temples; the eyes spaced in perpetual wonder, blue-green, the pupils too large; the carefully made up mouth too firmly controlled against its nervous mobility; the live pallor of the skin. This, Hildred said, is I. And I am experiencing an icy apprehension at the very name of Brant Henderson.

Jim had spoken of Brant so glowingly. “Good old Frost Bite Brant! Only a year older than I am, but you’d think he was fifty. The typical cynical medico. Never tells you anything about himself—but always finds out everything about the other fellow. Sees through you at a glance. That’s Brant Henderson: with a heart of gold.”

Hildred walked out of the room and started down the broad stairway.

**B**rant Henderson stood in the thronged reception hall opposite the winding staircase between the two arched mahogany entrances to the front and rear parlors of the old Kelso house, and heard music from a swing band, plaintive and insolent. The family was certainly doing this with traditional

gusto! The place was overflowing with color—short twinkling skirts of little girls in ankle socks and patent leather slippers, long swirling skirts of saucy young things in their 'teens, and sleekly modish skirts of matrons. There were boys and men of all ages. White flannels and blue coats were in evidence, a dinner jacket or two. Little rosy-faced urchins up to no good scuttled in and out among the towers of their elders.

Brant had come late, and his mind was even now still back in the city, troubled with that confused light and shadow of his other existence at which none of these exuberant Kelsos had ever guessed. For the first time in the four years he had known them, he felt a pang of unmistakable envy at their lusty, full-blooded confidence, their headlong joy in life, their astounding accumulative ebullience. Through the front parlor arch he could see the two old people, Rufus and Timothia, seated together on a plush sofa in a picturesque bower of honeysuckle, roses, delphinium and maiden-hair fern. Beside them was a long refectory table laden with gifts. The gaunt, broad-shouldered Rufus, looking ten years less than his eighty-three, beamed right and left from beneath his reddish-gray shrubs of eye-brows, while Timothia, dimpling and pink still under the blown-dandelion fluff of her white hair, bridled and smiled up at the young men grouped about her. Jim's parents, Senator and Mrs. Kelso, were there, too. Brant shook himself mentally: This was no place to bring his own burden of frustration and fear. He would go in now and deliver his felicitations to Timothia and Rufus. But first he glanced about for Jim Kelso.

There he was, just beyond the threshold of the rear parlor. Young Esther Fay, the teacher out at the Blue Meadow country school, had him excitedly by the arm and was telling him something that seemed to please him enormously. What a girl, Esther! And what a clean blade, Jim Kelso! Rather too bad he had heeled off and married this what's-her-name he had met on old Bolger's yacht. Brant had not yet seen her, though rumor had it the girl was a knock-out. He regretted the convention in the city which had kept him from witnessing the arrival of Jim Kelso and his bride. From all accounts, it was a day to remember. How the collective eye of drowsy little Amaranth must have popped!

**W**ell, he'd have to get through the crowd and speak to Jim, just to let him know he had got here, after all. But the music ceased on an abrupt questioning sob, and Brant forgot his dislike of that kind of music when he chanced to glance up the staircase.

The young woman descending through the burnished shadows of the old

hall wore a white gown straight and clear as a mountain cascade. Brant resented the simile as soon as it occurred to him. For of course, this must be Hildred, Jim's wife. No one else around Amaranth could make so dramatic an entrance. Why shouldn't she make a dramatic entrance? It must be second nature to her! Jim had written Brant a letter from somewhere in the West Indies—it had been sent by air from Havana, he remembered now. His eyes fixed upon Hildred, he thought: any room she enters will always be a stage. Even the music, the dancing, had accidentally paused for this moment, as if it had been part of an act, prearranged. From the reception hall, the two parlors, the guests were gazing up at what must be, to them—and justifiably, Brant thought—a vision of beauty. Brant drew himself up to his deliberate angular height, crossed his arms, and indulged in a sardonic grin. Here, at last, was something for which the forthright purposeful Kelsos had not been quite prepared!

He saw Hildred pause a moment at the bottom of the steps, then come directly toward him, her hands outstretched.

"You must be Doctor Brant Henderson," she said, not smiling, measuring him "—Jim's friend."

"I hope so," he said, bowing as he took one of the white hands into his own lean one. "And I believe you are—Hildred?"

As he spoke, he felt all at once as if somewhere, sometime, he had known this girl before. It was not impossible, of course, and yet the sense of it startled him profoundly. Instantly he knew the reason for it: he was back seven years, in his raw and struggling youth, when a woman had affected him this way as they first looked into each other's eyes. No other woman had ever done so, until now. A kind of baffled anger seized him, and he glanced deliberately away from Hildred, Jim's wife.

Jim came up then, full of belated introductions, just as the orchestra glided into a current song hit. While Brant observed that Hildred's curiously wide-sloped eyes were not black but a dark green-blue, the leader chanted, "*With all my heart I say I love you dearly.*"

Jim had his arm about Hildred. "Isn't she a honey, Brant?"

"Don't be silly!" Hildred smiled, her voice a low and tender caress.

"Well, you certainly gave Esther Fay the works," he said. "You should have heard what she had to say about you. And old Doc, here, can't understand how I did it!" Brant received a resounding thump on the shoulder.

Hildred looked at Brant and he was uncomfortably aware that her eyes crossed his face with a vagueness that was actually penetrative and hostile.

“I haven’t met your—Rufus and Timothia yet,” she said, looking with sudden radiance at Jim. “Shouldn’t we—”

“Sure, let’s go in. Come along, Brant.”

A fresh commotion prevailed in the front parlor when Jim and Hildred entered, Brant Henderson immediately behind them. Two photographers, freighted with paraphernalia, had come in through a side door, and Jim’s plump, bright-eyed little mother, with the help of his two sisters and his tall brothers, Lucius and Edwin, was doing her best to arrange folding chairs in semi-circled rows about the sofa upon which old Rufus and Timothia sat. Other relatives kept helpfully getting in the way, doing their best to round up the drove of children and herd them into the dining room. At a safe distance, the photographers began putting up their screens and placing the tripod for the camera.

Jim stood for a moment and laughed. “Great guns! What’s the idea? Why didn’t they get the decks cleared before they brought on this part of the show? Those kids—”

Brant grinned. “The Kelsos don’t make preparations, Jim. They take things in their stride.”

He glanced down involuntarily and saw Hildred’s eyes turned up to his. Was that a look of panic? he wondered. Surely not!

Jim’s father, Senator George Kelso—tall, ruddy, fiercely blue-eyed, his white hair worn *en brosse*—emerged panting from a tangle of children. “Hey, Jim!” he cried. “Give me a hand with these young devils. We’ve got to get them out of here. Their fathers and mothers have no more sense than the kids. Think it’s all a huge joke. And I asked those boys myself to come down here and get a picture for the papers. Hullo, Hildred, my dear!” He mopped his brow. “Don’t you wander off, now. We want you in the picture—the latest addition to the family, you know, barring a youngster or two.” He laughed and gave a last despairing look about the room. “Well, I give up! Brant, how about joining me over a drink in the library? They’ll be another half hour arranging this.”

“I’ll be along in a minute or so,” Brant said. “We haven’t paid our compliments to the old couple yet.”

“Go ahead, dad,” Jim said. “I’ll pitch in and clean up this mess. You wait in the library. Brant and I will be with you pronto.”

Jim stalked forward, wading through a clatter of chairs being dragged hither and yon, until he was within reach of the ringleader of the dozen youngsters who by this time had decided that the camera with its interesting black hood ought to be theirs. He caught his nephew, Edwin's ten-year-old, by the seat of the pants and dragged him off his feet. In half a minute the parlor was cleared of children, the dining room a bedlam where two servants abandoned their task of setting out great platters of food on the long table, and took charge of the rabble.

Meanwhile Brant, with a hand on Hildred's elbow, had made his way to the plush sofa where sat old Rufus and Timothia Kelso, and near them another very old lady, Great-aunt Maria.

"I hope I'm not too late to wish you all the happiness in the world!" Hildred said with a breathless laugh, and stooping quickly she kissed each one on the cheek. "I'm Jim's wife—Hildred."

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UFUS KELSO regarded her sharply, then the corners of his eyes crinkled in good humor. "Well, ye're about sixty years late, young woman—but it's the first chance ye've had!"

Laughter went up from those near by who had heard, and then Timothia said, twinkling, "I'm right glad young Jim settled down to someone at last. But he went far enough away from home to get what he wanted. Mind you keep him home from now on, Hildred!" Then, looking up at Brant, she remarked, "Rufe and me ought to be flattered you got here. Not but what we'd have had enough without you, but all these crazy Kelsos—" She waved a thin hand about her. "I was a Frobisher myself. Came here from Vermont, over sixty years ago—believe it or not—and here I am today, a dyed-in-the-wool Kelso!"

Brant laughed and shook hands with Timothia and Rufus. "May it be another sixty years!" he said, for want of something better. The sense of Hildred, so close beside him, was strangely unnerving.

“Look, Brant,” said Timothia, pointing to a tiny diamond star in her white hair, “—that’s what Jim and Hildred gave me. They sent it early today so I could wear it. I bet I know whose idea that was!” Her eyes twinkled again at Hildred. “It takes a woman to think of such things. And Rufe got a pair of onyx cuff-links, with diamonds in ’em—show Brant the links Jim and Hildred give you, Rufe.”

The old man heaved himself, thrust out a raw-boned wrist.

“Great day!” he scowled. “How much longer do we have to sit here, Tim? Seems to me I’ve sat sixty years’ worth already!”

Timothia glanced at him, straightened her slight back, and sniffed. “You’re not pullin’ the wool over my eyes, Rufe Kelso. You seen George go off to the library an’ you know you’re missin’ something. Well, for heaven’s sake, go on! Brant, you take him with you and keep an eye on him. There’s young Jim now, beckonin’. Go on, only get ’em both back here in time for the pictures. Anyhow—I’d like to have a word with Hildred, and we can’t talk with a gang of men hangin’ around.”

“That’s right, Gram,” Kate said, stepping up. “Get the men out of here and we’ll arrange things the way we want them.”

She swung about, raised her voice in a sharp command. Hildred offered to help, but Jim’s mother said, “No, my dear. You sit and talk with Gram. She’s thrilled at having another easterner in the family, you know.”

Old Timothia thoughtfully smoothed out the folds of her black velvet dress. Her fingers were like lavender-pink porcelain, flawed and knotted in the firing. She touched Hildred’s hand, started to speak, when Great-aunt Maria’s voice came high and sudden, as only the voice of the half-deaf can.

“Ezra and me—we had six children before we were thirty. Jim Kelso’s thirty-one now, if I don’t misremember. He’s been to college and all, and he’d got a lot of new-fangled notions about runnin’ that land his father gave him, but that’s none of my affair. He’s makin’ a lot of money, they say. But what I’d like to know is who he’s goin’ to leave it to, let alone help run the place when he gets on in years? When I was a girl—and I’m a year older’n Rufe, Timothia—when I was a girl, we had a peach tree in our orchard back in Pennsylvania. It was the purtiest tree in the orchard, and it bloomed purtiest every spring, but it never did bear any fruit. So we had to get rid of it. Rufe and me cried when pa cut it down. Still an’ all, it *did* crowd out the bearin’ trees.”

Timothia laid her hand gently over Hildred’s, but turned her face toward old Maria. “I don’t see as that has anything to do with us,” she remarked



comfortably. “Jim’s land’ll be where it is for a good long time to come. An’ he’ll look after his own trees, if anyone will.”

Hildred strolled with Brant Henderson over the graveled path that wound between luxuriant flower beds. Tangled scents troubled sweetly up from the dew. Moonlight quivered through the fine old trees.

She had been grateful for Brant’s suggestion that they step out into the garden for a moment and get away from the confusion, and hubbub of the big house.

“Well,” Brant said, “I suppose you’re glad that’s over. I’ve heard that stage people never really enjoy sitting before a camera.”

“I know a lot of them who’d run a mile to get into a picture,” Hildred said. “But I admit some of us are inclined to be a bit camera-shy. We don’t like to have our worst points exposed. I didn’t mind this, though, except that we all got so frightfully hot before it was over. It was thoughtful of you to suggest a breath of fresh air.”

“As a matter of fact, Jim mentioned it first. He was busy helping the photographers to make their escape before any damage was done.”

“Weren’t they the glummiest creatures you ever saw? Perhaps they had to be—to keep from laughing out loud. Imagine—fifty-two people, all more or less related—from four months to eighty-four years!”

“That ought to be some sort of record,” Brant observed.

“And it isn’t so much a matter of *how* they got them all into the picture, as *why*!”

Brant gave a short laugh. “One of the first lessons you’ll have to learn about the Kelsos, young lady, is never to ask why. I don’t think it ever occurs to them to ask why about anything. They just go ahead and *do*!”

“Apparently.” Hildred lifted her face to a slight drift of cool air. “They even order a full moon for their major social affairs, don’t they? And get it!”

Brant’s glance toward her was covert, sharp. “Do I detect a faint touch of sarcasm in that?” he asked and immediately regretted the question. He had no wish to establish so soon a personal footing with the woman Jim Kelso had brought home with him.

“Certainly not!” Hildred exclaimed quickly. “How can you—”

“Oh, I’m not accusing you,” said Brant. “It would have been quite

unconscious on your part. I haven't Jim in mind, of course. He's one of the finest men I've ever known. But he belongs to a dynasty. I happen not to like dynasties. That's probably because I'm still an outsider, after four years. You're an outsider, too, for the time being, and I thought it might have been some such realization that prompted the remark about the moon. That was all."

"I really wouldn't know," Hildred replied coolly. "After all, I haven't married a dynasty."

Brant smiled secretly. "That remains to be seen, of course," he said.

"I confess I don't see what you mean," Hildred said, a hint of irritation in her tone. "I expect to spend the rest of my life being a good wife to the man I have married."

Brant laughed. "That's what you'd call in the theater a good long run, isn't it?"

"You might reasonably expect me to hope for it, then."

"Naturally. May I venture to hope as much—for you and Jim, Hildred?"

"Thank you, Brant. I know you do."

His cigarette, with the casual gesture of his hand, made a brief arc of red in the shadows. "That's better, much better," he said. "I was afraid for a moment that I was getting off on the wrong foot. I didn't mean to."

"Certainly not. First meetings are sometime difficult—especially where there is so much involved. You see, Jim has talked to me more about you than anyone else and from what he said, I expected to find you a fascinating ogre."

Brant chuckled to himself.

"I don't really know *what* I expected," he said. "I admit I was a bit startled when I looked up and saw you coming down the stairway tonight."

"Frankly—I was scared stiff."

"Was that why you made that czarina entrance?"

"I wasn't aware of making an entrance, as you put it, but—well, perhaps, I was a little. It becomes more or less a habit when you've been doing it for years."

"That walk I suppose, is just part of the habit of years?"

"My walk?" She stooped and ran her fingers over the pale shimmering head of a peony. "That's something I can't help. I mean—it's the best I can do." Her voice caught a little and she said hastily, "So you thought I was acting

when I came down the stairs.”

Brant was puzzled. There was something in her voice that roused in him a feeling of pity.

“We all act—more or less,” he said gently. “Even the Kelsos, now and then, simple as they are.”

“What reason could they ever have for acting?” Hildred exclaimed softly.

“People act when they have something to hide,” Brant said. “The more they have to hide, the bigger the act. None of us wants to be found out.”

A little breeze moved through the branches of the elm under which they walked. Hildred drew her shoulders together quickly against the chill that passed over her.

“I can’t think of Jim acting, somehow,” she said quickly.

“You haven’t seen him yet when he had any call for it. You probably won’t like it when he does.”

Deep within herself Hildred felt a quick anger rising—or was it fear? Perhaps it was a mingling of the two. She looked at Brant in a curiously challenging way.

“Shall we go in?” she said, “I think they’ll be serving supper.”

**T**hey were driving home. Hildred and Jim—driving *home*! That miraculous significant word, for whose protection she had, such a brief time ago, felt she could never qualify. Now it was encircling her. She felt awed and humble. She looked out at the gleaming highway under the moon, and thought: This bright reach speeding toward me is the time, in years, that I shall come to know; it will one day be as familiar to me as my own eyes in a mirror. And she wondered, “Will Jim, his thoughts, his feelings, be really familiar to me then?” For more is needed, she told herself, than a sudden and violent flame of love to keep the long years warm. She fought back the old loneliness, pressed her cheek against Jim’s shoulder.

“You haven’t said a word since we came out on the highway, darling,” she said softly. “Are you forgetting there’s somebody with you?”

Jim laughed apologetically. “I’m just an old hick, sweetheart! Here I’ve been, sitting beside the best looking girl in the country—with a full moon and everything—and wondering how Johnson has been getting along with that cow while I’ve been out celebrating!”

“Married men get that way,” Hildred said, and tapped the back of his neck with her fingertips. “With their wives, I mean.”

“Come to think of it, you haven’t said much yourself since we left town.”

“Can’t a person be—just happy for a few minutes?”

“I’ll remember that,” Jim said stoutly. “After this, when you’re not speaking to me, I’ll know you’re just being happy.”

“And when you’re not talking to me—”

“Don’t let that get you down. I get quiet streaks once in a while. They may last for days. After that gab-fest tonight, I could stand a month with nobody saying anything. I suppose I ought to be used to the family. I grew up with it. But no matter how big a man’s ears are, they can take it for just so long.”

Hildred opened her flat silver case, lighted cigarettes for Jim and herself, and said, “The next two weeks are going to be tough. Teas and parties and receptions—all for us. For *Jim’s wife*, rather! Your darling sisters—and I mean that, Jim, they *are* darling—and your brothers’ wives, almost got into each other’s hair tonight about who should do what first. Kate wound up by saying that the whole family had to come to her place up on some lake on the Fourth of July. I didn’t have a chance to say anything.”

Jim was silent for a moment, staring ahead where the road dipped down into a hollow and across the white, moonlit skeleton of a steel-work bridge.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said at last.

“Of course not! They’re only doing their best to make me feel at home, sort of one of the family. They probably think I may feel—well, shy, and different, coming from the theater to be the wife of a farmer. But if they hadn’t noticed me at all, you’d—”

“I’d have been ripping. Sure. But there’s more to it than that, Hildred. Every woman that’s come into this outfit has been pawed over by the family. They take her in, they look her over, and then they go to work on her. If she’s going to stay, they make plenty sure she’s going to be a Kelso and act like a Kelso. In about three years she looks like a Kelso—and after that she just settles down and forgets she was ever herself. Take my mother, for example. And it wasn’t dad’s fault, either. No, he didn’t do it. He married a smart girl who helped him get where he is, and could have got somewhere on her own, if the family hadn’t swamped her. She started out for woman suffrage years ago—and look at her today! She wouldn’t swat a fly for fear there might be a

Kelso hiding under it!”

Hildred had to laugh, but she said gravely, “Jim, your mother is as lovely as—”

“Sure—as a popcorn ball dipped in honey! But when you get to know her—really know her, you’ll see what I mean. Only, she’ll probably hide it from you as long as she can, because you’re something different—and because she’s a Kelso!”

*Different!* Hildred bit her lip, and thought for a moment.

“Well, Jim, what should *I* do about it?”

“Do? Just be yourself, that’s all, and forget the family stuff. I didn’t marry you to bring you home and farm you out to a bunch of in-laws. I’m not going to keep you locked up, but I’m certainly not going to have you for breakfast and maybe nothing more from one Sunday till another. We have a right to a little privacy—the way we want it! If you agree, you’d better bend over this way and kiss me—under the ear. I’ve got to keep my eyes on the road.”

With mock solemnity Hildred kissed his cheek, dog-eared the lapel of his blue flannel coat with her fingers.

“I’m afraid I’m going to love you after all,” she said.

“I was afraid of that myself,” he said, grinning. “By the way; what did you think of Brant?”

Hildred sat quietly back. She pinched out her cigarette, felt the stubborn heat of it, and tossed it from the open window. It would have been simpler to lean forward and crush it into the ash pocket in the instrument panel.

“Why, Brant’s interesting,” she said. “Perhaps a bit of the old-school cynic about him, but I don’t mind that.”

Jim smiled. “I see. You two didn’t hit it off together, eh?”

“On the contrary, I thought him good-looking in a harrowed, intense sort of way, as if he’d never really had enough to eat—and probably very clever.”

“Poor old Frost Bite!” Jim mused aloud. “Sour as old buttermilk at first, but you wait! You’ll be as crazy about the big dope as I am. Tries to be mysterious—even with me, sometimes. Just a pose. You ought to see him and Casey Husted together! Casey’s a female medico up at the hospital in Birch Falls. Real name is Katherine Cecilia Husted, but we call her Casey—K.C. Built like a blacksmith—but a swell old gal just the same and when she and Brant get together, it’s a riot. I don’t think they ever speak a decent word to

each other, but get them one at a time, and you'd swear they were daffy about each other. Brant says she's the only doctor in the hospital who knows anything. Except for her, he doesn't think much of the staff up there. The chief of staff, old Doc Strickland, knows that and I'm sure he'd knife Brant in the back if he thought he could get away with it. And he'll do it one of these days. Well, here we are, Hildy."

He turned from the concrete highway into the narrower ribbon of gravel which threaded southeast over his own land—a firm, culverted road, well drained.

"It costs something to keep this road up," he said irrelevantly, "but it's worth it. You can almost size a man up by the approach to his home."

He heard Hildred's tender, amused laugh.

"What's funny?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing, darling. It just struck me how lord-of-the-manorish that speech was. And I love you for it, Jim!" Hildred's voice wavered a little.

He tucked her arm into the snug of his elbow and leaned forward. "Look," he said in simple pride, "isn't the place beautiful with that full moon swimming over it?"

**H**ildred saw before her the opulent yet disciplined expanse of Kelso Hill Farm: the faintly silvered rise beyond the fieldstone gate posts; the white gate-house where lived the foreman and his family; the dark aloof symmetry of Lombardy poplars shaped and pointed like great paint-brushes prepared to stroke the sky; the terraced slope of lawn and flower borders; the green-shuttered, white Colonial house beyond these. On the level land below the dwellings were the huge modern barns, the concrete silos, the pasteurization plant, beneath which was housed the complicated mechanical equipment that gave power, heat and protection against fire to this, one of the notable farms of the state. Here was the *machine* of agriculture, a dynamically living thing—the product of the old and the new. It stood here because the Kelsos, beginning with shrewd old Rufus, and continuing through sixty years of alternate drought and flood, had always had something "put by" until the fields were renewed and young again. Money for replenishing and fertilizing of Kelso land may often have come in strange and devious ways. But it had come, and the land was rich. Jim Kelso employed four men, besides his foreman, on this half section his father had given him. The men lived in two small cottages back of the pasteurization plant, furnished with every

convenience.

Hildred thought of all this, and replied to Jim, “Yes, it’s beautiful!”

The car stopped on the driveway.

“Come on down to the hospital wing with me,” Jim said. “Johnson said everything would be all right, but there’s a light on there.”

He took Hildred’s arm and they walked together down the path to the big barns.

“I’ll wait here while you go in and see,” she said.

“All right.”

Hildred stood just outside the broad entrance to the barn. The sweetly acrid smell of cattle, the serene and honest life of them. . . . The generous black-and-white sides of the Holsteins, their kind, wonderingly-turned faces, their already heavy under-burden of milk. Hildred glanced inward once, along the broad avenue of stanchions through which Jim had passed to the annex beyond, then withdrew her gaze. But not in time to avoid seeing a pure white barn cat fetch a kitten out from underneath an empty manger and haul it delicately by the neck up the stairs to the hay loft above. Hildred leaned against the side of the doorway and watched while the cat crept down four times and repeated the performance.

She looked out against the motionless wall of moonlight and saw a shadow pass before it. At the same instant, a barn swallow dipped down from the eaves, flung out a single angry note, and flashed back upward to its nest. A prowling owl, perhaps, Hildred thought. She would have to ask Jim about that. There was so much to learn.

Outside, the south wind, barely trying out the moonlight, touched on newly green fields and brought the smell of them with it to where Hildred stood.

She laced her fingers tightly together and heard herself forming the words in her own mind: “It’s thirteen years since then. Perhaps now it’s all right. Perhaps it *can* be possible. Oh, it *must* be possible! For Jim and me, it must be possible. I can’t be left out of all this beauty and richness around me. I can’t! It wouldn’t be fair to Jim—or to me!” She drew a hard breath, put her hand to her cheek. “But Aunt May said I couldn’t. The doctor told her I must never try. It would probably be fatal, she said. But I have a right to live—really to *live*! Or should I run away—now—before I love him too much? Before I find out?”

Jim came out of the door. “Everything’s okay, Johnson says.”

He put his arms about her shoulders, drew back her head so that her face

was clear in the moonlight, and kissed her. “I love you,” he said.

Their arms entwined, they walked slowly back up the hill.

“You seem tired,” Jim said anxiously. “Was the family too much for you?”

H

ILDRED plucked in her breath sharply. Now—now was the time to tell him! Have it all over with—let him share, if he would, her own racking uncertainty which in the last few moments had changed so unbelievably to tremulous wild hope. Or if he refused to share it, if he stood, betrayed and accusing—then let her find that out!

“No—no, of course not, Jim! I think they’re marvelous, so alive, and—and vital. But—well, suppose I can’t quite come up to them?” She hesitated, felt a nervous burning at the base of her throat.

“Are you going to let them start working on you already? Didn’t I warn you—”

“Jim, darling, it isn’t that. I’m thinking only of ourselves—of you and me. Suppose—such things do happen, you know—suppose we found out that I couldn’t have any children, for instance? Would you be terribly—”

Jim burst out laughing. With both arms about her, he lifted her almost off her feet. He rumbled her hair, in boisterous derision and then buried his face in it. But in a moment he gravely raised her mouth to his and kissed her.

“Aren’t there enough Kelsos in the world already?” he said huskily. “Do we have to start thinking about adding to the number right away? I haven’t had you very long and I’d like to keep you just as you are—all to myself—for a while anyhow.”

Hildred pressed her face against his throat. Her eyes were wet. The moment had gone.



Hildred had moved about the living room in a kind of trance, arranging and rearranging the autumn flowers she had brought in from the garden. She leaned now against the grand piano while her eyes drifted unseeingly down the long charming room with its soft blend of colors glowing in the stream of October sunset. She pressed her hand beneath her heart. She could feel its even, almost dreamful beat, as if, a thing separate from her acknowledging neither panic nor joy, it counted out the seconds of the new life it held in drowsy wonder.

She walked in slow enveloping abstraction to the window. The shorn valley fields lay gilded and dazzling under the wide swath of brilliance from the west. Doctor Brant Henderson's maroon car had stopped at the mailbox where Jim was gathering up the mail. Brant Henderson—why must she be reminded of him at this moment! The two men were talking. Now Brant's car started away, and she saw only Jim's tall figure striding up the hill, hewn darkly against the light. In a moment he would enter the house, letters, papers, farm journals in his hands.

Hildred turned so that she would not face him, so that her own eyes and her mouth would be in shadow when he looked at her.

He came in, and as always the room seemed smaller with his presence. How tremendous he was! His eyes were intensely blue with some pleased excitement. He tossed all the mail on the table except one opened letter which he brought over to Hildred.

“Read this, Hildred! It's from Dick Bolger. He's planning a cruise to Trinidad around Easter and wants us to go along. I can manage it, I think. The boys can get along for a month without me, and I'll be back before the work gets too heavy. What about it?”

“Jim.” Hildred raised her eyes to Jim's face. “We'd better not make any plans—not yet, anyhow. I don't think we'll be able to go with them.”

“No? It'd be the honeymoon we didn't have time for, and they want to—”

“I know, dear. But we can't decide now. I think I'm going to have a baby. I'm going to drive up to see Doctor Casey tomorrow morning.”

In Jim Kelso's little study the log fire snapped and whispered; its light played capriciously over the faces of the two men seated in the deep chairs and over the tall glasses they held in their hands. In its glow the coats of the two Irish setters stretched luxuriously out on the floor, shone like polished copper. The heavy drapes had not yet been drawn across the windows, and the outer dusk

was deep blue beyond the immediate perpendicular fall of loose soft fists of snow.

Jim was still clad in the flannel shirt, corduroy breeches and knee boots of his work day. Brant's clothes looked as if he had slept in them. Both men were very comfortable in their male undisturbed privacy. Brant's apologies for not having looked in at the farm for a whole month had already been disposed of with Jim's acceptance of them.

"Sure, I heard about that epidemic down at Feely's Brook," Jim had said. "Must've been kind of tough on those people. It's bad enough to have the flu when you know your system is strong enough to take it. But how in hell do those people survive any sort of illness, half-starved most of the time?"

Brant had made a grimace for reply. His jaws were leaner, tighter, than Jim last remembered them.

Now Jim glanced toward the blue-white, softly knit confusion of snow beyond the windows.

"Hildred ought to be home pretty soon," he remarked. "I know she'll be sorry to miss seeing you. But you know what those la-de-da benefit teas are—especially when Ed's wife gives 'em. I s'pose they do some good, but—"

"Where did you say Hildred went?" Brant had heard Jim clearly in his first statement of Hildred's whereabouts. A small contempt of himself for the dissembling question smote him.

"To Annette's, in Birch Falls, Annette and Virginia doped out the idea of throwing this benefit, for the people in the county who can't qualify for relief because of some red tape or other. Virginia decided they couldn't have it at her place—Luce wouldn't stand for that. It would look too much like a bid for votes, and he's going to be the next mayor of Birch Falls, or else!" Jim laughed. "Even if Luce is my brother, I'll say this for him—he'll get there without any false build-up. But you can't stop the women! My mother, both of my sisters-in-law, and Kate and Dora are in the thing up to their necks. Annette and Virginia are worse Kelsos now than any of them!"

"Or—better!" Brant looked thoughtfully into his glass. "So Hildred went to Annette's?"

"Here—there's nothing but ice in that." Jim got up, stepped over to the laden copper tray on his desk. "I advised her against going. It's the first time she's been away anywhere, since—" He paused. "But she said she loved the snow, and wanted Sam to take her out in the cutter, with sleigh bells and all the trimmings! I thought I'd let her go, poor kid. She's had a tough time of it,

Brant! We thought for a while, there, Casey and I—” He handed Brant his glass, and a sharp tinkle came from it.

Brant shot him a glance from beneath lowered lids.

“It must have been pretty bad,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to—to tell you how I felt about it. Casey told me a little—not much—but I know that if there had been any possible way of preventing the—what happened—Casey would have known that way. Let’s see—it’s a month now, isn’t it, since Hildred came home from the hospital?” He was talking, just talking, and angrily he knew it. But the determined brightness, the determined hope, on Jim Kelso’s face was something he couldn’t stand.

And yet, why in heaven’s name shouldn’t he stand it? For that matter, what was there to stand? Women had miscarried before this—with sadness—and had subsequently achieved joy for themselves and their husbands. Doctor Katherine Cecilia Husted in her brief summary of the case to Brant had been glibly, profanely cheerful. Another time—

“Just a month,” Jim was saying. Leaning forward, he moved his shoulders in that shifting way that was so startlingly reminiscent of his behavior on the football field at State, ten years ago. Brant, sweating for an education, had not known Jim Kelso then, but he winced now in recollection of his own envy, his admiration, for that great and privileged athlete who had become a college idol. “You know, Brant,” Jim went on. “I’ve wished a hundred times in the past month that you’d come out here. I—I felt sort of stupefied after Hildred—after we lost the baby. It’s funny—I didn’t think it would be so important to me.”

“Only natural, I should say,” Brant observed absently.

“Of course, at first I didn’t think about anything except Hildred. I was beside myself with fear that she wouldn’t pull through! But afterwards, when she came home—she brooded so about it! She’d just lie there for hours staring in front of her and not saying a word. She refused to see any of the family, even my mother.”

“It’s hard for us to get the woman’s viewpoint on such things,” Brant said slowly.

“We can’t!” Jim said. “If Hildred hadn’t felt so sort of this is the end of the world about it!—I don’t think it would have got me down. Gosh, we’re both young and healthy! There’s no reason why—just because something goes wrong the first time—”

“Well—probably not,” Brant said carefully. “Casey seems to think it’s all

right. I trust Casey—otherwise I'd insist on Hildred's coming in to see me some day soon."

"There have been times this last month, I admit, when I've wished you weren't so darned busy, Brant," Jim confessed. "Casey—"

"Don't worry about Casey, Jim. I've had my hands full anyhow. It isn't only the epidemic. Old Strick has been nastier than usual. I know what's eating him, of course. As soon as your brother Edwin landed the contract for the new hospital wing, Strick realized he wasn't going to get away with the graft he planned. Lord, the dirty work that old turtle must have pulled here before I came on the scene! The staff knows about it, but overlooks it. I won't, and he knows it. *Ergo*, he hates me."

"Well," Jim laughed, "you've got nothing to be afraid of, old man. Even your personal record—you're so upright I'm beginning to get suspicious of you. All those pretty nurses and everything—or is there a little number down at Feely's Brook, maybe? You can't tell me a man has no—"

"Sure!" Brant drawled. "I know. The old whited sepulcher and all that stuff. Being just plain decent—that's too original for most people to understand. Or being just plain lazy, perhaps."

He took a cigarette and lit it with a steady hand. What a luxury it would be, he thought, to tell the truth, *just once*—once, after these relentless vigilant years. But he dared not, even to a trusted friend like Jim Kelso. The habit of fear was too deep within him, now. His present security had been too hard to get to jeopardize it.

"There's Hildred now!" Jim said, rising eagerly as a door opened at the side of the house and her voice came to them in conversation with Hedvig, the girl in the kitchen. He turned on the light of a floor lamp, placed another log on the fire, drew the curtains. "I hope she didn't get cold on the way back." He went to the study door, opened it and called out to her.

Hildred came, dropping her beaver coat and her green beret on a chair, glanced with a smiling nod at Brant, and lifted her face to receive Jim's kiss.

"And what brings the busy Doctor Henderson all the way—" she began.

"Just my good Scotch," Jim interrupted. "Are you tired? Are you cold? Come on over to the fire."

"Oh, Jim, for heaven's sake!" Hildred laughed and looked helplessly at

Brant. "Everything's fine. I'm not tired, I loved the ride in the cutter, and I'm not cold." She put her hand on Brant's sleeve. "So good to see you again, Brant! I've been hearing all about how hard you've been working. Esther Fay told me this afternoon (there's a girl who simply adores you, Brant) that if it hadn't been for you some of her pupils from the Feely Brook place would never have lived. And I suppose you won't get a cent for your work."

"Well, there'll be a bag of potatoes and a chicken or two, and maybe a dozen fresh eggs," Brant laughed.

"Isn't there a county fund to pay for what you've been doing?" Jim asked.

Brant shrugged. "By the time Doctor Strickland has it spread out the way he wants it—"

"Your sisters were indignant about that this afternoon, Jim," Hildred said.

"That's right down their alley," Jim grinned easily. "Gosh, you look beautiful. All flushed up and bright-eyed. Guess the jaunt didn't do you any harm. What do you think of her, Brant? Here, let me fix you another—"

"I've got to get going," Brant said, glancing at his watch. "Can't take any chances in this snow." He got up and stood beside Hildred. "It's nice to see you looking so well. By the way—I want both of you to come in to dinner with me one of these nights. Mrs. Wales fixes a mean pot of stew. How about it?"

"Ask us anytime!" Hildred said gaily, and then while Jim started toward the door with Brant, she called, "Thank you for coming. Jim has missed you!"

Alone for a moment, her face changed, the valiantly smiling mask dropping from it. She sat down on the couch, did not look up when Jim came back into the room.

**H**e dropped down beside her, caught her hand and nestled it warmly within both his own. "What's the matter, darling? You look so queer! Perhaps you shouldn't have gone—"

"No, no, I'm all right, Jim. Just wait a minute." She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. "I've got to tell you something, and it isn't going to be easy."

He laughed. "Anything you have to tell me shouldn't be hard, dear. Was Virginia in one of her funny twists? I've always thought she was a little jealous of you, but—"

"No, it isn't that, though I did overhear her say something when she didn't

know I was just outside the door. But I expected to hear something of the sort sooner or later.”

“Well, what, for the love of Mike?”

“Oh, nothing, really, Kate was saying that she thought I was taking our—our loss altogether too hard, and that I ought to know a misfortune like that could always be remedied in time. And Virginia said, ‘How much do we know about Hildred anyhow? Perhaps she just doesn’t want a baby. Babies don’t improve the figure, you know.’”

“Well, damn Virginia!” Jim exploded.

“Jim—please!” She put her fingers against his lips, smiled at him unsteadily. “What Virginia said isn’t important and isn’t what I was going to tell you.”

An apprehensive pallor crept beneath his ruddy skin, a nervous frown came between the troubled blue of his eyes. But he smiled encouragingly.

“Well—what is it?”

“Promise me that you’ll be absolutely honest with me.”

“Cross my heart!” he grinned.

“I had made up my mind to tell you this, Jim—just as soon as I was strong enough. I didn’t want your answer to come from pity—or chivalry, or anything like that. If you’ll think back, you may remember that I tried to tell you—long ago—but you wouldn’t help me. And I didn’t have the courage to force you to listen, because I hoped against hope that it might be all right after all. Well—I know now that it couldn’t be right—that, it never will be. Even Casey, I think, hoped it might be—but it won’t ever.”

“What—what won’t be?” Jim stared at her in puzzled distraction.

“Oh, Jim!” Tears spilled out from beneath her lashes. Angrily she brushed them away. “You see, I should have told you—before we were married—that I wasn’t sure I could ever have children.” She drew away from him and buried her face in her hands.

“Why—why, darling!” In bewildered consternation Jim sprang up, stooped before her and gathered her into his arms. He sat down again on the couch, holding her close to him and stroking her shoulders with fumbling, awkward tenderness.

“It’s all right with me, dearest,” he said, his cheek pressed against her hair. “Whatever it is, it’s all right. I want you to get that straight. It’s you and I, isn’t

it? Haven't I always said that? Nothing else matters. Do you think I didn't mean that when I said it?"

Hildred relaxed a little and slowly, brokenly, gave him an unadorned account of her girlhood. Jim reassured her with the anxious caress of his hands, listened to her with heart-wrung attention. In the compassion he felt for Hildred at this moment, Jim forswore, or thought he did, his Kelso blood, his Kelso heritage.

"So you've been brooding about this all by yourself, not letting me share it with you?" he said at last. "And attempting something that might have cost your life. I might have lost you! Do you call that fair?"

Before she could reply he kissed her, drew her again into the curve of his arm.

"Jim—you know, don't you, why I couldn't tell you this while I was still ill? I had to be strong enough to say that I ought to leave you—leave you free to start your life again with somebody else."

"Hildred, you can't really believe that!"

"And then—since now we can go on the cruise with the Bolgers—you see how impossible it would be for me to be on that boat with you, unless everything was clear between us?"

She held her breath and then closed her eyes in poignantly sweet relief as his arms tightened about her.

"That settles it!" he said suddenly. "We're going on that trip, no matter what. It's going to be different this time—and better. We really know each other now."

"You do want to go?"

"You bet. I've been a thick-headed fool, Hildred, not to have seen that something was worrying you. I'm just a dumb farmer, Hildy. But I love you." His voice blundered along, striving for the right words. "I love you—and I'm not going to let you get away from me because of any crazy notions in that pretty little head of yours!"

Hildred pressed her wet eyes against the warm flannel of his shirt. "I'll be everything to you, Jim," she whispered. "Everything in my power!"

They were both silent for a moment, then Hildred said in a strained voice, "I don't want you to tell anyone—about all this, Jim."

He patted her on the shoulder. "Whose business is it? It's *our* life, isn't it?"

There's one Kelso, at least, who isn't going to be handed over body and soul to the tribe! They can think whatever they want to, and the hell with them!"

"Darling!" Hildred clung to him.

"Of course Casey knew all along, didn't she?"

"I had to tell her. She would have known anyhow. But we can trust Casey. She promised me she wouldn't even let Brant know about it."

The top log in the fireplace broke softly in two, a reddish spear of flame thrusting up briefly and then subsiding with a lispng sound.

"There's just one thing more," Hildred said. "It occurred to me that we could use that little south room—" her quickening heart forced her to continue more casually "—we could use it for your laboratory work. Johnson tells me you haven't enough space down in the pasteurization plant, especially now when you're beginning the soil tests. I thought we might have the room redecorated while we're gone—" Her voice faltered at the odd expression on Jim's face. Redecorated! Could any conventional overlay of color erase the pastel tones which had given that little south room its unmistakable character? And yet she had hoped—"It would be more convenient for you," she went on hurriedly. "And warmer in winter—"

"Well, I'd rather we didn't do that, Hildred," he said, his eyes evasive. "We can always use it for a spare room in a pinch, can't we? It won't go to waste, anyhow."

"No, of course it won't, dear. It was just an idea." She smiled brightly, then said, "Let's wire the Bolgers and start planning. I hope they still want us!"

Everybody commented that spring upon how extraordinarily radiant and happy both Hildred and Jim Kelso looked after their vacation. Virginia, the wife of Lucius Kelso, was heard to remark that she too might achieve a fresh and dewy bloom if her husband could afford to pamper her as Jim pampered his wife. Virginia's was a lone disparaging voice, however. The true Kelsos cheered whole-heartedly when Hildred made it known that she planned to use her idle time and a few of the idle acres surrounding her home, in a more or less scientific pursuit of horticulture. A brisk rivalry sprang up immediately between Hildred and Dora Gilport, Jim's sister, who had won various prizes with her exhibits at the summer flower show three years running.

Lanky, red-headed Dora came to the farm frequently, and in Dora, Hildred



knew she had a steadfast, if somewhat stormy friend. Her three children, who were usually piled in the car beside her on her visits to the farm, Dora treated with a bland absent-mindedness that always amused Hildred.

“I want to ride Shag!” young Dick would shout, and before his mother had brought the car to a full stop he would be tearing down to the barns in search of his Uncle Jim.

Then Hildred would see Jim lead the stocky, bushy-coated Welsh pony out of the pasture corral, saddle him and hoist Dick up on the animal’s back. The boy would go yelling past his awed and envious little sisters, the patient Shag obliging with his short-legged trot. Jim would stand by for a moment, watching and smiling, wave negligently to his sister and Hildred, and go back to his work.

I should not let this kind of thing strike across my heart, Hildred told herself. Everything is settled. Jim is content. He loves me now even more than he did before he knew. And yet—

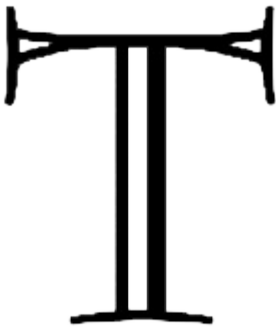
There was the day when little Dick insisted on riding with Jim on the cultivator. The cultivating was usually done by the farm hands, but Jim now and then liked “the feel of it” himself. It was late in the afternoon and the light over the young corn, over the man and the contented boy and the slowly moving machine, was the light of a myth, of a translucent dream.

Hildred was standing with Dora on the slope above the field. They had been hard at work together on a canna bed.

“You have green fingers,” Dora said, “and that’s a gift, let me tell you! I’m beginning to believe anything will grow under your touch, Hildred.”

Her voice was comfortable, placid. She apparently had not seen Hildred’s eyes fixed blankly upon the moving tableau in the valley below.

“That’s sweet of you,” Hildred said, flushing. “I hope you’re right.”



HE chain of weeks, ever more strong and green, linked at last with full summer, and in the shadowless fragrance of her life Hildred wondered how she could have been at one time the victim of a silly, melodramatic fear. In numberless, unconscious ways, Jim had made her confident that there lingered with him no futile regret for what could never be. He was delighted at her interest in everything about the farm, thrilled with pride when she grasped so quickly the problems that arose in his experiments with soil improvement, and after a long day they frequently worked together in his little laboratory in the pasteurization plant. Hildred had never again suggested using the south room in the big house for a laboratory—the room that was to have been a nursery and was now a guest room. Yet she sometimes chided herself for continuing to be over-sensitive about Jim's earlier disapproval of the idea.

Often, after an evening spent with nitrates and phosphates and strange-smelling muds in the laboratory, they would go for a drive in Jim's long-nosed roadster. Stop in at some roadside tavern for a beer and a hamburger. Loaf along to a small town where a tiny circus might be making its gallant, three-day stand; ride the carousel, buy hoops at three for a dime to toss over clocks, bracelets, gilt statuettes, flash-lights.

One Saturday night they had had a particularly gay time of this sort, ending by Jim's suggestion they drive the few remaining miles to the city. Hildred assented, not realizing they had come so far from home. Well, she reflected, distance meant very little to the Kelsos. They had had almost as much to do with the career of the state capital as they had had with the founding of the little village of Amaranth. Once again she thought of them as a hardy vine that had spread through generations over the land, sending down adventitious roots at shrewd intervals, burgeoning and bringing forth its deep-fleshed, glossy fruit.

"Too bad we're not dressed up," Jim said at last, when the city lights were a red reflection in the sky ahead of the car. "I feel in the mood for something like the Peacock Room tonight. Let's do that next Saturday night, hm?"

"Can't darling. We're giving a little dinner for Esther Fay and Leonard, to celebrate their engagement. You asked Brant to come too. Don't you remember?"

"Well it seems to me we never have a minute to ourselves any more except jaunts like this. Ergo—we'll make the most of it. How does that place ahead look to you? Must be new, I never saw it before."

“Let’s try it.” Hildred leaned forward, saw the garish awnings, the flamboyant string of colored lights and the neon-lighted name on the roof of the long low building. *La Comet*. She giggled. “Look—they’ve actually got a comet working in lights above the door!”

They parked the car and went in. A little waiter led them to the first unoccupied booth and then hovered above them—reminding Hildred of a plump blue-bottle in his bright new uniform, his buzzing activity, his air of eagerness.

Jim ordered chicken sandwiches and coffee, while Hildred looked about her. The interior was decked with scores of tricky mirrors placed at irregular angles, so that she could look straight before her without seeing either her own face or Jim’s. She saw one face, however, that brought her upright with amazement. Somewhere in the room sat Brant Henderson, and across from him was a woman of perhaps sixty, fiercely black-eyed, white-haired, clad in a prim costume like that of a deaconess off duty. Her navy sailor hat, her navy crepe-de-chine dress, high-collared, unrelieved except by a gold chain at the end of which hung a locket or a watch, would brook no compromise.

“Jim,” Hildred said as soon as the waiter had left, “sit over on this side with me and look straight ahead. I don’t think he’ll look around. He’s much too busy.”

“He? Who?”

“Ssh! Come and see for yourself.”

He slid in beside her and looked where Hildred directed.

“Brant!” Jim whispered. “And a woman! She’s telling him off about something.”

Together they watched the woman lean toward Brant, shake her finger beneath his nose, while Brant rubbed his forehead and stared at the table.

“Well, I’m cross-eyed!” Jim grunted. “What do you suppose—”

“We shouldn’t be spying on him,” Hildred said quickly. “It’s shameful.”

“Not at all! He’s been too mysterious with me too long. I’m going over and speak to him.”

“Jim, you’re not going to do anything of the kind.”

“Look, he’s writing a check or something—”

Hildred leaned back against the hard upholstery of the booth. “I feel funny—maybe it’s the heat in this place. Let’s get out, Jim.”

He looked at her and grinned. “All right, but I’m going to ask Brant about this some time.”

“No—don’t ever mention it to him, please. I’m sure it would be wrong. We shouldn’t have come here.”

“Well, here’s our coffee, kid. We can take the sandwiches out with us, if that’s the way you feel. Me, I’d love to stick around. . . .”

Hildred sipped a little of her coffee while the waiter obligingly folded the sandwiches in a paper napkin, and bowed his thanks for the generous tip Jim laid on the table.

**A**t last they were out in the car again. “Well, we made that short and snappy,” Jim said. “You’re feeling all right, aren’t you? I thought you turned kind of pale in there—”

“I’m all right, dear. Although I did feel queer suddenly. Maybe it was those crazy mirrors, maybe the idea of seeing something Brant obviously wants to hide from everybody—”

Jim laughed as he started the car. “Don’t be silly. That old dame is probably a crank patient, or something. I’m going to find out next time I get him alone.”

“Please, Jim!” Hildred begged. “Somehow I’m sure this concerns something he doesn’t want anyone to know. You saw his face . . . it was haggard! After all, there may be something in Brant’s life he has to keep secret. Something tragic, I mean.”

“Brant Henderson! Tragic?” Jim threw back his head with a shout of laughter. “Come off it, honey. I don’t mind your being psychic, as long as it’s about me. But—old Frost Bite! Listen to me. I know something about Brant. The reason he looks haggard is that he had to slave like the devil to get himself through college and medical school. He’s old before his time. That’s all the mystery there is. If he took enough time off to eat a decent meal, he’d be as good looking a guy as the next one. Forget it, Hildy. I don’t want you lying awake thinking about Brant Henderson. I could be jealous of him without half trying.”

While he spoke, Hildred seemed for the first time to see him, to see all the Kelsos, in a completely detached way. She felt cold and suddenly desolate, alone again. From somewhere the word “smug” had whispered itself into her thoughts. Could she call Jim smug, because secure in his own life, he could not

imagine deep and helpless pain in the life of a friend? She told herself this was rank disloyalty and quickly decided he had not really seen Brant's strained face, the down-bite of his teeth on his full, sensitive under-lip, the burning gray of his eyes beneath his straight dark brows.

**B**RANT HENDERSON would have pounced on any excuse to stay away from Hildred Kelso's party for Esther Fay and Leonard Clement that Saturday night. But things were quiet at the hospital—no loop-hole there! And during the week Jim had chided him over the telephone for not looking in on the flower show, where Hildred's miniature arrangements had received the blue ribbon, and where she had been runner-up to Dora Gilport with her design for a rock garden. Brant felt a little shabby for having avoided the show.

But all week he had thought of the glimpse he had had of Hildred out at that tavern on the highway, just outside the city. Had she and Jim seen him? He wondered. If they had, it was not surprising that they hadn't come and spoken to him. What a strange spectacle he must have seemed to them, there in a booth in a cheap dance hall, with old Beulah Frick shaking her bony finger under his nose! Mystifying, all right, he thought bitterly. He had to laugh now at the security he had felt in choosing such a place as being the least likely to produce an encounter with anyone he knew. Well, Beulah had had her "spree," as she called it, her glimpse of night life, which in her baffling and unpredictable way she had that evening demanded. Also, she had satisfied her periodic desire to make him feel like a coward and a worm.

In quite another respect, he had felt himself both coward and worm during the past week, scuttling around so that he would not meet either Hildred or Jim. Jim had the Kelso way of shutting his face up—good politicians, those people!—so that you would never know if he was *on* to anything. But Hildred—her eyes, the clear and marveling eyes of a child, despite her sophistication, he knew now—her eyes would tell him at once whether or not she had seen him that night. And what could he tell her, if she asked? A trumped-up story,

an insult to himself, to the only thing that anomalously gave sense to his arid life.

It had been arranged that Brant should drive Esther and young Clement out to the Kelso farm in his car. While he waited for Leonard to meet him at the dispensary of the hospital in Birch Falls, Doctor Casey Husted came bustling in, her shabby black bag in her hand. Beneath her shock of bristling gray hair, her fine brow bore a furious scowl.

“Well, what’s up now, Casey?” Brant asked with a sympathetic grin. “Had another tilt with old Strychnine?”

It was Casey who had given Doctor Strickland the nickname.

“And how!” she grunted, dropping into a chair. “He’s going to bull through his own ideas for that new wing, in spite of hell and high water. Instead of a decent air-conditioned charity ward in there, we’re going to be presented with three or four de luxe private rooms that will attract the mink coat maternity trade! Prestige for the hospital—Gawd! I’m seriously toying, Brant, with the idea of taking my aging carcass out of here and opening up a hot dog stand in Montana.”

Brant’s mouth hardened. “What makes you so sure he’s going to get his way with it? I thought at the meeting the other night—”

“Meeting, my neck! This county works on the hand-in-glove system. The Kelsos raise the money for hospital expansion—and old Strych raises votes for the Kelsos. Bah! Why weren’t you at the meeting?” She eyed him with sharp rebuke, and yet there was something else in her glance, a hesitance, as if against her will she was treading on forbidden ground by asking that question. At Brant’s suddenly averted eyes, his flush, she went on hastily, “You have more influence with the Kelsos than any of us. If you had been there you might have—”

“I told you,” he interrupted harshly, “that I’d be at the meeting if it was possible!” Then, contritely, “I’m sorry, Casey. My temper is worse than yours—if that can be.” His set face relaxed into the smile that gave him a sudden, boyish charm. “But it isn’t too late to cook the old boy’s goose yet. We can—”

“Brant, he has it in for you tooth and nail, and you know it. You’re entirely too popular in the county to suit him. I shouldn’t be surprised if he has you shadowed everywhere you go—just to get something on you. Forgive me, Brant—but watch your step. We—”

She paused suddenly. A faint creak had sounded from the corridor floor outside the dispensary. With a humorous grimace, Brant stepped to the door of

the little office and looked out. No one was in sight.

"I'll bet that was pussyfoot, just the same," Casey said, wearily getting to her feet. "Oh, well, I've got to look in on a gallstone before I go home and eat. Give my best to Hildred and Jim, won't you? Sorry I can't make it to their place tonight. I called Hildred and gave her my regrets. That girl is tops, in my humble opinion. Or what do *you* think?"

Her tone startled him. He brought down one heavy eyebrow in nettled perplexity. "What *should* I think? She's a swell girl—and Jim's a lucky dog!"

"I was just wondering. In some respects you're like a clam—in others, you're just an open-faced watch." She grinned, and added laconically. "Well, have fun. Here's young Clement coming in now."

In the car, on the way to the Clark farm to pick up Esther, Leonard Clement talked earnestly of his forthcoming marriage and his hope that the quarry would keep running most of the winter. He and Esther were planning to rent the upper three rooms of a private house in Birch Falls. They had saved enough for furniture, but—and he flushed self-consciously—they'd have to "kind of be careful about any third party for the first year or so. He and Esther didn't exactly know much about that kind o' thing . . . they wanted to start any youngster o' theirs out right. . ." Brant talked to him soberly, reassuringly, and before Esther got into the car with them Leonard's thin young face with the deep-set dark eyes was alight and cheerful.

It was some time since Brant had seen Esther. He observed now that she was ripening into grave, womanly beauty. Her bright hair, even, seemed somehow subdued by the awe with which the thought of her marriage, so close now, had filled her spirit. Awe toward marriage—a rare, sweet thing nowadays, Brant reflected with irony.

"You look swell, honey!" Leonard was saying, drawing her beneath his shoulder. She sat between Brant and Leonard, and now Brant glanced at her again. A crisp yellow dress of some cotton material—with her glowing hair and her golden-brown eyes it made her look like a sunburst. And yet there was a lovely quiet over her. What a girl! Brant berated himself for his moment's doubt about Leonard's being really worthy of her. She ought, in time, to be the serene matron of a great house, she had that unmistakable quality. And maybe Leonard would one day establish her as such. Brant could think that coolly enough, because for some reason she was not the sort of woman he would ever want for himself. The sort he would want was. . . He knit his brows. What the devil had Casey meant by that crack about Hildred Kelso? With cold irrelevance, it flashed over him then that Hildred might have told Casey—in

the way that women tell each other things—that she had seen him Saturday night at that preposterous place, *La Comet*.

Hildred's house was, as usual, beautiful with cut flowers spaced and vased in subtle perfection. The table centerpiece, on a deep blue mirror, was a heart-shaped arrangement of forget-me-nots and sweetheart roses. There were tall white candles set in low, heart-shaped holders of pink china. Esther clasped her hands to her breast, and turned to Hildred with brimming eyes.

“Oh, Hildred! Len and I didn't expect anything like this! You shouldn't have—”

Hildred laughed, pleased, and put her arm about the girl. She looked at Brant.

“Doing this was fun, Esther,” she said. “Leonard, you sit here beside me. That gives you a good view of Esther down the table there beside Jim. Brant, it's too bad Casey couldn't be here to balance the table—and glare at you now and then!”

Everybody laughed. Everybody enjoyed the dinner—Leonard Clement perhaps most of all. Never had he felt so on the crest of the wave. Why, this Hildred Kelso, this actress that everybody said was the ritziest article that ever struck Amaranth—here she was talking to him about the quarry workers forming a union! Talking as if she knew what it was all about too! And Jim Kelso was talking to Esther as if she was the governor's wife, or something. And Brant Henderson—nothing high and mighty about him. With friends like these, a fellow might really get some place. After all, he might have been in the Kelsos' class too if his father's store hadn't failed. He'd have gone straight through that engineering course he had planned. He certainly wouldn't be working in a quarry, at what he could get! Well—Esther knew all about that, and there she was smiling down the white and silver table at him. At him—Leonard Clement! His heart swelled with gratitude and hope.

After dinner, it was still light enough outdoors for a game of croquet. Jim insisted on a foursome. Hildred declared she always felt cross-eyed in croquet, and with the two dogs beside her sat down on a garden bench to watch the others.

She tried to persuade herself, she was watching all of them. But actually she was watching Brant.

She saw his lean, intent face, his brownish hair dipping over his ragged



brows, as he bent to take aim at a wicket. She saw him as he had been last Saturday night, sitting at the table with that extraordinary old woman. She saw herself, last Thursday, at lunch with Casey, suddenly and distractedly asking why Brant should have been at such a place with such a woman.

Why had she said a word about it—to anyone? Brant was nothing to her. And yet for some reason the memory of his face in that crazy mirror had haunted her so that she had burst out with it to Casey.

And Casey's expression had undergone a curious change. Her small, shrewd eyes darkened; she thoughtfully rubbed her lower lip.

"Oh, this seems like bearing tales!" Hildred cried. "I don't know why I mentioned it. But—"

"I think I know why." Casey's voice was unwontedly gentle. "What you feel toward Brant is a maternal thing. You want to protect him."

"Me—protect Brant Henderson?" Hildred laughed.

"Oh, I know you've resented him from the first because you've been afraid of him. But the other feeling is there. You can't laugh it off—not with me. I know you too well to think you're merely curious about Brant and that woman. And I happen to know that Brant isn't proof against a woman's charms—not by a long shot!"

"But, Casey—this woman was old enough to be—"

"I'm not thinking about the old woman," Casey put in abruptly. "I'm thinking about you."

"You're being simply ridiculous!"

Casey frowned. "Let it go. But this thing Saturday night—maybe you've stumbled on something there. I've known, ever since he came here, that he's carrying something on his mind. At first I thought it might be a woman, but now I believe it's something else. I've tried to get at it—" She gave Hildred a long and thoughtful look. "I wonder if you couldn't dig it out of him somehow. Brant needs help. I'm sure of it."

"Why, I'd not even dare let him know we saw him the other night!"

"No—I suppose not. Well, let's forget it. I can't help thinking old Strickland might have been the one to catch Brant off guard that night—instead of you and Jim. And I hate to think how that old snake would have gone to work on it. You know yourself what can be done with a little breath of scandal. Strickland is waiting for just such a chance."

Now Hildred was suddenly out of her reverie. The evening sky had darkened, and the croquet players were walking toward her.

“Leon and Esther haven’t seen the new refrigerator plant, Hildred,” Jim said. “You and Brant go in and listen to the radio or something,—eh?—while I take them down there?”

They stood for a moment watching Leonard and Jim walk down the hill, Esther between them, her arms locked in theirs.

“They’re happy, aren’t they?” Brant said, as if to himself.

“Who?” Hildred asked vacantly.

“Why, those two youngsters. I suppose Jim is too.”

“You *suppose*?” Hildred said. “Have you any reason to doubt it?”

All at once she resented having been left alone with Brant Henderson. She felt his cool eyes upon her in their old considering way.

“I can’t imagine why Jim shouldn’t be the happiest man in the world,” he observed.

No, Hildred thought, you can’t. Naturally. But hadn’t there been a shade too much heartiness in Jim’s manner tonight when he drank that toast to Esther and Leonard, wishing them a long life and a full one—and reminding them pointedly that James was a good old name—just in case they ever got stuck for one?

“Shall we go indoors?” Hildred asked Brant.

In the softly lighted living room, Hildred sank back into her deep chair, reached for a cigarette on an end table.

There were no matches at hand. Brant got up and strode across to her, stooped and held the flame to her cigarette. Over the brief flare of it their eyes met and balanced evenly. Then Brant straightened and flipped the match into the empty fireplace.

He felt the sting of blood in the tips of his ears, sudden heat in the palms of his hands. The fragrance of Hildred’s dark hair, of her cool skin, clung to his senses as he went slowly back to the couch and sat down.

She knew it too, he thought—she knew it, by heaven! Somehow she had wrested that look from him, he had been helpless against her! Damn the vanity of women—women like Hildred, anyhow! Jim wasn’t enough for her. She

must demand tribute, even from Jim's best friend.

In a moment of bitter recklessness, he found himself saying, "What were you and Jim doing in that new road house Saturday night?"

"Why—" Hildred fumbled with the strand of pearls about her neck.

"You saw me there, didn't you?" he laughed rudely.

"Yes, Brant we did. We—"

"Then why didn't you come over and say hello?"

"Well, we were in a hurry—"

"You saw I wasn't expecting anyone to speak to me, didn't you? Well, you were right. It would have embarrassed me if you had spoken to me. Does that satisfy you? Or does it only make you more curious?"

"Brant—" Hildred crushed out her cigarette, leaned forward and clasped her hands. "Must you be so unfriendly—"

"I am not being unfriendly." His voice was harsh. "If I seem to be—it is just my way of reproaching myself for being a fool."

Hildred looked at him for a moment. "Brant," she said at last, and her voice was very soft, "I won't believe you're that. But if there is anything we can do—Casey and I—"

"So you've been talking me over with Casey?"

"Well, not exactly. I *did* tell her about Saturday night."

"I thought so. And what was your conclusion?"

Hildred got up, walked nervously across the room. This was simply absurd. Her cheeks were burning. But if she lost control of herself now, she would gain nothing. She ought to be hating Brant Henderson now, but she was not hating him. She was hoping, somehow, to help him. She wanted to tell him that in their secret and tormented hearts they were both alone, and pitiful.

"We—" She faltered, then faced him with wide eyes. "Casey, that is, thinks it—it isn't a woman."

He laughed, shortly. "This time Casey's wrong. It *is* a woman."

"Oh!" Hildred turned away again and went over to the window.

When Brant spoke, his voice sounded tired. "I'm sorry if I've been rough, Hildred. I ought to be grateful to you for your interest. And to Casey. But—it's just no good. I'd feel better if you didn't even try."

“Perhaps you’re right,” Hildred told him.

On a raw December evening a year and a half after the marriage of Esther and Leonard Clement, Hildred sat at the little maple desk in her own sitting room at Kelso Hill farm. She was planning, five days ahead of time, the dinner she would give for Adolph Weimer, “distributor extraordinary,” as she called him, of dairy products throughout the state. Jim had not yet quite been able to sew up the Weimer contract for raw milk from Kelso Farms. Well, in five days Weimer and his funny little wife would be entertained here. And, Hildred thought serenely, the contract would be in Jim’s desk drawer. Weimer was a man who needed gentle and indirect convincing. It was strategic to flatter his mousy little wife. It was all very fine, because it was for Jim—and for Kelso Hill Farm. But to Hildred it was supremely hateful. This sort of thing had become, at last, a dreary substitute for any real meaning in her life. Useful—yes!—she was useful to Jim. Even the other Kelsos, who had grown aloof and wondering, had to admit that.

Hildred nibbled the end of her pencil, stared at the tentative menu she had sketched on the white pad. . . . But her mind refused to hold to its purpose. It continued on to Christmas Day, when, instead of going to “Gram and Gramp’s” with the Kelso legion, she and Jim would stay at home and entertain some of Jim’s friends from the city.

Yes, looking back now, she could see that the gradual change in Jim had begun on that summer evening of the party for young Esther and her earnest young man. Jim had not known how much of a Kelso he was—that was it! He had believed himself proof against the attitude of his family once they perceived that Hildred had no intention of trying again to have a child. How woefully he had deceived himself there! For in the past few months he had withdrawn more and more from the society of his own kin. Now he was insisting upon having people who meant little to him at his home over the holiday most sacred to the Kelsos.

But, Hildred thought with a cold pang, the day would come when Jim would find himself helpless against the pull of his own nature, when he would know that he was a Kelso with the most deep-rooted and tenacious of them.

Jim’s tenderness and love for her had not grown less—of that she was reassured time and time again by his need of her, by his sharing with her his problems, his hopes, his triumphs. Hildred reminded herself of this fact now, held it close to her heart.

Determinedly she resumed the business of planning the dinner for the

Weimers. Jim wanted his brother Lucius and his wife Virginia to be present. As Mayor of Birch Falls Lucius would lend a certain tone, Jim had grinned, to the occasion. But when had the Lucius Kelsos been here last? Not for months! But she would ask them anyway. . . . Dora Gilport would come, of course. She was more like Jim than any of the others. Hildred was glad that Senator and Mrs. Kelso were away. Jim's mother gave Hildred tacit sympathy from which she shrank.

And of course, Jim wanted Brant Henderson at the dinner. . . . Queer, how Jim never seemed to see that between herself and Brant, there had for months been a polite distance. But that was Jim—never seeing what was right under his nose. Well, Brant would come, of course—for Jim's sake. Hildred wondered briefly, as she had done many times, why he never spoke as Casey did of the disappointment they both felt at the use to which the new wing in the Birch Falls hospital had been put. In the past year, Brant had declined invitations to Kelso Hill more often than he accepted them. But he would come to this dinner for Adolph Weimer, Hildred knew. It meant so much to Jim.

**B**rant Henderson was driving back from the city, driving fast through the sullen December evening. He passed the little school where Esther Fay had taught—pretty, bright-haired Esther—who was now Esther Clement and looking forward to a happy event in August! Brant thought of her, and of his own errand this afternoon in the city, and his mouth tightened in an ironical smile. Wouldn't Hildred Kelso, with her graceful evasion of a woman's responsibilities to the race, be diverted if she could have glimpsed his thoughts right now? Hildred, Hildred! Must he, because of his friendship with Jim, go on eternally seeing her?

He had come into Birch Falls, he realized with a shock, and slowed down to enter the hospital street. He drew his car to the curb in front of the hospital, and stepped out. For a moment he stood and let his eyes move over the length of the building where for six years he had labored to shape the career that had been the bright dream of his youth. Yet, for all his devotion, for all his diligence, he saw himself now as one with his illusions shattered, who sought only to protect himself against the threats of a shrewd superior. He let his glance rest for a second upon the newly completed wing projecting from the western end of the building. He would never be able to look at it, he knew, without cursing himself for a coward and a traitor. Why had he not fought Strickland on that, forced him into the open, even though it meant bringing to an end his own career in Birch Falls? He alone knew the answer to that question.

In his office he hung up his coat and hat, threw aside his jacket, and was washing his hands thoroughly at the basin when the office nurse, Miss Murphy, came in.

“I have a patient waiting for you, Doctor Henderson,” she said. “That young signalman from the quarries.”

“Leonard Clement?”

The nurse nodded.

Brant followed her to the door and looked out over the crowded clinic waiting room. He’d be here till all hours, he reflected. He beckoned to Leonard Clement and held the door open for him to enter.

The young fellow was heavy-eyed, listless. He sat down cautiously and drew his hand slowly across his forehead.

Brant stood over him. “Well—how’s Esther?” he asked tentatively.

“Fine, doc. Couldn’t be better.”

“She won’t have any trouble. And now—what have you been up to?”

Leonard’s grin was not very convincing. “Haven’t been up to much at all for three or four days. I guess I must’ve caught cold or something, and it’s kind of got into me. All that damned dust from the drills—”

“Where do you feel it most?”

“It’s my throat. I haven’t been able to swallow anything since yesterday without—”

“Let’s take a look.”

Presently Brant said “You’d better get home, young fellow, and go to bed. I’ll be around later.”

“Okay, doc. I guess a little sleep wouldn’t hurt me, at that. I’ve got a hard day tomorrow. The hoist—”

“You’re not going to work tomorrow,” Brant frowned. “You’re going to be on your back for two weeks, unless that throat of yours—”

“Two weeks?”

“You’ve got your car here?”

“It’s outside.”

“Well, get going. Tell Esther I’ll be over as soon as I’m through here. And you’d better keep to liquids—milk, orange juice—”

As the door closed, Brant sat down again at his desk. He shut his eyes for a moment in an effort to forget the look that had come into Leonard Clement’s face when the young fellow muttered his thanks on leaving the office. There had been fear in his deep-set eyes—fear and bewilderment.

When he looked up again, Miss Murphy was at the door. “The little Malston girl, doctor—”

“Send her in. And Murphy, find out what beds are available. That young Clement ought to be where we can keep an eye on him.”

Clinic routine was rarely exciting. . . . “I’ve been having pains—here, in my side—” . . . “You want to look at this finger, doc? I took the rag off this morning—” . . . “It’s my nerves, doctor—”

Miss Murphy brought the information that there were no beds available except in the new wing’s private rooms whose price was prohibitive for Leonard Clement’s modest income.

“Damn!” Brant exploded.

“Mrs. Thorson is waiting to see you,” Miss Murphy said gently.

“Send her in.”

Send them in—send them in! Bandages and splints—aches and pains—labored breathing, creaking joints! But where was one who would heal the physician?

**B**y eight o’clock, Brant was knocking at the door of the house where Leonard and Esther lived in their three rooms upstairs. Esther met him at the top of the stairway.

“He’s been sleeping for over an hour,” she whispered as Brant stepped into the small living room.

“That you, doc?” Leonard’s voice came from the bedroom.

Brant stepped to the door and looked in. “I thought you were asleep. I was just getting set for a little flirtation with Esther.” He glanced back. “Unwrap that stuff I brought while I give this guy the once over.”

Esther busied herself, steeling her heart against the anxiety that had possessed it ever since Leonard had come home. She was just being foolish,

she knew. But having a doctor—even Brant Henderson—come into the house —

Brant walked slowly out of the bedroom, beckoned silently to Esther and led her to a far corner of the room.

“Leonard has a pretty bad throat,” he said in a low voice. “You probably know what a streptococcus infection is.”

She nodded.

“There’s no reason to be alarmed,” Brant went on, “but the boy really ought to spend a few days in the hospital where he can get constant attention. There’s a private room—”

“How could we ever afford it?” Esther protested.

“You don’t have to think about that,” Brant said.

Esther fought back the tears. “Leonard is so proud, Brant! He—he wouldn’t let you pay for it. If it was a charity ward—”

Brant clipped an oath short under his breath. “There are no empty beds. He’ll have to take a private room.”

“Will you talk to him about it? But don’t try to fool him, Brant. He’d find out, and he’d feel—”

“All right, let’s talk to him.”

In the light under the bed lamp Leonard looked up at them with fever-bright eyes. Briefly, gently, Brant told him what he wanted him to do. A stubborn smile settled itself about Leonard’s lips.

“I’ve heard enough about that skunk Strickland,” he said huskily. “There was money raised for a free ward for guys like me, and he got himself all fixed up with a nice bridal suite or something. No—I’m staying where I am, right here. So—thanks just the same.” He turned his face away, indifferently gazing at the wall.

Brant felt the blood pound in his temples. You couldn’t haul a man away by main force. Neither could you go back and undo something that had shaped your life forever.

From the very first, Brant was apprehensive. Months of breathing the granite dust from the quarry drills had left their unmistakable mark upon the delicate lung tissues, breaking down resistance to the ravages of a disease the very name of which he avoided mentioning to Esther. On the third day, however, he had to tell her. Leonard was fighting pneumonia.



On the night of Hildred Kelso's dinner for Adolph Weimer and his wife, Brant Henderson drove southward out of Birch Falls through the first snowstorm of the season. Late in the afternoon he had telephoned his regrets to Hildred. He could not possibly be on hand for the dinner, but he had promised to drop by later in the evening.

It was already after nine. For the past hour he had been with Leonard Clement, and had come away with a feeling of defeat. He had promised Esther that he would be back again at midnight. The only hope left was in Leonard's stout heart fighting its battle against odds that seemed almost overwhelming. As he drove through the swirling snow, Brant was all but convinced that the battle would be lost.

He could not help contrasting Esther Clement's stoical acceptance of birth and possible death with Hildred Kelso's barren life. If Hildred refused to be anything more than a man's mistress and a charming hostess to his friends, why had she ever married a man like Jim Kelso? On the other hand, what had happened to Jim that he was content to live his life with a woman who was little more than a decorative presence in his household? Why hadn't he made it clear to Hildred, before he married her, that the day would come when he would want a son of his own to take over the task he himself would ultimately have to resign?

But as he stepped down from his car before Jim Kelso's door, Brant had a sudden inspiration. It was not until he had spent nearly two hours with Hildred's guests that he found an opportunity to talk to her alone. They were in the study, a log fire blazing in the fireplace.

"I've got bad news for you," he announced abruptly. "About Leonard."

"Is he really—you mean he isn't going to get better?"

"Well, there's always one last chance, of course," Brant replied. "But I don't think he's going to be able to make it, quite."

"Oh, Brant!—isn't there something—can't anything be done? Can I—can we help in any way?"

"You can't help Leonard," Brant said. "But you *can* help—if you really want to. I'm thinking about Esther. She's going to have her baby in August, if nothing happens. If she loses Leonard, she'll have to find some place to put up till the baby comes."

"Does she know that Leonard is—"

“She’s prepared for the worst. I talked with her tonight, before I left. She’s not giving up hope, of course, but she has a pretty good idea how it is, and she’s being very sensible about it. She spoke of going out to live with her cousin and his wife—the Clarkes, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Frankly, I don’t think it’s a good idea. The Clarkes’ is no place for a girl like Esther—and in her condition. I thought of asking you to take her in here for a while.”

Hildred sat down on the end of the couch and stared into the fire for a moment before she replied. “Brant,” she said at last, “it won’t be easy for you to understand me when I say that I wish with all my heart that I could take Esther in and give her a home—for as long as she’d like to stay with me—but I can’t. And I can’t tell you why.”

Brant did not speak immediately. Had he done so he might have said things he would have regretted.

“I came to you about it,” he said finally, “because I thought you were fond of Esther.”

“I am. If there is anything else I can do for her—anything!”

She looked up at Brant and saw the old bitter smile forming about his mouth. How could she tell him what was in her mind at that moment? Why could he not see for himself how impossible it would be to have Esther in the house, waiting for her baby, reminding Hildred every hour of her own failure, renewing day after day the sense of defeat which Jim had striven all these months to conceal.

Months ago, Hildred had suggested to Jim something that had lain close to her heart for a long time. Why try to keep their secret any longer? Why not admit that she could never have a child! Then—she had drawn her arms close about Jim in the darkness—let them adopt a child at once.

Jim’s reply had been a protest so vehement that Hildred, for the first time in her married life, had cried herself to sleep.

Looking at Brant now, she could feel his unspoken resentment.

“You’ll think I’m selfish—and heartless—” she began, but Brant silenced her with an angry gesture of his hand.

“There are times when it’s best not to think,” he snapped, and left her.

Five hours later, before it was yet dawn, Leonard Clement died.

On a night in late August, Brant Henderson sat with his pipe and a book in his own study in Amaranth. The thin and lonely whisper of an early autumnal rain upon the windows had brought within him a mood of abysmal melancholy against which it was useless to struggle. The book could not hold his interest. He threw it aside and decided he might just as well go to bed.

He had already started upstairs when he heard the door bell.

“Damn it!” he muttered irritably, and went to answer it.

But when the disheveled figure of Esther Clement stumbled into the hall and almost into his arms, an exclamation of dismay broke from him. The girl was white, distraught.

“Esther!” he cried, holding her trembling hands. “What—”

“I can’t stay at the Clarkes’ another minute!” she sobbed. “I—Harry and his wife had another awful row tonight about my being an expense to them—I couldn’t stand it! I ran away.” She drew a sigh and pressed her hands to her sides. “I—oh, Brant—I’m not feeling right!”

“For God’s sake! Here—come in. Let me get those wet things off you. Your teeth are chattering!”

He poured a finger of brandy into a glass and held it to her shaking lips. Her wide, gold-dark eyes searched his face and found reassurance there, for she smiled. The smile struck across Brant’s heart. The brave loveliness of this farm girl who had been wife and widow and would be a mother—all within the briefly swinging space of a year!

While he stared at her in momentary disconcertedness, he saw her face become suddenly distorted.

“Are you having pains?” Brant asked her anxiously.

She nodded her head, her lip caught between her teeth.

“Look—you’d better get into bed,” he said. Without another instant’s hesitation he picked her up into his arms, strode into the hall and started up the stairs. From the top landing he called out sharply to Mrs. Wales to get out of her bed and dress.

Two hours later, with old Sarah bustling about and crooning over the red little gnome occupying a clothes basket in her own bedroom, Brant scrubbed up, threw on his dressing gown and went back downstairs. He felt somberly tired, not so much from the task he had just performed, as from the emotional

onslaught that had accompanied it. He lighted the ready-laid fire in the fireplace, and sat down before it.

What, he wondered, was now going to become of Esther Clement and the fatherless waif who was her son? He found himself once more engulfed by that sense of guilty responsibility which had followed Leonard's death last winter. If he had had the guts to stand up to Strickland, to fight for what he knew to be right and to take whatever consequences came of it in the way of personal dishonor and defeat . . .

In angry impatience he got up and paced to and fro across the room. No good would come of berating himself now. Something had to be done about Esther. It was out of the question for her to go back to the Clarke farm. He would get a nurse in to look after her for the next two weeks. By then, some plan must present itself to him.

The next afternoon, Esther awakened, tremulously smiling. The starched nurse standing indulgently by, Sarah Wales laid the baby in Esther's arms against her round young breast.

"He looks just like Len, doesn't he?" Esther whispered, looking at her son with eyes shining wet.

Mrs. Wales chuckled. "I didn't have the pleasure of knowing your husband," she said, with an air of conscious propriety, "but he must have been a real good-lookin' man to have such a son!"

Presently, when the nurse had carried him off, Esther looked up thoughtfully at Sarah Wales.

"Mrs. Wales," she said, "you've been so awfully good to me."

"Well," Mrs. Wales said. "I was kind of in your fix when my own boy Cyril was born. My husband was a house painter, and he misreckoned a step on a scaffolding, shortly before Cyril came into the world. But I couldn't break down then. I knew I owed it to Cyril to be strong and brave, because I just felt it in my bones that he was going to be something good in the world. And I wasn't disappointed."

"Did you have to work to support your little boy, Mrs. Wales?" Esther said hesitantly.

"Indeed I did! And I loved doing it, too. But I was very lucky. I got a place where I could have him with me—the whole time—nice people they were, with one child of their own. Our two boys grew up together."

Esther's eyes dreamt softly into a measureless distance. "I want to do everything for my baby, too," she said, just audibly. "I want him to have a chance to be something in the world. Leonard would have been. He was going to take a night school course in engineering, after we had enough put by. Oh, Leonard—" Her voice fell to a muffled sob, her head turning suddenly upon the pillow so that her rich hair tumbled over her face.

"There, there, now!" Mrs. Wales said soothingly, and reached over to stroke Esther's arm.

Esther's gaze looked intently at the older woman.

"Will you do something for me, Mrs. Wales?" she said.

"Anything, my dear."

"Will you telephone Hildred Kelso and ask her to come in and see me when she can?"

"That I will," Mrs. Wales replied heartily. "Though maybe I ought to ask doctor about it first. He thinks you oughtn't to have any visitors just right away. He especially said the Clarkes shouldn't be let in for—"

"I know. I don't want to see them."

"Your cousin's wife must be a hussy," Mrs. Wales laughed. "Doctor was real sharp with her on the phone this morning. When he gets angry—"

"But Hildred is nice," Esther said.

"Oh, yes. She's a dear soul, from all I hear. And she'll want to see the baby right off, I know—especially after her losin' her own the way she did. She's one the doctor wouldn't mind comin', I'm sure. I'll talk to the nurse about it, and then I'll telephone."

Hildred came down the stairs in Brant Henderson's house, after her visit with Esther. The nurse had permitted her only a peep at the baby, who was sleeping, contented and plump and pink, in his clothes basket. Hildred felt as if she were walking through some curious trance. It would be just as well if she left the house before Brant got home; she didn't feel quite equal to meeting him just now. Mrs. Wales had hung her wraps in the hall closet. She would get them and go. The outer door opened and Brant came in.

"Hildred!" Through the dusk he looked at her in a startled way, the color deepening on his cheekbones. Only then did it occur to her that it was over a month since she had seen him last.

She smiled at him, puckered her brows. “You aren’t going to be cross with me, are you? I couldn’t wait until tomorrow to see the baby.”

“Your interest is rather sudden,” he said brusquely.

“It’s hard for you to be fair, isn’t it, Brant?” She walked ahead of him into the living room.

“Sorry, Hildred,” he said, more gently. “Sit down a minute, won’t you?”

Hildred seated herself on the divan, and Brant took a chair.

Hildred leaned toward him. “Brant, if you will please relax for a minute and try not to look like a thundercloud—”

He laughed wryly and ran his hand over one temple. “Would you like me to shake up a cocktail? You’re the last person I expected to see here today. It might be in order to celebrate the event.”

“No, thanks, Brant. I’ve been having a talk with Esther. Listen—and please try to understand me, Brant. I’ve done something you may not understand—and I don’t know how Jim will take it. I don’t care very much. But I’m going to have Esther and the baby come to live with us as soon as she can leave here. Hedvig is going to be married next month, and Esther will take her place. I’ve talked it over with her and she seems to be very happy about it. It’s completely settled!”

Brant looked at her with conflicting emotions. His first spontaneous feeling of gratitude and relief was clouded by the unreadable expression of Hildred’s face. Her eyes, that had always been so limpidly candid, seemed to be obscured now by a veil of—what was it? Irony? In offering Esther a home, was she motivated by something other than pure generosity?

“I don’t know quite what to make of you,” he began haltingly.

“Don’t try to make anything of me,” she said, a touch of weariness in her voice.

“H-m-m! You say you don’t know how Jim will take to the idea. You mean you two haven’t discussed it?”

“No. But I feel sure he’ll agree to it. The situation is slightly different now, you know, from what it was last winter. Esther wants a job, and I happen to have one for her. So, you see, it’s not merely a gesture on my part.”

“You’re sure you want the baby in the house?” he asked doubtfully.

“I’d adore it, Brant!” She gave him a swift smile, then got up and stretched out her hand to him. “Tell me you approve—it would help just to know that.”

He stood looking down at her hand within his own. Then he raised his eyes to her face, and forced a smile. “You know I’m all for it. I’ll even talk to Jim about it, if you want me to.”

“No, please, I’d rather you wouldn’t.”

“You’re right. I’ve been wondering all day what to do about that girl. Well—it’s damned decent of you, Hildred. I must confess I didn’t think you had it in you—”

“Please, Brant! How much *do* you know about me? How much have you ever taken the trouble to find out?”

He could feel his cheeks reddening again, and detested himself. “I guess I’ve been pretty disagreeable, eh?”

“Well—I guess I’ve been cowardly.” She paused, then said, “Don’t you think we might forget it?”

He laughed companionably. “Good idea, Hildred!”

“I—oh, let’s not talk about it!” She shook her head in a queerly impatient way, and Brant thought he saw the glint of tears in her eyes. “I’ve got to go now,” she said hastily. “Drive out soon, won’t you?”

“How about tomorrow night, if you’re home?”

“We’ll be home. I’ll tell Jim.”

**N**ovember came, with the fine spun gold haze of Indian summer over field and woodland, the sky a softer blue, the horizon’s curve half-lost in a magical shine of distance.

On one of these mornings, Hildred walked with the two setters across country to the marsh land bordering Kelso Hill farm on the north, and sat for a long time on a dry hummock where she could watch the muskrats at work building their winter huts of sticks and straw.

Looking southward over the rolling fields that had for generations belonged to Jim’s family, Hildred thought how simple it was to understand the Kelsos here, and on a day like this. Scorning echoes of wars and rumors of wars, depressions, recessions and all the ills that flesh is heir to, they believed in having children. They believed that their blood was the good blood of America which should go forward again to America and insure its vigorous future. They loved to see the steady family blue of their own eyes shining back at them from the eyes of their children. The Kelsos *were* the land—and the

land was the Kelsos. Odd, she mused, how she could think of that now, with a detached admiration, with no sense of self-pity.

Was it, she wondered, because she had stood so well the self-imposed test of having Esther Clement and her child at Kelso Hill? She doubted if even Brant Henderson had ever guessed that in offering them a home she had wanted to prove to herself whether or not her marriage to Jim Kelso was, after all, a mockery. She would discover now what her own feelings toward childlessness were. She would know whether in her heart there lingered a bitterness she would never be able to conquer. If she found this to be so, she would have to admit to herself that she was no life companion for the man she had married. Well, she had stood the test. She had steeled herself against any maudlin yearning over Esther's child—had pretended in the presence of others merely a normal, affectionate and half-amused interest in the youngster. Sometimes she had caught Brant's eyes upon her curiously, but even that ordeal she had withstood.

As for Jim, his attitude toward the change in the household had been one almost of indifference. The truth was, probably, that he had been too occupied with the heavy fall work at Kelso Hill to be much concerned with its domestic status.

She looked across the fields now and saw a great flock of blackbirds wheel in significant symmetry. Winter was coming. Winter—when they would be closed in together, day after day, she and Jim and Esther and her son.

**S**he got up now and walked to the roadside, the dogs bounding joyously ahead. A car was coming.

"Blarney!" she called sharply. "Sham—come back here!"

The dogs doubled on their tracks, and the car came to a stop. Brant Henderson leaned out of the car window and smiled at Hildred.

"Hi, there! What are you doing so far from home?"

Hildred stood close to the wire fence that marked the edge of the field. "This isn't far. Are you going to the house?"

"I thought I'd look in on Esther's kid. Do you want a lift back?"

"If you'll hold this wire up so I can crawl under it," Hildred said.

He stepped down from the car and hopped across the shallow, dry ditch. "I was up north on a nasty gangrene job for Strickland this morning," he said as he lifted the lower strand of wire and held it while Hildred bent low among the



dry weeds.

“Doesn’t Doctor Strickland go out on his own cases?” she asked.

His smile was sardonic. “Doctor Strickland is a very busy man. He happens to be interested in this case, and sent me out to arrange to have it brought in to the hospital.” They had come to the side of the car. “Put the hounds in the back seat.”

The dogs jumped in, and Hildred took her place beside Brant. A year ago, she realized, she would have felt ill at ease so close to him, but now she looked down consideringly upon his strong, brown hands gripping the wheel. He had been so friendly since Esther had come to live at Kelso Hill. The obscure sense of strain she had felt with Brant had disappeared, and in its place there had gradually come a warmth which seemed to grow out of some unexpressed and secret conspiracy between them.

Still, she could not help but recall the two or three disturbing occasions when she had turned her head suddenly and found Brant’s eyes upon her with a strange, resentful hunger. He had always looked away quickly, his face drawn stonily blank, yet the expression had been there and had brought a sting of color to her cheeks. She had refused to admit the possibility that Brant Henderson was in love with her—in spite of Doctor Casey’s brusque admonitions. Yet—

There had been the night of the Hallowe’en dance in the big Kelso barn loft—fiddles and accordions, pumpkins and strung cobs of golden corn, quadrilles and schottisches, lusty country merriment, with most of the Kelsos there. The Kelsos had been as naïve as children in their approval of what Hildred had done for Esther Clement. Now, perhaps, Jim’s wife would see what it meant to have a child in the house. She might even be won over to having one of her own. Hildred knew what they were thinking. But it was not of them she thought at this moment, while she rode along the highway. It was of the odd feeling that had come to her that night when she had danced with Brant Henderson in the barn loft. It had been a feeling of physical awareness that startled her at the time—the more so because she knew that Brant shared it with her.

As the car came to the end of the drive, she could see Jim and two of the men pitching straw down from a big truck and onto a huge stack that was shaping up beside the main barn. Esther Clement had come down the hill and was standing beside the truck looking up at Jim. All at once he hoisted a great forkful of straw and tossed it down on her head. Jim’s shout of laughter followed Esther’s shriek of surprise.

Brant stopped his car and laughed too, then looked at Hildred with a sudden awareness. Hildred felt the painful warmth flow into and ebb out of her face.

Was Brant thinking, she wondered—as she herself was thinking just then—that Jim would never indulge in any such merry horseplay with her?

It was a winter of tremendous snows. By dint of unflagging effort, Jim and his men kept the Kelso road passable to the highway so that the milk trucks could get in and out. During the months of January and February, however, visitors at Kelso Hill were few and far between, and Hildred and Esther had really very little to occupy their time in the green-shuttered house above the bare dark whips of the Lombardy poplars.

Fields and meadow lands had become one indistinguishable mask of white, blinding to the eyes when the sun shone. Hildred had managed one day to walk south to the oak and birch wood, a sack of suet, shelled corn and dried bread under her arm for the birds and small creatures who must be foraging desperately for food. She had returned exhausted, her underclothing soaked with perspiration, and for three days had lain in bed with an ignominious cold.

Jim scolded her for what she had done, and against her protest telephoned Brant Henderson to come out and look her over. When Brant came she peered up at him guiltily from beneath a mountain of comforters.

“So,” Brant grunted, “you had to risk pneumonia to feed the chickadees!” He thrust a thermometer under her tongue, and folded his fingers about her wrist.

Hildred watched him out of one eye. He looked so solicitously grim that she suddenly wanted to laugh. She did so, and the thermometer dropped from her mouth.

“Here—what’s the idea?” he demanded impatiently. “I’m not out here for fun!” He replaced the thermometer, and for an instant his fingers lingered against her lips.

I must have a fever, Hildred thought wildly. There could be no other explanation for the white, drawn change that had come over Brant’s face. In the last five seconds, she knew, her pulse had leaped. Brant’s sensitive finger on her wrist must have recorded it.

His face was quite composed when presently he said, “Unswaddle yourself, and I’ll listen to your chest.”

The stethoscope in his ears, he listened intently here and there over her exposed bosom, and did not once look at her.

“Turn over.”

“This is silly,” Hildred began. “I’m—”

“It may seem silly to you,” Brant told her, “but Jim Kelso is paying for it.”

After a few moments, he removed the stethoscope. “Better stay in bed two or three days—nothing but liquids—just as a precaution. I’ll leave some capsules.” He dug into his bag and tossed a small box on the table. “One every three hours. I’ll phone tomorrow—or come by if—”

“Please do. I’ll be all right by Sunday, won’t I?”

Brant grinned, amusedly. “You’ll be all right—when you’re all right.”

He was out of the door, thinking to himself, “A near thing, that! The hurt red of her mouth—that’s something I’ve never been able to get at, that *hurt* look of it. And the immaculate ivory of her skin! I’m a fool and a bounder.” But there was more in his thoughts than that. He had not told Hildred how pleased he had felt at seeing Esther and Jim playing with the baby downstairs when he had first come in—little Len, six months old, sitting in his diapers on the bear rug, with the two of them goggling at him like a couple of idiots! And Hildred sick, though not very sick, upstairs. This was the end of February, he thought. March is coming, and April, and spring and summer and autumn and winter, and so on for the rest of his life, of *her* life, of Jim Kelso’s life, and of. . . .

He met Jim in the lower hall, and the unreality of his own imaginings came to him with a cold shock.

“She’s all right, Jim,” he said, picking up his coat and hat from the settle. “Keep her in bed for a day or so. I gave her some dope to take. Phone you tomorrow.”

“Okay, Brant, and thanks a lot.” Jim put his hand on Brant’s shoulder. “Sure you won’t stay for supper? It’s just about ready—”

“No, I’m tied up, boy. Thanks, just the same.”

Esther was standing in the living room doorway with the young Leonard in her arms. Brant stepped over and chucked the baby under the chin and received a gurgled greeting and an experimental tiny hand.

“I’m just taking him up to bed,” Esther said. “But it’ll be a job getting him

to go to sleep. I wish you'd tell Jim he shouldn't play with him so much just before his bedtime." She laughed, frowned. "We've told him he's spoiling the baby!"

"Well, you women ought to be able to handle Jim among you," Brant said drily. "Anyhow, you look as if you could take care of yourself, Leonard, old timer! Lord, isn't he growing! So long, folks."

He went out, got into his car, and drove thoughtfully away between the high drifts piled along the roadways.

In the years that were to come, whenever Hildred saw a piecequilt, memory would sweep her back to that month of March and the glass-enclosed, heated sunporch on the south side of the house at Kelso Hill.

On one of her infrequent trips to Amaranth, she had gone with Great-grandmother Kelso to the attic of the big old house, where from trunks and boxes they had gathered hundreds of remnants and patches of materials from Kelso dresses whose wearers had long been dust. Old Timothia had exclaimed: "There's something good and honest about making a quilt, and something kind of sad and sweet, too, because if it's done right, with fine stitches and all, it's like to outlast the one who makes it. I hope you and Esther will get good luck out of making this one!"

And while she and Esther worked, during those stormy March days, fitting the pieces of calico and gingham and dainty percales to the complicated star pattern old Timothia had given them, Hildred thought of the old woman's words.

During these hours, young Leonard crawled about in his play pen nearby, a handsome and engaging infant of seven months. Jim would drop in to see them, bright-eyed, bright-cheeked from the brisk March day. He would be very offhand and hearty, stooping over the baby's play pen to ask him how many toys he had murdered since breakfast, hoisting the child into his arms to elicit crowings of boundless delight.

No, no, Hildred told herself, this had not been a mistake, this experiment of bringing Esther and the baby into the house! When she was ill last month, hadn't Jim been all tenderness and anxiety?

Yet it was one of these days, after Jim had come in and played with little Leonard, that Esther said to Hildred, as soon as they were alone again,

"Hildred, I think perhaps I ought to leave here soon."

Hildred felt something like a latch fall sharply in her heart. “Why, for goodness sake?”

“Well—” The red tip of Esther’s tongue moved over her lower lip, and her eyes were downcast. “The baby and I can’t go on living here forever. We love it here, Hildred, and nobody could be kinder than you’ve been. But—well, I’ll have to start thinking ahead. Little Len will have to have a school close by and—I don’t know. I think it would be better somehow if I could find a place in town—maybe in the city. Perhaps Senator Kelso would know somebody—”

“Oh, Esther!” Hildred laughed, “There’ll be a home here for you and Lennie as long as you live—as long as the house stands, for that matter. There’s plenty of time yet before we start talking about putting him to school. Don’t be silly, dear! Besides, you’ll be getting married again if I know—”

“Hildred, I’m not being silly,” Esther put in with sudden breathlessness. She leaned forward, her sewing falling from her hands. “I—I just have a feeling that we ought to go.”

Hildred thought, I don’t dare ask her what her real reason is. I must make light of what she is saying, treat her as if no change has come within this house where we have been held prisoners by the snow.

“Aren’t you happy here?” Hildred asked.

“Of course I’m happy, Hildred—with you—and Jim. But I don’t know—it’s just a sort of queer idea, maybe—”

Dear child, she’s trying to tell me something! Something I won’t listen to, because I won’t admit the truth of it even when I hear it!

“Well, don’t have queer ideas,” Hildred broke in sturdily. “Come on, let’s get these strips lined up.”

Esther looked down at the sections of the quilt Hildred had laid out on the floor. Without a word she got up and came over, knelt down and pensively drew the point of a small blue star more accurately into line with the larger red one which encompassed it.

**O**n the May morning when Hildred and Esther drew the last thread of the patch quilt into place, Hildred dressed in her old heather tweeds and a bright yellow beret she had worn when she first met Jim, and left the house. Though she had struggled against it, had told herself that she was being unreasonably morbid, a sense of ominous significance in the completion of the quilt had overwhelmed her. Today, watching Esther fold the quilt and pat it

affectionately down into the cedar chest, she was seized with an almost frantic desire to escape from the house that had so long enclosed them.

Outside, she called to the dogs who came bounding to meet her, then strolled down the hill toward the big barns, her heart beating nervously.

Jim was at work somewhere among the barns. "Maybe he'll leave his work for an hour now," she told herself tensely. "He can if he wants to. We used to walk together in the woods—we used to go on rambling, lazy drives, anywhere, anywhere, it didn't matter. Please, Jim—just an hour with me! I'm Hildred. Remember? Please remember, my own dear Jim!"

He came striding toward her from a silo upon which he had been doing some repair work. "Hullo! Well, aren't you a sight for any man's eyes! Where'd you get that outfit?"

He laid his hand on the smooth yellow crown of the tiny beret, grinned admiringly. Within Hildred's breast a leaden weight swung, grew still.

"Oh, this is just an old thing I found at the bottom of a trunk," she said bitterly. "The dogs and I are going down to the south woods, darling. Couldn't you sneak off for an hour and come along?"

He looked heavily rueful, threw out a hand toward the scaffolding. "We're right in the middle of this job, Hildred. Can't you wait till—"

"Oh, never mind, Jim. I just thought perhaps—but it doesn't matter. Come on, Sham! Blarney!"

"You'll be back for lunch, won't you?" Jim called anxiously after her. Anxiously, and—what else? Confusedly, blunderingly. Not even knowing, in his simplicity, that day after day he had been growing more evasive, more oblique with her!

She waved back at him without turning, so that he would not see the rush of tears that blinded her.

The half mile walk to the woods should not have been so tiring, she thought, as she sat down at last in the thin and sweet-smelling shade of a scrub oak thicket at the fringe of taller trees and closed her eyes. The dogs, who had been far afield, returned and flopped panting beside her. When Hildred presently opened her eyes and looked into the deeper stand of trees, she could see hepaticas, anemones, and a delicately matted bed of arbutus starring bravely up through the damp brown scales of old leaves. The old road, little used now, would soon be obliterated in weeds. It had been a dusty trail four years ago, when Hildred had first come here in search of wild flowers.

A sound reached her from beyond a curve where the old trail was lost among the trees. Presently a car, rather old and familiar, came cautiously around the bend and drew alongside her. Brant Henderson leaned from the door of the car, his eyes twinkling.

“This smacks of intrigue,” he declared. “Don’t tell me it’s all accidental.”

Hildred laughed. “You’re the only one who can tell why you’re here.”

“I was over at McPherson’s. This way I can save at least three miles back to town. Besides, I have a feeling for old roads—very rare among professional men.”

Hildred had got to her feet. “Why not get out and really enjoy it?”

They sat down together on a grassy shoulder under the trees. Hildred was aware of a disturbing mixture of gladness and something that was almost fear. She felt she might easily burst into inexplicable tears.

Brant offered her a cigarette, but she refused it. She would not betray her feelings in the trembling of her fingers. He smoked in silence for a while, his eyes distant with thought.

“Something must be coming over me, Hildred,” he said finally. “The last few times I’ve seen you, I’ve had a mad desire to tell you the story of my life.” He laughed shortly. “That’s a bad sign in a man.”

“You’ll find me a good listener, Brant.”

“The time, as the saying is, is not yet ripe for that.”

“You love being mysterious, don’t you?”

He kept his narrowed eyes straight ahead. “I hate mystery. There’s nothing I’d rather do than tell you everything I know about myself. When I saw you just now, I wanted to do just that. Perhaps because you had a look in your face which made me think that maybe we’d both feel a bit better if we could only bring ourselves to make a fair exchange of whatever it is that’s being kept locked away from the rest of the world.”

He threw his cigarette into the road and glanced at her. “I’m talking like a fool, Hildred. And in broad daylight.” He looked away quickly as he saw the tears start in Hildred’s eyes. “Go ahead and cry, if you want to. But what is it that’s getting you down? Is it having Esther’s kid in the house? I’ve suspected something of the sort, you know. Partly because you’ve always seemed rather indifferent to the kid.”

Hildred angrily whipped the tears from her cheeks. “Why shouldn’t I? What else have I seen among the Kelsos but a perfectly drooling sentimentality over children? You’d think every one they brought into the world was a flaming genius of some kind! Why—I—I detest the whole family!”

“Easy, Hildred,” Brant admonished her. “We can’t dismiss the whole business with hard words. It’ll stand thinking over—and talking over.” He laid a hand lightly over hers. “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll come around tonight and have dinner with you and Jim. Maybe we can have a little talk that might lead somewhere—without being too blunt about it, eh?”

“Maybe.” She could hardly speak. “Come for dinner, anyhow.”

He got up and saluted her, his face grave with a sympathy she found herself resenting. “S’long, then!”

Then he was gone in his old, honest-looking car. Why didn’t he get himself a new car? What was he doing with his money? She couldn’t help thinking again of that woman he had spoken of once—the one she had seen him with in the roadhouse.

The moist May air from the open windows of Jim Kelso’s house was freighted with the smell of lilacs. In the dusk of the living room, Hildred sat at the piano playing a Welsh lullaby she had heard years ago.

Leaning forward slightly in his chair, Brant Henderson could see Jim’s eyes fixed intent and somber upon Esther Clement, who sat in the deep rocker Hildred had placed in the room for her months ago. The curly haired, nine-month old boy was being lulled to sleep in Esther’s arms while Hildred sang in a voice that moved on moth wings. . . .

Jim Kelso could no longer draw the wool over Brant’s eyes. The primal yearning for paternity, which was his Kelso heritage, was implicit in the abstraction with which he stared at the silhouette of Esther and her child.

And Hildred? In spite of her rebellious outburst that morning Brant saw in her now little more than a faintly derisive tolerance toward Jim’s absorption in Esther’s son. Was there something profoundly bitter and perverse in Hildred, which Brant, who loved her as he knew now he had never loved any woman, could not guess? If he could only tell her everything—and hope to receive in return a full knowledge of her secret heart! He had come here tonight in the hope that something might be said that might open the way to a complete understanding for them all. But everything in this house, among these people, seemed fixed in a perpetual, bright glaze. The decision came upon him suddenly that he could not endure it any more.



Esther rose softly and carried the little boy, flushed with sleep in the rounded lee of her breast, out of the room. She paused just perceptibly to incline her head with a smile toward Brant and Jim. Trailing sunset light caught the ruddy gleam of her rich, careless hair, her full, contented mouth. Lord, Brant thought, she's beautiful as a woman ought to be beautiful! Not for me—for me all that is over. But for men like Jim.

Hildred's smile at Brant was serene—too serene. He glanced at his watch.

"I promised to look in on old Mrs. Bratrud," he said, grateful for any excuse to get away. "Sorry I have to beat it, but it was a darned good dinner, Hildred."

"We loved having you, Brant," Hildred assured him.

She stood very straight against the ebony of the piano, whiter than usual in her white dress.

Jim got up from his chair. "Well, drop around whenever you can, old boy. I'd insist on your staying for an hour or so, but I'm selling some Swiss calves, and the fellow is coming out to close the deal tonight."

**B**rant was half a mile down the road toward Amaranth when his motor gave a clanking rattle and he knew that a bearing had gone again. A new car, he thought drily, or a new doctor for the town of Amaranth, perhaps—either alternative would be an improvement. But right now, he had to walk back to the farm and borrow one of Jim's cars.

When he came into the yard, there was still a streak of tulip yellow left behind the barns and silos and their infringing trees. He preferred to avoid Hildred, so he went directly to the barns where lights showed that work was still going on.

"Jim checked up a little while ago," the foreman told him. "I think he went over to the new wing where they've got the calves they're going to sell. There'll be somebody over there anyhow."

"Thanks. I'll just cut through the south barn."

"The south ain't lit," the man said, "but you'll make it all right if you don't fall into one of the stanchions."

Brant soon found that it had been a mistake for him to take the short cut to the main barn through the outmoded and scarcely used one on the south. In the redolent dusk a few work horses stamped and rubbed themselves against their stalls, so that Brant's step on the straw-matted aisle between the stalls was

indistinguishable from other sounds in the barn. The two human figures, standing locked into one and swaying a little as if in some madly ecstatic rhythm, came into Brant's view before he reached that last stall.

He turned on his heel and retraced his steps.

Out of doors, he breathed deep yet thought he did not breathe. He glanced up and saw, without really seeing, that the spring sky had plucked out some stars for itself.

So—it had come to that. Jim and Esther! He might have known. The deep-bosomed woman, the bearing woman, the red dark earth from which Jim Kelso himself *had* sprung. And he, Brant Henderson, had been to blame. For it had been he who had first suggested Hildred's taking Esther into the house.

**H**e pulled himself up with the thought of old Mrs. Bratrud. Her arthritis was still there, no matter what was wrong with him, with Brant Henderson, the physician. He had no desire now to see Jim. He did not want to see Hildred. But he had to get a car to take him to town. There was nothing for it but to go up to the house and speak to Hildred.

"Mrs. Kelso just took some white lilacs up to the top landing, doctor," said the cook, who admitted Brant.

"Thanks. I'll run up and speak to her a minute."

Hildred was not in the broad upper hall, where fresh white lilacs stood in blue earthenware vases at the open windows. The doors were all open, except the one to the room occupied by Esther and the baby. Brant opened the door of that room.

He opened it, and then stood motionless. Hildred was sitting on the floor, the child in her arms. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She looked up at Brant, and instantly the color drained from her face. Then with great care she got up and placed the child in his crib.

"I'm sorry Hildred," Brant apologized. "I didn't mean—"

"What brings you back?" she demanded. "I thought I might spend a minute here—by myself—without being spied on."

Brant took a step through the doorway. "Hildred—I'm not spying on you. My car broke down and I just walked back to see if I could borrow your station wagon to get into town. I didn't see Jim downstairs, and I came up looking for you."

Hildred's face worked pitifully toward control. "Well—you can go and take the car. It's in the garage." Something within her seemed suddenly to give way. "Don't stand there looking at me!" she cried.

Brant went into the room, sat down on the edge of the bed, and leaned forward, clasping his hands.

"For a long time, Hildred," he said slowly, "I've known there was something—something I couldn't quite get at—in all this. I think I know now what it is. You should have told me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said defiantly, tilting her head back. All at once she seemed to shrink down, small and away from him, until there was nothing of her but the dark panic of her eyes.

Brant got up. His hands were not quite steady on her shoulders as he forced her to look at him. "You know what I mean, I think—"

For a few seconds, then, while her gaze was fixed upon him, she seemed not to breathe. Then he felt the suspicious stiffening of her body, the scornful mistrust returning.

"I don't know—and I don't think I care," she told him. "And I think you'd better go."

"I'm not going," he replied doggedly. "If you won't tell me what the truth is, I'll tell you. You can't have a child of your own. Isn't that true?"

He had not raised his voice beyond the level of a toneless compassion, but Hildred's lashes and the corners of her mouth whipped back.

When she did not reply at once, Brant asked, "Have you told Jim?"

"Do you think I could have lived with him all this time without telling him?" she replied in swift fury.

**H**e stepped back in blank astonishment, reddening slowly. "Forgive me, Hildred. I should have known better than to ask you that. I—I've been sort of knocked off my pins tonight." He ran one hand distractedly through his hair. He tried to smile at her. "I seem to have a knack of putting my foot in it, just when I least want to. I'm sorry I mentioned it to you at all. I'll get out now and go about my business."

She wavered toward him, her hands lifted in a curious awkwardness.

"No, Brant, no!" she said huskily. "Don't say that. I would have told you long ago, but—I've been so vain. I wouldn't let Jim tell anyone. I wanted a

child, Brant—you can't possibly know how much I've wanted a child of my own. When I knew I could never have one, I was afraid to have anyone know about it. I believe I was more afraid of *your* finding out about me than I was of letting the Kelsos know. I can't understand that—perhaps it's because you have always been Jim's good friend, and I was afraid you might think I had done something dishonest in marrying him. I don't know."

"That's something you must settle with yourself, Hildred," Brant said.

"It wasn't quite so simple as that. I wasn't sure myself. What happened to me was no fault of mine. I hoped desperately that I could have a child with Jim—and you know what happened. I made Casey promise not to tell you. Sometime, I may tell you more about it—only, please try to understand me a little."

They were standing several feet apart, staring into each other's eyes.

"I believe you, Hildred," he said. "Partly, I suppose, because I *want* to believe you. I've never wanted to think anything of you but the best." That was true, he told himself. He had never wanted to think anything but the best of Jim Kelso, either, and now—a surge of pity for them all swept over him. Pity for Jim and Esther and Hildred—even for himself. "Don't you know what has stood between us—from the very first?" he demanded abruptly. "I've been in love with you ever since I saw you come down the stairway to face the whole Kelso tribe at the diamond wedding. I'm in love with you still. That's why I haven't been coming here as often as I might have come. That's why I've decided not to come here again. From now on, at least, you and I will understand each other."

He saw Hildred turn away, one hand groping along her cheek in a gesture of helplessness. "Oh, Brant, I—" Her voice was broken. "I think you'd better go now—please. I don't want to cry again."

Yes, he would go, of course. And Jim would come in, plausible and hearty and Hildred would never know that he and Esther had been in each other's arms. That was the sort of thing that passed for marriages. Brant felt a certain pride in the fleeting thought that he himself had not known that kind of marriage. What he had known had had about it a fervent dignity, though neither church nor judge had had a hand in it. But that was nine years ago. . .

"I'll go," he said, and felt a gray hopelessness envelope him. "I'm taking the station wagon into town. I'll see that it gets back somehow."

And in a moment he was out of the room.

When Jim came into the house an hour later, Hildred was reading in a deep chair in the living room. She looked up at him with a composed smile and began to frame the words with which she would lightly touch upon Brant's return for the car, making it all very casual and of no importance. Of Brant's confession she would say nothing. Brant would get over his feeling for her, of course . . . she could not bear the thought of coming between two men who had been friends so long. There was something tawdry in that threadbare situation.

So engrossed had she been with her own thoughts that as Jim took a chair beside her the desperate expression of his face startled her.

"Hildred," he blurted out, "I have to tell you something."

The knuckles of one of his big hands whitened into the palm of the other. A quick chill crept about Hildred's heart. Instantly she remembered having heard Esther go upstairs a half hour ago. Why hadn't she come in to say goodnight? All the past weeks of the spring, during which Hildred had valiantly denied, again and again, the fear that had been growing within her, surged forward now, and she knew there was no use in any further denial.

"It's Esther, Jim, isn't it?" she asked with infinite quiet.

His look of humble gratitude to her for putting the awful thing into words, wrenched at her inmost being so that she felt momentarily faint. With a supreme effort she forced herself to sit erect.

"I don't know how it happened, Hildred!" he exclaimed miserably. "When you and I started our life together, I wanted it to go on—to grow into something big and—well, beautiful. I didn't think a thing like this *could* happen. But—I've got to be honest with you. I've got to be honest with myself. We've both tried to fight it, but we—we just couldn't seem to help it. It's something we have no control over, I guess. Oh, Lord—I'm just a big lout."

Suddenly, he leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. Hildred rose, stood above him and gently stroked his hair.

"Please listen to me, Jim," she said softly, her throat aching so that she could scarcely speak. "You mustn't blame yourself for what has happened. People make mistakes. If we have made our mistake, we're old enough to see it—and young enough to correct it. We've had a little while together, and it has been a wonderful time in so many ways. Knowing what we know now, it would be madness to go along together, hoping for what we know can never be. You and Esther were made for each other, Jim. She's your kind of woman."

I'm not. It isn't our fault altogether that we didn't know that four years ago, but it would be our fault if we didn't recognize it now. I shall always think of you and Esther—"

She felt herself sway a little, strangely light and disembodied. She put a hand out to the back of a chair and steadied herself. Jim groped up and took her arm.

"You mean—you want to go away?" he asked.

All at once, Hildred thought wildly of Brant Henderson, the contradictory steeliness and heat of him—the hard, rarely-given metal as against the facile earthiness of Jim Kelso. Her heart throbbed in a bewildering need of Brant, of his brusque reassurance that somewhere on earth there was a place for a woman like herself.

"Let's not talk any more tonight," she said vaguely.

She only half heard his confused reply. As she turned away and moved slowly and carefully up the stairs, a memory came vividly into her mind. Old Aunt Maria, on the first evening when she had met all the Kelsos at the diamond wedding party, had said something about a "flowering tree" . . .

**B**rant Henderson was still at home early the next morning when Hildred drove up to the front of his house.

He had tossed sleeplessly most of the night, wrestling with the emotional chaos into which he had been plunged again after all these years of self-discipline. He would have to leave Amaranth. Escape, again! There was his old friend Phillips, out in Oregon, still urging him to come out and putter around with his elusive glands and hormones. . . . Yes, escape, again!

He was amazed now, when he opened the door and saw Hildred standing there with brilliant eyes and stiffly smiling lips.

"Well—what's this?" he demanded.

"May I come in for a minute?" she asked, a little catch in her laugh. "I'm on my way up to see Casey and I thought—"

"Come in, come in!"

She wore a swagger hat of cherry red felt, a flannel suit of dove gray with a red stock tie. Mechanically Brant noted these things.

"On your way up to see Casey," he said absently, his eyes searching her face. "What's the meaning—"

“You see everything, Brant,” she said evenly, her lips determinedly smiling. “I don’t need explain to you. It’s Jim and Esther—and me—of course. Jim told me last night.”

Brant sat down heavily in his chair. “Well, there’s no use in my trying to appear ignorant,” he said. “I was sure he’d come to you about it sooner or later. But—of course—you must have known.”

“I knew.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll go to Aunt May’s for a while—until we get things straightened out. After that—I suppose I’ll go back—”

“When are you leaving?” he asked.

“In a day or two. Just as soon as I can get ready. Jim and I talked it all over quietly at breakfast this morning. I wanted to come in and tell you that—that Jim needs you for a friend now, more than he has ever needed you—more than he has ever needed anyone, Brant.”

He smiled at her and shook his head. “I don’t think you quite understand the kind of stuff Jim is made of, Hildred,” he observed. “He’s earthy. He’ll recover from this as soon as he gets out into the fields and does a good day’s work.”

As he looked at her, she crumpled forward, her arms upon the edge of his desk, her face in her hands. Brant sprang to his feet and stooped to gather her into his arms.

“Hildred, my dear!” he muttered. “Listen to me, will you? I know how hard this is for you. You think you’ve failed. But there’s one thing worse than not being able to have a child. There’s such a thing as having one—and loving it—and never being able to acknowledge it before the world.”

His voice was shaking as he held her tear-wet face up to his.

“I’ve been on the point of telling you—often, Hildred—and I can’t keep it to myself any longer.” His voice was very steady as he spoke. “I wanted to tell you yesterday afternoon, out there beside the old road. Will you listen to me now?”

She nodded her head.

“I have a daughter, Hildred. She’s almost nine years old—and she’s lovely. She lives with an old aunt of mine in the suburbs of the city. Her name is Gail.” Brant paused for a moment, then raised his voice sturdily. “Do you

remember the old woman you saw with me that night in the road tavern? That was my aunt—Beulah Frick.”

“Of course I remember her,” Hildred said, her eyes wide upon him.

Brant laughed. “She was giving me merry hell that night, because she thinks she’s getting too old to look after Gail. She thinks I should have got me a wife years ago. That night she had decided to go on strike if I didn’t do something about it before the end of the year. She goes on a strike on an average of about twice a year. I’ve managed to get her back on the job again, but it’s getting harder. That’s not the only difficulty. I had to go down one night when Gail was threatened with pneumonia, and stay with her while the hospital board met to discuss what Strickland was doing about the new wing. I wasn’t at that meeting—Strickland swung the thing his way—and Leonard Clement probably died because there wasn’t a free bed vacant in the hospital when he needed it.”

“Oh, Brant!” Hildred cried brokenly. “Why didn’t you—”

“Why didn’t I do a lot of things?” he interrupted savagely. “Because I’ve been a damned coward!”

“No, Brant!”

“**A** damned coward! Gail’s mother was a pretty little waitress in a restaurant near the hospital where I was interning. I loved her, Hildred. She was sweet, and she was good. She was very young, and she was working to save enough money to buy herself a little more education. That was how we met—talking about getting to college. I wanted to marry her—and I would have married her as soon as I could afford it.” He paused, looked briefly away. “She didn’t tell me that she was going to have a baby. She just disappeared, and for a month I was beside myself. When the time came, she got in touch with my aunt Beulah—that was where I was staying at the time. The poor kid was frightened. But Beulah was grand about it. She brought Elsie—that was her name—she brought Elsie to her home and the baby was born there. The old girl pretended to the neighbors that Elsie was the wife of another nephew of hers. They were both trying to protect me—and I let them do it! My God, Hildred, what a coward I’ve been! Elsie died the day after little Gail was born.”

Hildred’s eyes filled with tears.

“And you’ve never told anybody this?” she asked.



“More cowardice,” he said shortly. “I had dreams of a career. And Beulah insisted I should put my career above everything else. It was her idea that the child should grow up to call me Uncle Doctor. Once a man lets himself in for a lie—it’s the old story all over again. I’ve gone about for years like a whipped pup. I came away from the city, though I had an offer in the hospital there. I’ve been afraid—afraid for nine years! If it hadn’t been for that, do you suppose I’d have let old Strickland get away with what he’s been doing ever since I came here? But I didn’t dare. There’s nothing more rotten in a man’s heart than that kind of fear.”

“Oh, Brant,” Hildred said, almost under her breath. “You’ve had to live through something even worse than I’ve had to live through.”

A flush rose to Brant’s temples as he took her hands abruptly into his own. But his gray eyes had a sudden decision in them when he spoke.

“Let’s begin here—all over again, Hildred—both of us!” he said suddenly. “Drive up to the city with me—and see Gail—and old Beulah. I have a plan, believe it or not. An old pal of mine has been nagging at me for three years to join him in his work out in Oregon. You know that I’ve loved you from the very first time I set my eyes on you. I’ve already told you. But—after you’ve met Gail—maybe—can I dare to hope that you’ll come with us—and let’s start building—you and I and little Gail?”

“Brant—” She was half-crying, half-laughing. “Last night—after you had gone—I can’t tell you how it was. But it seemed to me that I saw you then, for the first time. I’m still mixed up. You’ll have to be patient with me. But—I’ll go to the city with you Brant, I will!”

He took her face into his hands, looked at her deeply; and it was Hildred who leaned forward as if in a trance and touched his lips lightly with her own. Brant put his arms about her strongly, and she felt some depth within her drift irresistibly to the haven of his warm, hard body.

They drove up beside a white cottage set back in a flower bordered lawn in the quiet suburb. Brant gave his hand to Hildred, helped her down from the car, and together they entered the picket gate. A little girl with long, straight gold hair and big brown eyes was playing with a cocker spaniel puppy on the very green grass. She jumped up and raced across the lawn to throw her arms about Brant.

“Oh, Uncle Doctor!” she cried excitedly, and then drew her breath to look shyly up at Hildred.

“Gail,” said Brant, “this is Hildred. She came just to see you. We three are going to have a house—and live together from now on, Gail.”

Gail made a curtsy, and Hildred knelt and put her arms about her. Across the child’s shoulder she looked at Brant with shining, wet eyes.

Gail studied Hildred thoughtfully a moment, then said, “You’re awfully pretty! Can you play croquet?”

Hildred laughed tremulously. “Not very well, dear, but I’ll learn to do better.”

“Run into the house, Gail and tell Auntie we’re here,” Brant said.

The child danced away across the lawn, the puppy leaping joyously up about her bare legs.

Brant took Hildred’s hands, and with a half sob she laid her head against his shoulder.

“I know now, Brant,” she whispered. “I know this is real. I love you.”

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A book cover has been created for this project.

[The end of *Wife In Law* by Martha Ostenso]