



IMPATIENT VIRGIN

"YOU'LL HAVE TO ADMIT SHE'S GOOD COMPANY!"

DONALD HENDERSON CLARKE

Author of *The Housekeeper's Daughter*, *Louis Beretti*, etc.

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TO GLADYS
Another Ex-Virgin

Impatient Virgin

CHAPTER I

Ruth Robbins struggled into the world five months after the death of her father, the Rev. Josiah D. Robbins, and two hours before the death of her mother, Loretta Hughes Robbins.

While Henrietta Wells, wife of Crosby Wells, the undertaker, was upstairs in the south bedroom, Ruth was downstairs in the kitchen, making faces at her Uncle Ben and her Aunt Katherine Robbins.

She was lying in a wicker clothes-basket, which Ben had turned into a bassinet by lining it with a flannel blanket.

“Well, Kitty,” Ben said finally, “what are we going to do with it—drown it?”

Katherine turned and looked at her brother. Then she raised her eyes and her arms towards the white kitchen ceiling.

“God help me!” she exclaimed.

“You better be asking Him how we’re going to get out from under this load of trouble,” Ben said gravely, nodding at the twisting bit of humanity. “What’ll we do—leave it on somebody’s back stoop tonight, or wait and send it to an orphan asylum after the funeral?”

Katherine lowered her head, and dropped her arms, and stared at her brother.

“Benjamin Robbins,” she said finally in measured tones, pronouncing each syllable with peculiar distinctness, “I always knew you were a fool, but I never knew that you were such a godless and heartless fool.”

“As what, Kitty?”

Ben’s blue eyes, ordinarily twinkling kindly from rosy cheeks, were sober as they returned her gaze steadily.

“As to talk like you are talking with Loretta dead upstairs, and her little motherless and fatherless baby girl lying there helpless and alone in the world, in front of you.”

Suddenly she stamped her foot on the white scrubbed boards of the kitchen floor.

“Don’t keep calling me Kitty,” she said, and exploded in tears.

“There! There! There!”

With each word, uttered in a soothing tone, Benjamin thumped Katherine on her back.

“There! There!”

She fumbled futilely at the line between her white waist and black skirt.

“Give me a handkerchief,” she sniffed. “And don’t ‘there, there’ me.”

Ben gave her a big white handkerchief from his hip pocket. She dabbed at her eyes, and at her nose, making small snuffling noises; and for a moment the only other sound in the kitchen was the hissing of steam from an iron kettle on the coal stove.

“Oh, Benjamin,” she said in a teary voice. “I wish you were different.”

“Well, for Heaven’s sakes!” her brother exclaimed. “How’m I different from other folks, Kitty? All I want to know is what we’re going to do with this baby, and you go off into a tantrum.”

“Do with the baby! Do with Ruth? If you had any sense you’d know we are going to take her and bring her up just the best we can, and better than if one of us really was her mother.”

“Or both of us were her fathers,” Ben suggested. “Now, don’t jump on me any more,” he added quickly, putting an arm around his sister’s shoulders. “The best part of life is its responsibilities, and now I’m a father to all practical purpose, I’ll have a chance to work out some of my theories.”

“You’ll never work out any of your outlandish theories on this poor baby, Benjamin Robbins. That’s the only doubt I have about taking the poor little young one—that you’ll be in the same house.”

“I always thought girls were brought up all wrong,” Ben said, taking away his arm.

“Well, you’ll have nothing to do with bringing up Ruth,” Katherine asserted.

“We’ll send her to a good private school,” Ben said.

“She’ll go to the Elm Street Grammar School and the Appleton High School just like you and I did.”

“Wanh! Wannhh! Wannh!”

Ben wheeled to the bassinet.

“Her lungs work,” he observed.

A new sound came from the bassinet.

“Both ends of her work all right,” he amended judicially.

“Benjamin Robbins!”

“You better get a diaper—or may be two diapers,” Ben advised. “But in a

day or two I'll have her house-broken, just like I train my puppies."

Katherine, who had snatched a soft roll of white cloth from the kitchen table, faced her brother.

"You dare try any of your fool notions on this baby, and you'll answer to me," she cried. "The very idea!"

"If I can train dogs I should be able to train a youngster," Ben said. "And one of the first rules is if she howls for nothing, let her howl. Train her only to howl when it's important—as when it's meal time, or a time like this, for instance."

"Benjamin Robbins," Katherine Robbins said in solemn, passionate tones, "you get out of this room."

"Aw, Kitty," Ben said, easily, "aw, Kitty, there is some sense in what I'm saying. Of course I wasn't thinking of rubbing a baby's nose in it, or of smacking her with a folded up newspaper—although," he brightened a bit, "that might not be such a bad idea at that."

"Benjamin," Katherine said coldly, "I've heard enough."

"I'll be back in a jiffy," Ben said, opening the door, and letting into the kitchen a chill breath of late November air, and an odor of disinfectants from the hall.

"The further you keep away from this baby the better chance she's got," Katherine said, unfastening necessary safety pins.

Ben stopped on the other side of the threshold, and pushed the door open wide enough to allow him to stick his head back into the kitchen.

"That baby is going to be a Twentieth Century Girl," he said, "if her Uncle Ben doesn't do anything else in the world."

The door closed abruptly on the words. Katherine gazed with swimming blue eyes at the unresponsive panels. Then she looked down at the tiny red, wrinkled caricature of humanity in the bassinet. A tear finally splashed from one of her cheeks onto a miniature foot.

"Oh, Ruth," she whispered in a voice like a prayer, "we are going to have an awful time with your Uncle Benjamin."

CHAPTER II

“Help! Uncle Ben! Uncle Ben!”

Ben held the knob behind him so that the front door through which he had just emerged wasn't entirely closed. His niece, in a fleecy white cloak and white wool cap, squirmed to get past him, and into the house. Her big blue eyes under yellow hair were tearful.

“Hurry and let me in, Uncle Ben. Hurry!”

A snowball squashed against white clapboards a few inches from Ben's head. A half-dozen others spatted on the porch. A score of youthful voices out on the walk yelled:

“Tattletale! Tattletale! Hanging to the bull's tail.”

“What's the matter, Ruthy?” Ben asked.

“Oh, let me in, Uncle Ben,” Ruth said. “They'll hurt me.”

“What's the matter?” Ben repeated, putting a big hand under her soft chin, and tilting up her flushed face.

Ruth's words came in a rush.

“I told Miss White that George Smith was passing a note to Myron Brown. And the other children have been chasing me home from school.”

“So, you tattled, did you, Ruthy?” Ben asked pleasantly enough. “Well, I guess you'd better go right back down the steps and take your medicine.”

Ben took Ruth under the arms, and dropped her gently off the porch into the banked snow beside the walk. Ruth was dumb. Her mouth worked, but it gave forth no sound. She looked up piteously at her uncle, but saw what an older person might have catalogued as the smile of a scientist enjoying an experiment. Certainly there was no sympathy for her.

The boys and girls, making or throwing snowballs, hesitated, as if paralyzed. They stared first at Ben, and then at Ruth. Ben stepped back into the front hall, and closed the door, leaving the porch vacant. By the time his face was visible through an adjoining parlor window, pursuers had pounced upon quarry.

“Wash her face!”

“Stick it down her back!”

“Let's push her headfirst into a snow bank.”

“Ouch! Wow! She's scratching!”

“Help! Leggo my hair.”

“It ain't fair, twenty pitchin' into one.”

“Hey! Look out, Myron; it was you she tattled on.”

“Come on, George,” Myron yelled. “We ain't cowards, anyhow. Let's lick

the cowards!”

Ruth was on her feet, half smothered with snow. Tommy Doty was looking ruefully at a long scratch on his right hand from which crimson drops were oozing. Myron’s sister, Sally, was weeping, and holding her hand to her torn hat and disarranged hair. Ruth, eyes shining, and cheeks redder than ever, was trying to stuff snow down the neck of Norman Ellis.

“Come on, Ruthy,” George screamed cheerfully. “We’ll lick ’em. Myron and you and me. The dirty cowards!”

“Dirty cowards!”

Ruth and Myron repeated the battle cry.

But no one fought. The others looked helplessly at Myron and George and Ruth, and then looked as helplessly at each other.

“I’ll tell you what,” Ruth said. “Myron and George and I will build a fort, and then the rest of you attack us.”

Ben left the window in the front parlor just in time to be between the front door and Katherine as she stepped from the bottom tread of the front stairs. Katherine was breathing hard; there were red patches on each cheek. She was in a flowered orchid-and-green kimono, and her hair was down.

“You let me out that door, Benjamin Robbins.”

“What do you want to go out for? You ain’t dressed for going out.”

“You!” Katherine exclaimed.

“What?” Ben asked.

“Words fail me.”

Katherine made a quick attempt to reach the doorknob, but Benjamin easily thwarted her by merely failing to move his two hundred pounds net. She gripped his coat sleeve with both of her hands and shook vigorously. If he had been lighter and she had been heavier, he, rather than she, might have been shaken.

“What’s the excitement, Kitty?” Ben asked.

Katherine glared at him. She swallowed once or twice, and then her eyes filled with tears. Her mouth worked, as if she were controlling her weeping muscles.

“It’s bad enough . . . you bribing Ruth . . . to brush her teeth . . . but teaching her to fight like a hoodlum,” she said, spacing the words between hard breaths. “And don’t call me Kitty!” she exclaimed in a rush.

“There! There!”

Ben punctuated his sedative words with a brotherly thump on his sister’s back.

“I’m not teaching Ruthy to fight.”

“I don’t know what you call it, but I saw her running home frightened half to death, and you put her out there to fight. Yes, you did. And don’t deny it!”

“I didn’t put her out there to fight,” Ben replied. “I just fixed affairs so that she could meet her responsibilities. A woman, naturally, must meet her responsibilities in life just as well as a man.”

“Responsibilities! Well, I declare.”

“She tattled in school,” Ben explained. “Told the teacher about some boys who were passing notes.”

“Well, Benjamin Robbins,” Katherine said shrilly, “the boys hadn’t any business passing notes, and Ruth was merely doing her duty reporting it. It was just the same as if you saw a burglary and reported it to the police.”

“Hell!” Ben objected amiably. “Burglary’s a crime, and passing notes in school is a sport. This is my method of making a note-passer instead of a tattler out of Ruthy.”

“Don’t call her Ruthy, Benjamin. Her name is Ruth.”

“All right, Kitty.”

“And don’t call me Kitty,” Katherine exclaimed, stamping her foot. “How many times have I got to tell you that I detest Kitty; it’s a weak, namby-pamby name. And I won’t have it, Benjamin!”

“All right,” Benjamin said.

“I’ll do something desperate,” Katherine said.

“All right,” Benjamin repeated, agreeably.

“Teaching a little orphan girl to fight—and your own brother’s daughter, too.”

“One of the biggest lessons any one has to learn in the world is to mind his—or her—own business,” Benjamin stated. “And this is Ruthy’s lesson.”

Katherine looked up piteously at Ben.

“Oh, Benjamin,” she wailed. “How am I ever going to raise Ruth to be a lady, if you always are spoiling everything?”

“Come here, Kitty,” Benjamin said. “And don’t kick if I call you Kitty, or Katy, or Susie Snodgrass, either. Susie Snodgrass is a nice name at that.”

“It’s terrible,” Katherine sighed. “How can you be so common, Benjamin?”

“Come here, Susie Snodgrass,” Benjamin said, masterfully.

He pulled her gently through the white painted door lintels into the front parlor. He led her to the window, pulled aside the lace curtains, and poked her face up near the pane, frosted on the edges. He peeped over her shoulder.

Ruth and the other boys and girls were rolling three big snowballs.

“They’re going to make a snow man, I guess,” Benjamin said.

“What has that to do with teaching Ruth to fight?” Katherine demanded.

“Well,” Ben said, “most troubles in life turn out to be nothing but snow men, if we only go out and meet ’em, instead of running away from ’em.”

“But——,” Katherine began.

“Now don’t do any butting,” Ben interrupted, “we’d better get Ruthy in.”

As Ben walked quickly towards the front door, Katherine called after him:

“But what do you want Ruth to come in for just as she and her little friends are having such a good time playing a harmless game?”

Ben opened the door:

“Ahoy, there, Ruthy,” he called. “Come in a minute: I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“More bribery,” Katherine exclaimed.

“One lesson is enough for today,” Ben said, as he waited for Ruth, whose feet already were on the front steps. “So you can suggest to her that if she would take a couple of minutes to go upstairs and brush her hair, or powder her nose, or whatever you like to call it, she won’t have to take so much time out of her play to cross her legs and jump up and down.”

“Benjamin!”

“Well, even ladies have plumbing,” Ben said. “And they shouldn’t neglect it.”

CHAPTER III

Ben spent a few hours most days in his small real-estate office.

On the four acres around his seven-room frame house, he kept bees in a score of hives. The hives stood in a single row on the north side of the woodshed in the apple orchard. Ben loved nothing better than to let the bees swarm on him. When he went to their hives to collect honey, he first pumped them full of smoke from a bellows.

“A bee is one of the noblest of living creatures,” he used to say.

When a bee stung him, which was infrequently, he suffered tortures. He was particularly susceptible to the poison. But he said:

“I must have done something to the bee. It must’ve been my fault. Bees are all right. It’s us humans that are wrong, mostly.”

He had a hundred apple trees on the place—Baldwins, Northern Spies—and was one of the first to set out MacIntosh Reds. There was a tree of Golden Sweets at the most northerly end of the row of hives; and there was a tree of Early Harvests at the most southerly point. And there were Red Astrakhans, and Greenings, and single trees of many varieties. But the Baldwins, Northern Spies and MacIntosh Reds were the favorites, and he was famous for his hand-picked apples, in a day when the custom still was to barrel apples with good ones at each end of the barrel, and rotten ones in the center.

Katherine always kept a considerable number of chickens. She was judged a genius at caring for the fowls; and her kitchen more often than not was turned into a nursery for a new hatching.

Katherine also was noted for her way with flowers. Honeysuckle climbed over her front porch, where humming birds poised on hot summer days. She kept an old-fashioned flower garden and a remarkable collection of rose beds. She owned three Jersey cows, for which she cared personally, and a six-toed black cat, which she called Sir Joseph. Sir Joseph was an eunuch.

Ben had two brown water spaniels, Elmer and Gert. Elmer and Gert went for his slippers the moment Ben said the word. And either of them always was available for errands. They even fetched meat from Hooper’s Market.

“If you took as much time training yourself as you take training dogs, you might be somebody,” Katherine told him.

“You don’t see any dogs training themselves,” Ben replied. “I’m a good trainer, but a poor trainee. I was neglected in my youth.”

Ruth was a good cook before she was ten, and she made all the dresses for her dolls.

“She’ll make some man a good wife,” Katherine said.

“But she won’t be cooking and sewing for any man if I have anything to do about it,” Benjamin asserted. “Ruthy is going to be trained right. She’ll get on in the world.”

“Oh, dear, Benjamin. I don’t know what is going to happen—with you putting ideas in that poor child’s head. What is better than being a good cook, and housekeeper, and wife and mother, for a good man?”

“You’ll see, Susie,” Ben replied.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me Susie,” Katherine exclaimed a bit wearily. “Why can’t you call me by the name I was baptized?”

“It doesn’t seem brotherly,” Ben said.

That afternoon—a shimmering hot day in August—Ben harnessed his big black mare, Bertha, to the buckboard, and called for Ruth.

“Ahoy, Ruthy!”

Ruthy came running out of the milk house, where the stone floor was cool on bare feet, and climbed into the seat beside Ben.

“Giddap, Bertha,” Ben said.

In his mouth he had a corncob pipe, without which he seldom was seen unless he was asleep. And he was in shirtsleeves and suspenders.

Bertha ambled easily over the grass-lined trail which answered for a driveway, and turned into the macadam street. A horn sounded, and an automobile chugged by.

“Time is near when everything’ll be done by machinery,” Ben said. “Personally, I’d rather have kerosene, horses and wagons, back houses, and peace, than gasoline, electricity, tiled plumbing, Twentieth Century Limiteds, and excitement.”

They jogged along in silence for five minutes. Elmer and Gert were roaming happily, first on one side of the road, and then on the other.

“Where do babies come from, Uncle Ben?” Ruth asked.

“What made you ask that?”

“Well, Edith says the stork brings babies; and Aunt Katherine says the doctor brings babies; and Dr. Pease says God brings the babies; and Peter, the Browns’s hired man, says babies come right out of you. He told Myron, and Myron told me.”

Ben removed the corncob from his mouth and spat into the dust, and clucked needlessly to Bertha.

“You’ve seen how fussy I am about getting a good bull for your aunt’s cows, haven’t you, Ruthy?”

“What do you get a good bull for, Uncle Ben?”

“Shucks, Ruthy. You’ve heard me say if a bull isn’t right, the calves wouldn’t be any good, haven’t you?”

Ruth nodded, not in a very convinced manner.

“It’s the same way with dogs, and horses, and humans,” Ben continued. “You got to have good, healthy stock for the fathers and mothers, or you won’t have good children.”

“Where do they come from—the children?”

“They are made by their fathers and mothers loving each other,” Ben said. “The father has seeds in him, and the mother has eggs in her, and two seeds come together inside the mother, and then the baby grows.”

“How does it come into the world?”

“You’ve seen hens laying eggs haven’t you Ruthy?”

“But I can’t lay eggs, can I, Uncle Ben?”

“Nope,” Uncle Ben replied, grinning, “you can’t lay eggs. Hens, and birds, and fish lay eggs. But in the case of human beings, the women have the eggs inside of them, and the young grow right next to their mother’s heart, nice and warm and cosy until it’s time to be born.”

“But how . . .”

“Now listen, Ruthy,” Ben said. “I’ve agreed to tell you anything that you can understand any time you ask me, and I’ve had this question you’ve just asked figured out for some time. I’ve got a book at home I’m going to give you to read. It’s a physiology book. And it’ll tell you the details better than I can.”

“I’d rather have you tell me, Uncle Ben.”

“Well, I’d rather have you read this, and then I’ll answer any questions you have to ask me. But there’s one thing I want you always to remember.”

“What is that, Uncle Ben?”

“I want you always to remember that if we are so fussy with getting healthy animals together so that they can have healthy children, human beings should be even more fussy.”

“Am I healthy?” Ruth asked.

“Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho!”

Uncle Ben put his head back and roared; and Bertha, pricking up her ears, increased her gait about a mile an hour.

“Healthy!” he repeated. “You’re the healthiest and sweetest little lady in the county, and maybe in the country.”

“I’d like to have a whole lot of babies,” Ruth said.

“Well,” Ben replied, “there’s nothing better. And since you want good, healthy babies, you want to keep yourself clean, and sweet and sound.”

“How can I do that?”

“Just take as good care of your body as you do of your mind, and remember that a poor bull can ruin a good cow.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means that you never want to do any loving with a man that isn’t a real he-man—and a bearcat,” Ben explained. “Your real big job is to keep

yourself sweet, and your next job is to find a sweet man.”

Ben picked the whip out of the socket and switched Bertha with it. Bertha was startled into a swifter trot. Ben hit her again with the whip. Bertha broke into a canter. Ben lashed her a little harder a third time, and she broke into a run.

Elmer and Gert went tearing after the swaying buckboard, smothered in the billowing fog of dust raised by Bertha’s threshing hoofs and the spinning wheels of the buckboard.

“Is Bertha running away?” Ruth asked, a little quiver in her voice.

Ben took the reins in his right hand and held Ruth tight with his left as they rounded a sharp curve on two wheels. An automobile and a wagon loaded with hay, both coming towards them, blocked the narrow road. The automobile was stalled in the ditch, and the driver of the wagon was swinging to the ground.

“Hang on, Ruthy,” Ben ordered.

He took the reins in both hands and swerved Bertha into the opposite ditch. The buckboard raked along the piled hay and almost overturned before he pulled Bertha to a stop. Ruth picked a handful of hay from her lap, and looked up, wide-eyed.

“It was a runaway, wasn’t it, Uncle Ben?”

Ben guided Bertha back into the road on the far side of the hay wagon, giving all his attention for a moment to the task. Then he turned to Ruth.

“Never was in a runaway before, were you, Ruthy?”

She shook her head, her big, dark-blue eyes still wide with excitement, and the color suddenly suffusing her cheeks.

“You’ll probably always remember this day, won’t you, Ruthy?”

“We might have been killed if you weren’t so strong—huh, Uncle Ben?”

“It’s a good thing to never forget it,” Ben advised, restuffing his pipe with fine-cut tobacco from a muslin sack. “And whenever you think of loving a boy or a man, you remember this afternoon, and what I told you about keeping yourself fine and sweet and healthy so that you can have healthy babies.”

“What has Bertha running away got to do with babies?” Ruth asked.

“Some day you’ll understand that it’s better to have a horse run away with you than to let your worse self run away with your better self,” Ben said.

“That was white clover—that hay,” Ruth exclaimed, looking back. “My, but didn’t it smell good!”

CHAPTER IV

Katherine entered the woodshed, where Ben was splitting kindling. The grass was short and stubbly in the orchard, visible through the doorway, which never was closed because wood always was in the way of the door. Orderly pyramids of apples were under the trees, and bits of goldenrod glowed in the uncut hay among the beehives. The big oak tree in the front yard was turning red; and the smell of burning leaves already was in the air.

“Benjamin Robbins,” Katherine exclaimed.

“What’s the matter now, Kitty?” Ben asked, stabbing the ax into a fixed position in the chopping block and straightening his back.

“Matter!” his sister repeated. “I’ve told you from the beginning that you would be the ruination of Ruth, and now look at what you’ve done.”

Katherine held out a bit of ruled yellow pad paper, which showed by multiple creases that it had been folded into a small wad.

“Read that,” she said. “And then tell me, if you can, what we’re going to do. Oh, God help me!” she added piously, sitting with the effect of complete collapse on a sawhorse.

Ben took the paper and read aloud:

“Dear Myron, I love you. Do you love me? Ruth.” “Dear Ruth, yes. Myron.”

“Well?” Katherine cried, with rising inflection. “Well? Don’t stand there like a dummy! What are you going to do about it?”

“Do about what?”

“About what?” Katherine cried. “You’ll drive me mad. ‘About what?’ I suppose you think it is perfectly proper for a twelve-year-old girl to be making love to a boy. I suppose that is more of your ideas. Well, I’m telling you right here and now that it’s going to stop.”

“Been rummaging through Ruthy’s things, have you?” her brother asked.

Katherine bristled.

“Until she is of age it’s my duty to know everything that Ruth does. A young girl has no right to have any correspondence with boys without her family’s knowledge.”

“Rummaging in Ruthy’s things, eh?” Ben repeated. “I suppose you go through my pockets once in a while, just to keep your hand in.”

“I should think you’d be ashamed to talk to me that way, Benjamin Robbins. Or haven’t you any sense of shame?”

“You and I have very different ideas about what we should be ashamed of, Kitty,” Benjamin said.

“Don’t think you can squirm out of this, Benjamin. And,” she added with increased violence, “don’t call me Kitty, for Heaven’s sake.”

“Now, let’s see,” Ben said, rubbing an old-fashioned sulphur match over his right buttock, after having prepared a good striking surface by raising his right knee a trifle.

“I wish you could see,” Katherine cried. “I wish you could see what you are doing to a sweet little girl, and her chances to grow up to be a lady.”

“Wait a minute, Susie,” Ben said between puffs at his corncob, over the fresh-filled bowl of which he held the now flaming match.

The pipe lighted, he removed it from his mouth long enough to spit carefully on the match end. When the match end was moistened thoroughly he walked to the door and dropped it on the bare ground and pressed it in with his heel.

“I wish you were as careful with Ruth as you are with matches,” Katherine exclaimed.

“I don’t know just how to break the news to you, Kitty. But the truth is that Ruthy and Myron are engaged, and are going to get married when they grow up.”

“What?” Katherine almost screamed.

“Fact,” Ben said, nodding his head. “Ruth came to me about a month ago and told me that she loved Myron, and thought he’d make a good husband, according to some rules for picking husbands that I laid out for her some time ago.”

“Rules for picking husbands!” Katherine gasped. “Am I awake, or am I dreaming?”

“You’re awake all right, Kitty,” Ben assured her. “She said that Myron was healthy, that he was the best swimmer and the best football player in the school, and that he could run the fastest and the farthest, and that it seemed to her he would make a good father for her children.”

“Oh, God help me!” Katherine breathed. “Oh, God help me! Have you gone entirely crazy, Benjamin Robbins? Have you? Have you gone insane? Are you mad?”

Ben grinned.

“She said that she thought he was handsome, too,” he resumed calmly. “She said she thought his brown eyes and dark hair made a good contrast for her blue eyes and yellow hair. And she thought he wore awfully pretty neckties.”

“Everything is going around,” Katherine cried, clutching her hair with her hands. “You’re just telling a story to excite me. Tell me you’re fibbing, Ben.”

“I’m not fibbing,” Ben said, “I’m telling you what I know about this engagement.”

“Engagement! My stars and garters!”

“There you go swearing again, Susie,” Ben chided.

“I suppose it’s best for me to know all about it. Hurry and tell me everything you know about it.”

“There isn’t much more to tell,” Ben said. “I told her that when it came to picking a husband there was slightly more to it than picking a good bull for a cow.”

“A bull—you are crazy,” Katherine exclaimed. “You should be in an asylum!”

“Anyway,” Ben continued agreeably, “I told her that brains count as well as good health. Of course, it’s old stuff. The old Romans knew about it; and the Greeks before them, and the Egyptians before that. I guess a good many people have heard about it, but few of ’em pay much attention.”

“Stop rambling,” Katherine exclaimed.

“Well, I told Ruthy that Myron seemed to fill the bill so far as health was concerned, but that the question of brains had to be settled. I said something about money not being so important in a young husband: it was health and ability that counted most.”

“I don’t believe my ears,” Katherine said.

“Anyway,” Ben went on, “Ruthy told me that right at present she had a case on Myron, and that she got a thrill from kissing him.”

Katherine jumped as if she had been stuck with a pin, then sat down again heavily. She turned white, and clutched at her heart. And then she turned red.

“Kissing him,” she repeated. “Kissing a boy before she is married—or even engaged—when she is only twelve years old.”

“Yeah, it was your views on not kissing until after a girl gets married that was partly responsible for Ruthy coming to me with the story, I guess. You see, I told her that one of my pet ideas was for a girl not to marry any man until after she had lived with him a while—kind of tried him out.”

Katherine was speechless, her hand still clutching spasmodically at her heart.

“I wasn’t going to tell you about it,” her brother said frankly, “but you went snooping around and found that note she sent Myron in school, and I figured I’d better get in my licks first—before you got after Ruthy, that is, and put some bad ideas in her head.”

Katherine arose, trembling.

“This is the end, Benjamin,” she said. “I never could have believed it would come in our family. But before I will allow you or any one else to endanger the morals of a minor child, I will go to court.”

Ben started to pat his sister on the back.

“There! There!” he began.

“Don’t ‘there, there,’ me!” she exclaimed, with an accent of disgust. “And don’t touch me. May be the harm has been done already. Where is Ruth?”

Ben took hold of Katherine by both arms. There was no smile on his face.

“Wait a minute, Kitty.”

He shook her gently but firmly.

“Pull yourself together, and listen to me. There’s no harm done. There’s only good done. Ruth tells me everything she does, and everything she plans to do. She knows that no woman should have a baby until she is matured, and she is interested in having good, healthy babies.”

“Don’t talk to me. I won’t listen. Let me go.”

“I will talk to you; you’ve got to listen, and I won’t let you go. You were brought up with all that rot about not kissing or hugging a man until you were married, or engaged, although being engaged wasn’t really considered an excuse for such unnatural goings-on; and here you are an old maid.”

“I never thought I’d hear my brother talk to me like that,” Katherine half sobbed. “I could have been married.”

“Sure you could—to some old dodo who wanted his cooking, housework, darning, and diaper-washing done free of charge. Sure you could. But you didn’t have any independence, and you weren’t in an environment where men with brains and money were handy to be grabbed, and if there were any men of that kind handy you would have been so restrained that they wouldn’t have had any way of knowing whether you would have made a good wife or a substitute for ice in the refrigerator.”

“Oh, Benjamin, I’m suffering.”

“Sure you’re suffering, and Ruthy probably is going to suffer too. But, by gum, she’s going to suffer from tackling the problems and taking on the responsibilities of life, not from ducking ’em. Our job is to develop her brains, and her character, and her ideals, so that she can go out and buck life.”

“My head aches so, Benjamin. Poor little Ruth!”

“Poor little Ruth—rot! Our grandmother Burns was married before she was sixteen, and her mother was married when she was sixteen. And I never heard tell of two grander characters.”

“They didn’t go around kissing boys.”

“Ha! Ha! How would you know if they did or not? They wouldn’t tell you, any more than Ruthy would tell you.”

“Father didn’t go around kissing girls.”

“There’s no sense in going into that, Kitty.”

“Don’t call me Kitty,” his sister protested feebly.

“Great!” Ben said. “You’re coming back to normal. Now don’t say anything to upset Ruthy. She and Myron and these other young folks have paired off. There are twelve girls in her Sewing Club, which is what they call

it, only I surmise it hasn't much to do with sewing, and they each have got themselves a boy. And they hug and kiss each other, and have thrills."

"A terrible tragedy may come of it."

"Don't you worry, Kitty. They're only puppies having their first taste of life. And the only difference between you and me and some other folks is we know just what is going on."

"But how will Ruthy explain that to her husband, if she ever gets married to some one else?"

"Oh, I've told Ruthy about that. Any woman that explains anything to her husband or to any one else is just wasting time and piling up misery. The only time for confessions to husbands is when you're sure they're going to learn the facts without the confession. Only kissing is nothing much to bother about, as I see it."

"Oh, Benjamin!"

"It's a fact," Ben insisted. "And I'll go further and say the best plan is never to confess but to keep right on denying anything that might get you in Dutch, even if the evidence is conclusive."

"Oh, what am I going to do?" Katherine asked, raising her eyes towards the woodshed roof, where a fat spider was sitting in the middle of his web. "Oh, God, tell me what to do."

"I'll tell you what to do," Ben said gently. "Do nothing. You keep right on teaching Ruthy to cook and keep house, and I'll see to the rest of it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, next year, I'm going to send her to the Sarah Langley School."

"That's a wonderful school," Katherine said. "They'll guard her there."

"They'll teach her manners, and how to handle complicated cutlery, and how to enter a drawing room, and how to carry on small talk, and a lot of other useful little wrinkles—such as a few words of French and what amounts to a smattering of music."

"They build character at that school," Katherine said. "I wish she was there now, although I never dreamed I could reach the point where I would want to be separated from her a moment."

"And then, after a couple of years, I'll have her take a business course somewhere," Ben said.

"A business course—after all that stylish training?"

Ben nodded.

"Sure. It's either as a secretary or an actress that she'll have her best chance to get her hooks into a man."

"Hooks into a man!" Katherine repeated faintly.

"What else does a woman live for?" Ben demanded. "Be honest about it."

CHAPTER V

Ruth was leaving for the Sarah Langley School early next day, and Myron was making his last call. They were sitting on a sofa in the front parlor. Electricity had been installed in Southington, but Ben still burned kerosene. The lamp on the curly-legged mahogany table was turned low.

“How is your Uncle?” Myron asked.

“He’s still in bed upstairs, groaning something awful. Aunt Katherine is ironing his back with a hot iron. He says it’s the only thing that does lumbago any good.”

“He’ll be all right, huh?”

“All right? He’s all right now. But all you men are babies—you like to be sick, and be looked after.”

“As if your uncle didn’t look after you!”

“Oh, he takes care of me, Uncle Ben does. And he can stand pain, like when he chopped off his toe with an ax two years ago when I was with him in our west wood lot. He joked all the way home. But just being sick, and being looked after, is different. Give Uncle Ben a little cold, and he’ll howl for Aunt Katherine and me, I’ll tell you. He’s a big baby in some ways.”

“I’m a big baby when I think about you going away to school, Ruth.”

Myron leaned over and kissed her. He slid his arm around her neck, and kissed her again. She wrapped both arms around his neck and kissed him back, long and hard. They both breathed audibly, and shivered. Suddenly, Ruth reached down and took hold of Myron’s right hand.

“Don’t,” she said.

“You’ve got such pretty legs,” he pleaded.

“They’re just like anybody’s legs,” she said, still holding his hand.

“They are not. They are the prettiest legs in the world.”

“You’d say that to any girl, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t kiss any girl but you, ever. If you never would kiss me again, I never would get kissed again. I’m just crazy about you, Ruth.”

They kissed again. After a minute or two, Ruth reached down and took hold of Myron’s right hand.

“You are awful tonight, Myron,” she said. “If you don’t stop that, I’ll have to go upstairs.”

“You’re so beautiful.”

“You’d say that to any girl.”

“I never said it to any one but you, because you are the only girl in the world.”

They kissed again. Ruth pulled Myron's hand first from her knee and then from her blouse without missing a fraction of physical contact of lips.

"Don't, Myron," she whispered.

They kissed for a long time. Ruth sighed, catching her breath a little.

"Myron."

"Yes."

"Why do you want to see my body?"

Myron was silent.

"Would you like to?"

Myron's voice trembled, and his voice was husky.

"I'd like to more than anything in the world."

"Will you promise to be still, if I let you just once?"

"I promise."

"Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart."

Ruth slipped aside a bit of linen.

There was the sound of the tick tock of the grandfather's clock in the front hall. Myron just looked.

"There," Ruth said, and restored her blouse to its original condition. Then she said brightly in a voice that sounded like a thunderclap after their previous whispers:

"Oh, won't you have some fudge, Myron? I made it this afternoon."

Myron jumped to his feet, too, and took a piece of fudge from a plate on the table. They looked at each other as they ate the fudge. After licking her fingers, Ruth suddenly stepped to Myron, and standing face to face with him, she pressed her lips and her body to his. A long silence followed. It was broken by Katherine's voice from upstairs:

"Ruth! Ruth!"

Ruth heard the first call, and shoved Myron away from her. He looked dazed. Ruth ran her fingers through her hair, and smoothed down her clothing, and took a deep breath.

"Yes, Aunt," she called in her pleasant contralto.

"I'm sorry," Katherine called, "but it's time for you to come upstairs. You have some packing to do, and your Uncle Benjamin wants to see you for a few minutes. You know you have to catch an early train."

Myron caught Ruth in his arms, and kissed her hard.

"I'll love you till I die," he promised. "Will you love me?"

"I love you now, anyway, Myron," Ruth said.

"But promise me you'll never love any one else."

"How can I promise that? All I can say is that I never loved any other boy except you, Myron."

“Please promise me, so I won’t be miserable.”

“I love you, Myron.”

“Will you promise never to kiss any other fellow?”

“I never did kiss any other boy; you know that.”

“You’d better not. We’ll get married in about ten years—after I finish college and medical school.”

“I’ve got to go now, Myron.”

“Will you promise?”

“Promise what?” Ruth asked.

“Don’t do that, Ruth,” Myron begged. “You know what I want you to promise—to never love anybody but me.”

“The way I feel now, I won’t,” Ruth said, kissing Myron, and looking at herself in the mirror over the mantel at the same time.

“I hate to leave you,” Myron said. “I love you to death.”

“I love you too, Myron; here’s your coat.”

Ruth held the coat for Myron, and handed him his hat. She gave him a hurried kiss.

“I’ll write every day, and you write me every day,” Myron said.

“All right,” Ruth assented. “Good-by, Myron.”

Ruth closed the door, and went into the parlor to put out the lamp. Down the street a little way, Myron stopped suddenly and looked back at the house. Then he looked up at the sky. Then he made a despairing gesture with balled fists, and began to walk briskly.

Ben was gazing out his bedroom window when Ruth entered. He had a good view of the moonlit street.

“Hello, Ruthy.”

Ruth went to the bed and kissed his cheek.

“Is your lumbago better, Uncle Ben?”

Ben laughed.

“Have a good time saying good-by to your fiancé?”

Ruth looked serious.

“I don’t know whether I want to marry Myron or not,” she said.

“Ain’t women marvelous?” Ben exclaimed delightedly, “from cradle to the grave.”

“I think we are a bit young to be talking about marriage,” Ruth explained. “After all, I’m only fourteen and Myron is only seventeen. He won’t be a doctor for ten years yet. And that’s a long time.”

Ben eyed his niece, with one thick eyebrow cocked quizzically.

“You chased Myron, didn’t you, Ruthy?”

Ruth blushed.

“Come on now, tell your Uncle Ben the truth. You kissed him first, didn’t

you?”

“I guess I did, Uncle Ben,” Ruth said.

“And then he wanted more kisses and things than you wanted to give him, didn’t he?”

“How did you know?” Ruth demanded.

“Boys are like that,” Ben observed.

Ben reached out and grabbed Ruth, and, pulling her suddenly to him, spanked her once, hard. Ruth’s eyes filled with tears, and she looked wonderingly at Ben.

“What did you do that for?” she asked. “You hurt me.”

Ben chuckled.

“Never spanked you before, did I?”

“No.”

“Never was cross with you—hardly—was I?”

“No.”

“This is the only time I ever hit you in my life, isn’t it?”

Ruth nodded.

“And it hurt, didn’t it, so that you’ll remember it?”

“Yes, I’ll remember it, Uncle Ben,” Ruth said. “It hurts.”

“Well, Ruthy, I did it because I want you to remember something. You’re a well-developed girl, almost a young woman, despite what the calendar says. And I want you to remember that there’s a big difference between a young boy living at home and a grown man.”

“What difference is there, Uncle Ben?”

“If the boys had the brains and experience of the men there wouldn’t be any virgins hardly, Ruthy. A boy like Myron asks if he may do something; a man doesn’t ask: he just goes ahead.”

Ruth didn’t say anything, but her eyes turned towards the window overlooking the street.

“I guess unconsciously you were blaming Myron for not doing what you won’t admit to yourself you wanted him to do, Ruthy. It may sound complicated, but I guess you understand.”

Ruth blushed again, and looked at her shoes.

“But now I’ve explained it this way, I guess you find you care just as much as ever for Myron.”

“How much was that, Uncle Ben? You seem to know everything.”

“That was as much as any full-blooded youngster feels for a full-blooded youngster of the opposite sex.”

“I thought I wanted to marry him,” Ruth said.

“I know,” Ben agreed. “I know. As I’ve told you, there’ll be a lot of young fellers that’ll set your nerves tingling before you’re done. But you keep your

weather eye peeled, Ruthy, and don't let any of the older ones get you on a parlor sofa when you're feeling romantic and loving. It's a tough spot for a girl who wants to keep herself right for the babies to come."

"I guess I understand now, Uncle Ben," Ruth said.

"Now run along to your Aunt Susie," Ben said. "I'll be ready to take you to the station in the morning."

A half-hour later, Katherine came into the room.

"What did you do to Ruth, Benjamin?" she demanded. "There's the mark of your hand on her bottom. It's blistered."

"It was put there to make her a little cautious," Ben said.

"Well, I think it was brutal and uncalled for, and it's a great relief to me that she finally is going away from this house."

Katherine started to stalk from the room. At the door she turned and exclaimed tearfully:

"And don't call me Kitty."

"By gosh! I didn't," Ben said.

But he said it to an empty room: his sister was gone, leaving nothing except a draft caused by her hasty departure.

CHAPTER VI

“The trouble with Ben Robbins is, he is crazy,” Emma Putney said, fumbling with the tongue for her false uppers, and making them click.

“All the Robbins always were more or less cracked,” Hetty Brown agreed. “What has he gone and done now?”

“Nothing any different from usual—which is what makes him crazy,” Emma replied. “Keeping that young one in a fashionable school, and him and his sister Katherine without a cent in the world!”

Hetty bent over the sewing machine at which she was working in her sitting room window, pried a bit of thread loose from the needle, moistened it between her lips, and slid it into proper position.

“They’ve always had mortgages—the Robbins have. And they’ve always had educations, too.”

Hetty tossed her head contemptuously as she steered a bit of material under the bobbing needle.

“Ben—he went to Yale; and Katherine—she went to Mount Holyoke. And if signs mean anything, they’re both going to wind up in the poorhouse.”

“I hear they haven’t paid any of their bills, since the Lord knows when,” Emma said. “But they read Latin and Greek to each other after supper every night.”

Hetty pulled the material from the machine and looked carefully at her work. She was a plump, comely woman of forty, but her motions were as sprightly as those of a girl. Her husband was superintendent of the Flora Silk Company’s mill, and Deacon in the First Church. Her son, Myron, was in his second year in Harvard, and her daughter, Sally, fifteen, was in Southington High School. She nodded her head on which red brown hair was brought smoothly back, but didn’t reply.

“Look at you and Deacon Brown,” Emmy continued. “You haven’t any mortgage, and you got money in the bank, and the Southington High School is good enough for your daughter. Heaven knows you can afford to send Myron to college.”

“We have to be mighty careful,” Hetty said, shaking her head and frowning. “But it isn’t because of the expense we have Sally go to the high school.”

“Oh, everybody knows that,” Emmy exclaimed, making her teeth click, and shaking her head.

Emmy was dressed in black, as usual, and her gray eyes, behind steel-bowed spectacles, looked red and tired from peering. She wore a black bonnet

atop her scanty, straw-white hair; her nose, slightly red at the tip, was the most prominent member of her angular face, covered with parchment-like skin. She was eternally taking a peppermint drop, either red or white, from her reticule, as she termed her little leather handbag, and putting it between her lips. She smelled something like a musty peppermint, herself.

“Her father didn’t think it would do any good to put high-falutin’ ideas in Sally’s head,” Hetty explained. “What’s the good of having a daughter getting a lot of airs when what you hope she’ll do is marry some good dependable young man, and settle down to making a home and having babies?”

“I never saw anything come of this finishing-school and college-for-women business, myself,” Emmy asserted. “They say Ruth knows how to carry on a conversation in French, but I figure she’ll have to talk with herself if she wants to try any of it in Southington.”

Hetty nodded comfortably.

“Ruth will have to talk a whole pile of French to talk the mortgage off the Robbins place and the debts off Ben Robbins’ back.”

“I had a sort of idea once that Ruth was setting her cap for Myron,” Emmy suggested, with an extra push of the tongue against her loose upper plate. “If she got Myron, the Robbins wouldn’t have to worry much.”

“Myron went around with Ruth before she went away to that school three years ago,” Hetty admitted. “But it was only one of those boy-and-girl affairs. At first, the Deacon and I were kind of worried. But after a spell they sort of got out of the habit of writing to each other. We figure he’s forgotten all about Ruth now.”

“I never did understand for the life of me what men could see in blondes,” Emmy asserted. “I never saw a blonde yet that you could trust. One of the Cooley boys—Ed, it was—said he saw Myron with a blonde at a football game in Boston last Saturday. And I thought it might be Ruth.”

Hetty looked at the little gold watch, which she wore pinned to her waist over a well-developed left breast.

“Law’s sakes!” she exclaimed, pushing aside her sewing and rising. “It’s past five o’clock; it’s Bridget’s night out, and I’ve got to get the supper.”

Emmy stood up, somewhat slowly, favoring her knees, and grunting just a trifle.

“I didn’t know it was so late myself,” she said. “I’ll be getting along.”

Hetty started towards the front hall.

“Don’t you come with me, Hetty,” Emmy said. “You get right about your chores.”

Hetty accompanied Emmy to the front door.

“Good night, Emmy,” she said.

After that, she went back to the sitting room and plumped herself down

heavily on a sofa. She sat limply for a minute, then sighed, got up and went into the kitchen.

“Corned beef hash and biscuits,” said Deacon Brown, entering the golden oak dining room, with its hand-painted punch bowl on the buffet and hand-painted china in the china closet with sliding glass doors. He rubbed his hands and sat down. A moment later his wife and his daughter sat down too.

Deacon Brown was two inches more than six feet tall and weighed less than one hundred and forty pounds. He had a high sloping forehead, thick black eyebrows, hazel eyes set in a maze of wrinkles, a scraggly brown mustache, and an Adam’s apple which bobbed whenever he swallowed. He ate mountains of food: everything on a table seemed to be magnetized by him. He was smacking his lips over his third huge dish of corned beef and buttering his tenth hot biscuit, when his wife said:

“Emmy Putney was in this afternoon.”

“Now you know all the gossip,” the Deacon replied, a sudden upthrust of air from his stuffed stomach causing him to pronounce “gossip” as if it were spelled “GOS-SIPF.”

Sally, who was eating silently and daintily, glanced at her father scornfully.

“Do you want the baking soda?” Hetty asked.

Deacon Brown shook his head from side to side. Disappearance of the freshly buttered biscuit, violent agitation of the Adam’s apple, and added redness of the cheeks, indicated that he might have a reason for not answering vocally.

“Why will you swallow your food whole?” Hetty inquired.

Deacon Brown suddenly looked relieved.

“What did Emmy have to say?”

“Oh, dear,” Hetty replied. “She was fishing about Myron and Ruth Robbins.”

The Deacon scowled, and put back on the tablecloth a cup of tea he had been raising towards an already dripping mustache.

“She worked around to it the way Emmy does,” Hetty continued. “She said she once thought Ruth was setting her cap for Myron, and that if she got him the Robbins wouldn’t have to worry about money troubles any more.”

“Why didn’t you tell the old fuss-budget to mind her own business?”

“You know I couldn’t do that, Deacon. I don’t think she knows anything. I said I guessed it was only a boy-and-girl affair, and Myron had forgotten about Ruth long ago.”

“I don’t know what ails that boy,” her husband exclaimed. “Here we are working ourselves to skin and bone, and depriving ourselves to give him an education so’s he can be a doctor, and he has to go chasing around after that yellow-haired Ruth Robbins.”

“Do you think the Robbins have an idea how much you’re worth, Deacon?” his wife asked suddenly, her eyes fixed curiously on him.

The Deacon’s face seemed to grow smaller as he looked at her.

“If they know,” he replied, “they know I ain’t got much, and if Myron don’t stop spending money he’ll have to leave college and go to work to keep you and me out of the poorhouse. He’ll have to quit anyhow, if he don’t stop this fool business with that fool girl.”

“Well, I guess he won’t stop it unless she makes him,” Hetty exclaimed. “Emmy said Ed Cooley saw Myron and a blonde girl at a football game in Boston last Saturday, and she thought it might be Ruth.”

A big blue vein on the Deacon’s right forehead swelled and throbbed.

“Emmy got all she wanted out of me,” Hetty said bitterly. “She knows we would give anything to have Myron leave Ruth Robbins alone, and she knows as well as you do it was Ruth that Myron was with at the football game. After two years, it had to come out.”

The Deacon thumped the table with his fist so hard the dishes jumped.

“By thunder!” he exclaimed. “I’d rather be dead than think my money was going to be thrown around by one of those crazy Robbins. And by thunder! I’m going to stop it.”

“What are you going to do, Deacon?”

“You know,” Sally interjected, “Ruth says she wouldn’t marry any man unless she lived with him first?”

Hetty’s lower jaw sagged away from the upper, and her eyes popped wide. She looked at her daughter, and then at her husband.

“For HEAVEN’S sake!” Hetty breathed.

“Young woman, you go up to your room,” the Deacon said in a trembly voice, glaring at Sally.

“What did I do, Pa?” Sally asked. “Huh! What did I do?”

“Go on! Get up to your room this instant, young lady, and don’t ever let me hear of you talking to Ruth Robbins again. I’m sick of hearing her name.”

Sally looked at her father, and then at her mother.

“I don’t know what you’ve done,” her father exclaimed. “I’ll talk with you later. Get out of here now.”

Tears started in Sally’s eyes as she mechanically folded her napkin. Her cheeks were crimson as she stalked from the room. She turned at the dining room door.

“I didn’t do anything,” she exclaimed, and vanished.

“Now lookit here, Hetty,” the Deacon said. “You’ll have to have a long talk with Sally. I can’t be around looking after my children and taking care of my business at the same time. I’d say they both was being contaminated, and I’d say that the proper influence might have prevented it.”

Hetty was weeping.

“But, Deacon I . . .” she began.

“Don’t Deacon me,” her husband cried. “You better have the Parson talk with Sally. Free love being preached to your daughter right under your nose. If it was a man instead of a girl he’d be tarred and feathered out of town, or I’d know the reason why.”

“I’m sure Sally is a good girl,” Hetty said. “She was just repeating what Ruth Robbins told her.”

“She listened, didn’t she?”

Hetty’s lips were trembling.

“Oh, Deacon,” she sobbed. “I’m so worried.”

“I should think you would be,” her husband snapped. “I should think you would be.”

“I can’t help thinking,” Hetty exclaimed, in an uncertain tremolo, and with a rising inflection, “what Ruth Robbins may be teaching Myron.”

CHAPTER VII

Katherine's eyes were red and her nose was snuffly when she met Ben in the front hall.

"Dr. Prescott is here," she said. "It's about Ruth."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Ben exclaimed.

"How do you do, Benjamin?" said Dr. Prescott, pastor of the First Church, rising from a rocking-chair as Ben entered the front parlor.

"How d'y' do, Doctor?"

"I have just been discussing Ruth with Miss Robbins," Dr. Prescott explained, putting two rather soiled white forefingers, with not recently manicured nails, softly together, and nodding gravely a head endowed with silvery white hair, and the face of one entirely satisfied with its possessor's views on God, life, death, this world, the next world, the tariff, the weather, conditions in Hell, and three square meals a day.

"After discussing her with others, I presume?" Ben suggested briskly.

Dr. Prescott looked surprised a moment, and then smiled Smile No. 2 on his list of smiles. Smile No. 2 was useful in cases of death, serious accident or illness, or when the roast was too well done.

"If I had not been told of the—ah—somewhat advanced views held by your niece, I would still be in ignorance of them," he said, using Voice Tone No. 3, good for use on atheists, bad children, or any one who doubted that the Doctor used anything except the undiluted word of God.

"Well what about it?" Ben asked. "What about it?"

"Er, Ah—Ah—Er—."

"I beg your pardon, Doctor," Ben interrupted. "I know the subject is a painful one to you. But it isn't to me. I'm back of anything my niece does, says, or wants to do or say."

"But this—ah—free love," Dr. Prescott began.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Ben exclaimed. "So you've heard that too, have you? Well, all I told her was that she'd be silly to marry a man unless she lived with him first."

Dr. Prescott elevated his arms.

"Well, call it anything you like," Ben continued, "only it certainly isn't the sort of doctrine that asks a woman to hitch up with a man, thinking he's a sort of tailor's dummy, and then may be waking up too late to find out he's a twin-bed hound, while she's a double-bed female, or vice versa."

"I never thought I would hear any one in Southington talking this way," Dr. Prescott declared.

“Wait a minute, Doctor,” Ben said. “Me, I’m for all religions—Christian, Mohammedan, Hindoo or Voodoo. The only feature I don’t like about any religion is when its followers try to force their interpretations of it on others—me, for instance.”

Dr. Prescott made a vocal sound, but Ben held up a large, tanned hand, restrainingly.

“There’s nothing more helpless born into this world than a little girl baby without any father or mother,” Ben said. “There’s nothing been invented by any religion or any science that can take the place of a father and a mother for a little girl.

“Well, when I saw my brother’s daughter lying there in her basket without a father or a mother, I made up my mind that minute that I would take all responsibility for arming her for the battle of life.”

So earnest was Ben that Dr. Prescott sat quiet for the moment, and Katherine stilled her sobs.

“I had a hot feeling in my head in that kitchen,” Ben said, “and a lot of pictures and printed words went sailing through my mind. In less than a second I knew what I was going to do with that baby.”

He paused a minute, and looked solemnly at the minister and at Katherine.

“She didn’t have a father or mother to protect her through life,” he continued. “I made up my mind I’d give her a chance to develop her character and her mind so that she could look after herself.

“My first job was to win her confidence—and I did. I always have known everything that child has thought, or done, and I’m standing right here to say there isn’t a sweeter, more natural little girl on earth than our Ruthy is.”

Dr. Prescott cleared his throat.

“But, Benjamin,” he began.

“Wait a minute,” Ben interrupted again. “I didn’t want that little girl to grow up to think she had to live in this God-forsaken town for the rest of her life, and either marry some mossback to raise children and bread for him, or not find any mossback to suit and spend her time drying up with old maid’s misery.”

“Oh, Benjamin!” Katherine exclaimed.

“I didn’t want her to think she had to get stuck for life with any misfit of a he-goat,” Ben said, raising his voice. “So, when the time came, I told her that before she signed a contract to sleep with a man, she’d better try him out first. And if that’s free love, I hope Ruthy’s a free lover.”

“This is terrible,” Dr. Prescott said. “My heart goes out to your dear sister, and the poor little girl. This is terrible. I will pray for you all.”

“Ben is crazy,” Katherine said, conviction in her voice.

“If the rest of you are sane,” Ben said, “I’m glad to be crazy. Ruthy has

read the Bible, and she's read Plato, Huxley, Tyndall, Spencer, Darwin, Ingersoll, Voltaire, Heine, the Elsie Books and Campfire Girls. She's studied physiology. She knows what a mind is for, and what a body is for. She's only seventeen, but she's a woman."

Dr. Prescott gazed sadly at Ben, shaking his head gently from side to side.

"I will pray with you," he urged. "Let us wrestle with this Demon which possesses you."

"I'm in no mood for either prayer or wrestling," Ben said.

"I don't think you realize what results this state of mind will have in Southington—so far as your niece is concerned," Dr. Prescott said.

"I don't think it would have much, except with a few old fogies," Ben replied.

"Benjamin Robbins! How can you talk like that?" Katherine cried.

"Anyhow," Ben said, "I don't want Ruthy to settle down in Southington. I've brought her up from the beginning with the idea of bucking life, going out in the world. If she likes Southington after she's seen other places, why let her come back."

"You are an iconoclast," Dr. Prescott said.

"All the guts of Southington followed the frontier years ago, or is dead," Ben said. "The people around here inherited their fathers' and grandfathers' houses and money and names, but not their guts. Thank God the Polacks who are settling the farms are bringing in some new blood."

"How could any one talk to a man like that?" Dr. Prescott inquired.

"Well," Ben exclaimed, suddenly smiling, "you'll find me ready to talk on about any subject under the sun, and listen to any as well—except the subject of Ruthy's welfare. Suppose you stay for dinner, Dr. Prescott, and I'll show you a page I have of the Gutenberg Bible—or I'll get out my telescope and we'll look at the stars, or we'll discuss the Romantic movement in literature in the Nineteenth Century, or the New Humanism, or we'll read a chapter or two in Papa Herodotus, or we'll listen to Hetty read Horace, as you've never heard Horace read."

Katherine looked wistfully at Dr. Prescott.

"Oh, Dr. Prescott, please stay."

After he was in his Canton flannel nightshirt that night, Dr. Prescott kneeled beside his bed and spent an hour asking God to do the best He could for Ruth. Perhaps Katherine's victuals had taken his mind off hell fire and brimstone for the moment, because he didn't ask God to punish any one—even Ben.

CHAPTER VIII

“Well,” Ruth said, “examinations, then class day, and then no more school for another summer.”

Marion West, her roommate, wielding a paddle in the bow of the canoe, said:

“It won’t make me mad. Where you going this summer, Ruth?”

Ruth, in the stern, made a wide circular sweep with her paddle, putting her weight behind the blade, and then repeated the gesture. The canoe, responsive, swung around towards a tiny cove: brown clear water through which white pebbles showed, and grass to the water’s edge.

Elizabeth Hanley, lying on the bottom of the canoe, her back propped against a cushion, put both hands gingerly on the gunwales, as the craft slithered in against the grassy bank.

“I don’t know,” Ruth replied belatedly, “whether I’ll be a cigarette girl in a hotel, a chorus girl, or a private secretary to a millionaire.”

Marion laughed and Elizabeth gasped. “You say the most original things,” Marion gurgled.

“I’ve even thought of being a parlor maid,” Ruth said, as they carefully got out of the tipsy vessel.

“I wish I could be like you, Ruth,” Elizabeth said. “You can do anything you want.”

“I can do anything I want,” Ruth agreed, “as long as Samantha Jane thinks it’s all right.”

“Oh, there you go with that funny talk,” Marion exclaimed.

“It isn’t funny,” Ruth protested. “It’s darned serious. You see, Elizabeth, my Uncle Ben always told me that he wasn’t my boss, my Aunt Katherine wasn’t my boss, that I wasn’t my boss, but that Samantha Jane was my boss.”

“Why didn’t he say your conscience, then?” Elizabeth asked. “That’s what he meant.”

“May be he did,” Ruth said, “and may be he didn’t. Anyhow, if Samantha Jane lets me, I may run away and get married.”

“To Myron Brown? To Harry Tobias?”

Marion and Elizabeth spoke together.

“Isn’t Myron handsome? I love brown eyes on a man.”

“Does it make you passionate to be kissed on the ear?” Elizabeth asked.

“Ooh!” Marion exclaimed, making a face. “The very idea is nasty.”

“Wait till a boy kisses your ear, and then you’ll see,” Elizabeth said. “It sends the shivers all over you, doesn’t it, Ruth?”

"I haven't done any petting since I came to Sarah Langley," Ruth said.

"What?" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"I'd like to," Ruth said, "but I'm afraid of myself."

"Boys are always trying to paw you," Marion said. "They make me sick."

"It would make me sick if they didn't try," Ruth observed. "I'd think there was something the matter with me."

"All they think about is pretty legs—and things," Elizabeth said.

"I like pretty legs myself," Ruth said, "but I guess boys wouldn't think girls' legs were so attractive if the legs didn't lead somewhere."

Elizabeth giggled.

"You say the most awful things, Ruth," Marion exclaimed.

"Bobby told me I had the most beautiful legs he ever had seen," said Elizabeth.

Ruth smiled.

"If any boy is making love to you and he says anything different, he doesn't belong to the union."

"I've been told my legs were the most beautiful," Marion said. "Freddy Holmes says he doesn't like pipe stems." Marion extended an extremely sturdy pair of legs along the grass in front of her, and bent her head first to one side and then to the other, as she looked at them.

"Let's measure legs," Elizabeth suggested. "Let's take all our measurements."

"Ruth and I did," Marion said. "Ruth has the best figure in school, anyhow. What's the use?"

"I have an old-fashioned figure," Elizabeth said. "I have hips and a bust. I'll bet I'm more like the Venus de Milo than either of you."

"I wish I knew something that would cure blackheads," Marion said. "Freddy Holmes says I have the most beautiful complexion in the world. I'm glad he doesn't have to see me putting it on."

"What are you thinking about, Ruth?" Elizabeth asked. "Myron?"

"Or whether you'll be a parlor maid, or a movie star?" Marion added.

Ruth patted a strand of yellow hair back into place and showed a flash of white teeth in a smile.

"I'm always thinking about what I'm going to do; I have to."

"Why?" Elizabeth asked.

"Because I'm an adventuress," Ruth said.

"Isn't she killing?" Marion cried. "Sometimes I don't know whether I'm living with a female pirate or what."

Ruth turned to Elizabeth.

"I'm different from you and Marion. You're going to Europe this summer, and Marion is going to Bar Harbor. You'll both come out, and get engaged,

and be married, and may be get divorced, and get married again, and neither of you will ever have to worry much about where your next meal is coming from.”

“Oh, Ruth!”

“And I’ve got to get on in the world by myself, and I’m going to. I want success, and I want love, and I want children, and I’ve been trying ever since I can remember to make up my mind how I’m going about getting ’em.”

“Couldn’t your uncle help you—he’s so wonderful,” Marion asked.

“Uncle Ben has been the biggest help in the world, by just telling me about what I really wanted before I understood what he was saying myself. But he can’t help me decide just what I’m going to do.”

“Couldn’t he suggest something?” Elizabeth asked.

Ruth tilted her head back and laughed, showing more white teeth and a healthy pink mouth in the bargain.

“Suggest something? There isn’t anything he hasn’t suggested. And if I said I wanted to go on the stage, he said ‘Great!’ If I said I wanted to go into the movies, he said ‘Bully!’ If I said I wanted to marry a nice man and have children, he said, ‘There’s nothing better in the world than that, Ruthy.’ If I said I wanted to be a secretary, a doctor, a lawyer, a Congresswoman, a trained nurse, or a cook, he always was enthusiastic.”

“Well, if you can do anything you want, why don’t you just go ahead and do it,” Elizabeth asked. “I wish my stepfather was like that.”

“What would you do?” Ruth demanded. “Go ahead. Tell me. What would you do?”

Elizabeth looked at Ruth, and then she looked at Marion.

“Go ahead,” Marion urged. “Tell us what you’d do, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth, closed it, thought a moment, and then said:

“Well, I’d have to think it over. But the first thing I’d like is to have my freedom, with no one to boss me.”

Marion giggled.

“But you see Ruth has Samantha Jane to boss her.”

“Uncle Ben wasn’t sending me out without a guardian,” Ruth explained.

“Well, the first thing I’d do would be get rid of Samantha,” Elizabeth retorted.

“But that would spoil the game,” Ruth said. “Samantha Jane is my guide. Samantha is a combination of my father and mother, and my Uncle Ben, a policeman, and myself.”

“She sounds complicated,” Elizabeth said.

“She’s worse than that, if you get to know her,” Marion said. “Samantha Jane would be glad to have Ruth live with a man before she married him, but she wouldn’t have any use for Ruth if she lived with a man she was married to,

if she stopped loving him.”

“Marion has heard quite a bit about Samantha Jane,” Ruth explained, “but I think myself that the most important thing about her is courage. If I see a man I want, I’ll get him.”

Elizabeth gasped.

“But a lady can’t do that,” she protested.

“Lady, my eye,” Ruth retorted. “I’m no lady: I’m a young female of the species who’s had a bit of polish applied so I can do my stuff.”

“I wish I dared talk like that,” Elizabeth said. “It sounds perfectly zippy.”

“I told Uncle Ben once that I thought I’d like to be a gunman’s moll—it sounded so romantic,” Ruth said.

“I’ll bet he didn’t say ‘Bully’ to that,” Marion exclaimed.

“No,” Ruth admitted. “But he didn’t tell me I couldn’t. He said it was his opinion that a girl should be even more careful in picking out a gunman to be a moll to, than a man to be a wife of.”

“How killing!” Marion cried.

“I’d just love your Uncle Ben,” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“Uncle Ben said that from the trend of the times he couldn’t assure me that some gunman might not be running the country in a few years.”

“How perfectly terrible!” Marion said.

“And he said if he was a girl he was sure he would prefer to be a gunman’s moll to a golf widow, but he figured neither of those females had brains, while I had.

“‘My idea would be to hook up with a man who used his head, instead of a gun, to earn a living,’ Uncle Ben said. ‘But you can use your own judgement.’”

“You weren’t serious?” Elizabeth charged.

“Oh, I was as serious as I was about anything—I was only about twelve—and I’ll never be so serious again.”

“With your ideas, Ruth, don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of chance to be serious in this life,” Marion said.

Ruth laughed, and arose from the grass.

“Let’s get back,” she said. “I want to write a letter before dinner.”

CHAPTER IX

“Where are you going, Benjamin?” Katherine asked through the screen door in the kitchen.

Ben, about to enter the woodshed, took his pipe from his mouth and grinned back at her.

“Bees’re swarming,” he said, pointing with the pipe stem through the woodshed to the orchard, white with apple blossoms and fresh with their odor.

In the fragrance of sunlit countryside was a faint murmur which might have been mistaken for the stirring sounds of a world, miraculously young and green. But to a knowing ear it merely was the hum of bees, busy in the roses and blossoms.

“Benjamin Robbins! You march straight into the house this minute, and put on your bee helmet and your gloves. Do you hear?”

“Pshaw! Susie,” Ben grinned, “those bees and I are friends: they’re not going to hurt me.”

“But they poison you so terribly when one of them forgets she’s your friend. Please, Ben.”

“Keep your shirt on, Susie,” Ben advised, replacing the pipe in his mouth and puffing out a cloud of aromatic blue smoke which dissipated slowly in the balmy June air. “Don’t worry.”

Ben stepped into the woodshed and couldn’t be seen from the kitchen door, when Katherine called:

“Don’t you call me Susie, either, Benjamin Robbins.”

Ben walked along a footpath which was kept worn between the hives and the first row of apple trees. In one of the trees, a cluster of bees was clinging to a limb, and other bees, anxious to attach themselves to the cluster, were hovering in air. Ben watched for a minute or two, and then, still with his pipe between his teeth, stepped over and took hold of the bee-laden limb.

A moment later, he jumped, dropped the limb, slapped at his neck, back of his ear, and then turned and ran, a trail of bees marking his progress to the woodshed, and through it to the kitchen door, and through that into the kitchen.

Katherine dropped a pan with a rattle into the sink, and turned when the door slammed. She looked dumbly at Ben as he slapped at bees for a moment. Then her face worked as if she wanted to cry but couldn’t, and she hurried to him and squashed a bee on his coat.

“Get the ammonia,” Ben said in a breathless voice, bending over and slapping his ankle.

Katherine, pale and voiceless, went into the pantry and quickly emerged

with a bottle in her hand.

“By Godfrey!” exclaimed Ben in a great hoarse voice. “By Godfrey!”

Ben killed another bee—and another. Katherine began to apply the ammonia.

Ben’s eyes and face were suffused with blood. The blood pipe in his neck throbbled visibly.

“By Godfrey!” he repeated tonelessly.

Suddenly Katherine straightened.

“You get upstairs, Benjamin,” she ordered. “You’ll have to get your clothes off and get into bed. And I’ll call Dr. Parker.”

“By Godfrey!” Ben said.

Dr. Wallace Parker, and Molly, his wife, were as close friends as Ben had. Dr. Parker held a bachelor’s degree from Amherst, a medical degree from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, a Master’s degree from Harvard, and various sheepskins from other institutions in his own and other countries.

He was a big, broad-shouldered, red-faced, black-haired, gray-eyed, bass-voiced, easy-going chap who always had his own way—except when Molly wanted her way. He had all the work he could do, despite a remarkable irregularity in keeping his office hours, and a fondness for going away to Boston or New York for several days, or even a fortnight. When asked why a man of his attainments selected Southington for the practise of his profession, he said:

“My ambition is to work as little as possible, enjoy life as much as possible, and live to be a hundred years old if possible. I picked Southington because it had such a nice low death rate.”

Dr. Parker walked right out of his office and out the back door of his house when he received Katherine’s message, leaving Mrs. Alonzo Reid, who suffered mostly of imagination, still detailing symptoms. For five minutes, Mrs. Reid continued talking. Then she got up and opened the door, disclosing no doctor. Thereupon she went into the waiting room, where two other women were sitting, and said:

“The doctor’s gone again.”

“Don’t he beat the Dutch?” one of the two said, while the other one nodded in sympathy.

Ben was swollen grotesquely, and suffered tortures. Dr. Parker and Katherine stayed with him until late that night.

“Would you like Ruth home?” Katherine asked.

Ben’s face was bandaged so that he could not see. He shook his head, and said faintly:

“Don’t tell Ruth anything. You leave her alone.”

Ben finally went to sleep. Katherine followed the doctor to the front door,

and looked up at him pitifully. Dr. Parker's eyes had lost their twinkle. He gazed down at her.

"Ben's a pretty sick man," he said. "He's badly poisoned, but we'll do everything we can."

Katherine's lips quivered, and a tear trickled down her cheek. She compressed her lips, and shook her head resolutely, wiping away the first and last trace of moisture from her eyes.

"Ben thought the bees were his friends," she said.

Dr. Parker's eyes suddenly regained their lost twinkle. He took both of Katherine's hands in his big ones.

"You know what Ben would say, don't you, Katherine?" he replied. "Ben would say the bees were his friends still, but that it was his own fault for butting in on their business."

Katherine nodded, pressing her lips together.

"That sounds just like some of Ben's foolishness."

"You get as much sleep as you can, and I'll be around in the morning," the doctor said.

After Katherine closed the door, she kneeled right there in the little hall under the deer-antlers hatrack and prayed.

When Ruth arrived in Southington a week later, the first friendly face she saw was Dr. Parker's.

"Hello, Dr. Parker," she said, leaving her suitcase, and running to meet him. "Where are Uncle Ben and Aunt Katherine? Have you seen them?"

"Hello, Ruthy," replied the doctor. "Yes. I just saw them. Ben isn't feeling so well, and . . ."

Ruth's face whitened, and she stopped dead, looking with frightened eyes at the doctor. She clutched his coat sleeve with one gloved hand.

"Uncle Ben," she whispered.

"Ben is not so well, Ruthy," Dr. Parker said, laying his hand over hers, and moving her along to her suitcase. "He went out to look after some bees that were swarming, and——"

"They poisoned him," Ruth supplemented.

Dr. Parker picked up the suitcase, and took Ruth by the arm.

"My car is right here," he said. "We'll be out at your place in no time. And about the first person you'll see will be your Uncle Ben. He's sitting out in the front yard, waiting for you."

"Oh!" Ruth exclaimed. "He's all right then; it isn't serious?"

Dr. Parker helped her into his runabout, and then went around and got into the driver's seat. After the car was rolling, he said:

"Your Uncle Ben received more than twenty bee stings a week ago."

"Twenty," Ruth repeated in a shocked whisper. "Twenty! And one bee

sting poisoned his whole system. Oh, Dr. Parker, tell me the truth. Tell me.”

“Well, Ruthy,” the doctor said, “I am telling you the truth, and that is that Ben was stung by the bees, and he is a very sick man. He is sitting out in the front yard now, waiting for you to come home.”

“He’s well enough to be dressed and up?”

“He wants you to think that, Ruthy.”

Dr. Parker stopped his car behind an ivy-covered fence in back of the Brant Paper Box Mill, and, turning to Ruth, took both of her hands again in his. Ruth’s breath was coming and going unevenly.

“I wanted to tell you all about it here where you can pull yourself together,” the doctor explained. “Ben made us dress him and help him get into a chair on the lawn so that you wouldn’t think there is anything much the matter with him. And you musn’t let him realize that you see a great change.”

Ruth found her voice.

“Is Uncle Ben going to die?”

“That is in the hands of God.”

“Damn God!” Ruth cried.

“That won’t help much,” Dr. Parker said.

“It makes me feel better,” Ruth replied. “I’d like to say something worse than that; or do something terrible.”

“I know your stock, Ruthy. You’ll be a good soldier.”

“Killing Uncle Ben, and letting all the terrible people in the world live.”

“Get it out of your system, Ruthy.”

Fifteen minutes later, Dr. Parker turned in the Robbins’ driveway and stopped under the second apple tree from the street. Ruth got out and ran across the grass to where Ben was sitting in a Sunday blue suit, in a big rocking-chair, his legs propped up on another chair in front of him.

“Hello, Uncle Ben; hello, Aunt Katherine.”

She put her arms around Uncle Ben’s neck.

“Hey you!” Ben exclaimed in what was meant to be a jovial voice, but which really was a tired one, “be careful of my pipe.”

Ben’s face was thin and pale; his legs under the concealing blanket were hugely swollen. There were dark pouches under his eyes.

Ruth kissed Ben, and then she kissed her Aunt Katherine. She was smiling and natural. Ben’s eyes followed her for a moment, and then he turned to the doctor, and slowly dropped the lid over his right eye.

CHAPTER X

Ruth was walking down Main Street. She wore a soft, white felt hat and a white voile dress, flesh-colored stockings and white pumps. She passed Price's drug store.

"There goes that Ruth Robbins," Emma Putney said to Effie Wallace, Price's cashier. "Fresh as paint and bold as brass. Never think her uncle was only dead and buried these three days to look at her, would you now?"

"She's a pretty thing," said Effie.

"Pretty enough, I guess, and may be too pretty for her own good," Emma replied. "I've often wondered if she didn't use peroxide on her hair."

"Why you know Ruth Robbins is a natural blonde," Effie said. "Her mother was an ash blonde, and there've been lots of blondes on the Robbins side."

"Believes in free love," Emma Putney whispered.

"I've heard that before, Miss Putney," Effie said, "but so far as I have been able to see, she never goes anywhere much with any of the boys in this town."

Ruth passed Tony's Barber Shop.

"Hey! What's the matter, Tony, what're you staring at?" asked George Williams, the butcher, half-shaved, and in a hurry as usual.

"That Robbins girl has got a shape . . . оооh!" Tony said from his window. "And some eyes and some hairs," he added.

George Williams scrambled from the chair, and joined Tony at the window.

"She's a pretty girl, all right, Tony," he said. "But I don't know if it's a good thing for her or not. Ben Robbins is dead now, and he didn't leave anything except debts and a lot of high-falutin' ideas he put in Ruth's head."

"Me," Tony cried, waving his razor, "me, I would be a-scared if I had a daught' like-a that. All the men they want her right away they see."

"Ha! Ha! Tony," George exclaimed. "What do you know about the way men feel—you're an old feller now—all through."

"Me!" Tony replied. "Don't make a mistake. When I see that-a girl I am young again."

"Well," George Williams sighed, going back and getting into the chair, "I guess we all are the same way, Tony, more or less. Come on, get me out of here."

Ruth passed Winslow's cigar store, in the rear of which were two pool tables. Bryant Edgar, Wallace Burke, and John Backus were in the doorway.

"How'd you like to sleep with that?" Bryant Edgar asked, following Ruth's

trim figure with his gaze.

"I bet she'd bounce like a rubber ball—that one," said Wallace Burke.

"She's got the bedroom look all right," John Backus agreed.

"Best lookin' skirt in town."

"Did you get the milk route on her?"

"What a behind!"

"Oh, mama!"

Ruth passed the Southington Bank and Trust Company.

"There's that Ruth Robbins now," said Deacon Brown to J. Frederick Hasbrouck, president of the bank. "If she doesn't look like the front row of the chorus, I don't know what does."

Mr. Hasbrouck, trim body clad in tailored black, gray-brown hair neatly parted in the center, brown mustache clipped close, shining pince-nez perched on his right index finger, swung his swivel chair so that he had a view of the street. With gray eyes fixed on Ruth through the plate glass window pane, he said:

"She is a bit startling looking for this town, Deacon, but don't you think you are just a little too harsh?"

"Harsh!" the Deacon exclaimed. "Harsh! With her teaching free love to my daughter, and running around with my son Myron down to Boston? I'd like to see that girl put in an asylum, or dead."

Deacon Brown trembled with rage.

"Um," Mr. Hasbrouck murmured, turning back to his desk after Ruth had passed from view. "You want the mortgage on the Robbins place foreclosed, and suit begun on the two notes."

"You've got to do it," Deacon Brown cried, thumping his fist down on the arm of his chair.

"All right," Mr. Hasbrouck conceded. "I guess this bank will come pretty near doing anything you want, Deacon. You know that."

Ruth turned the corner into North Avenue, passing the Mansion House, halfway down the block. Dick Porter, who travelled for a mill supply house, promptly left the hotel porch and followed rapidly. When he caught up with her, he said in an eager, assured voice:

"Why, Helen, what brings you to this town? It's certainly great to see you."

Dick took off his rough straw with the red and black ribbon, held out a manicured hand, and slightly bowed a sleek, shining head of brown hair, brushed straight back.

"If I should take hold of you and yell, 'Help,' I'd probably get it," Ruth replied without turning her head.

Dick hesitated, replaced his hat, and walked back to the hotel porch. "A female wise-guy," he said, sitting down in a porch chair.

Ruth turned into a doorway, climbed a flight of stairs, and walked along a corridor to a door on which was printed in black letters:

“Daniel P. Cullen, Atty. At Law, Justice of the Peace, Real Estate.”

She opened the door and went into an outer office in which were three cane-seated chairs, a black mission table, and a marble washbasin in the corner. Through a half-open inner door, Judge Cullen was visible.

The Judge was seated in a tipped-back cane-seated swivel-chair. His feet, in Congress boots, were tossed, with other odds and ends, on his opened roll-top desk. He was smoking a powerful Connecticut cigar, and the room was blue with swirling light blue haze.

When Ruth closed the outer door the Judge didn't budge, but when she moved into his line of vision, he pulled his feet off the desk and arose. His piercing eyes sparkled darkly through steel-bowed spectacles. His hair was cropped into short, iron-gray half curls.

“Hello, Ruthy,” said the Judge, holding out a long brown hand, on the back of which was a thick growth of hair. “Come right in.”

His wide, thin lips snapped open, and snapped shut as if they were worked by a powerful mechanism.

“What can we do for you, Ruthy?” Judge Cullen asked, after Ruth was seated in a chair by an open window through which the July mid-afternoon sun poured unchecked.

Ruth smiled at the Judge. The sun made highlights on her lips, on her cheek, and in her yellow hair.

“I snapped the lock on your hall door, Judge Cullen.”

“State secrets?” the Judge inquired, raising thick eyebrows.

“More important than that for me,” Ruth said.

Judge Cullen didn't say anything. He merely kept his swimming dark gaze upon her, and nodded.

“Uncle Ben always said you were a great lawyer, but that you didn't get very far around here because you didn't care whose toes you stepped on either in court or out,” Ruth said.

“He did, did he?” said the Judge.

“Yes,” Ruth continued. “He said you would have been a Superior Court Judge a long time ago if you hadn't been suspected of being a Socialist, and if you didn't represent the mill hands when they go on strike, and if you didn't like a good poker game better than making speeches.”

“Well, what did what your Uncle Ben told you have to do with your coming to me?”

Ruth leaned a trifle towards the Judge. A faint odor of dried rose leaves became perceptible above the smell of tobacco. Her dark blue eyes looked almost as black as those of the lawyer.

“He told me some other things, too,” she said, “but I won’t go into them except to mention that they included the fact that you were very chivalrous, and apt to go out of your way to do a favor for a woman.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the Judge cried. “And you came here thinking I might even let out an extra notch if the woman happened to be very young and extra pretty?”

Ruth nodded, and smiled again.

“But that is only part of it, Judge Cullen. I am in a delicate position right now, with my Uncle Ben gone.”

Ruth’s hand, lying on her lap, clenched for an instant, and she bit her lips, and glanced out of the window.

“You have your aunt, haven’t you?” Judge Cullen suggested, clearing his throat.

“Yes, I have my Aunt Katherine to look after too,” Ruth said calmly. “She is one of my problems.”

The legal eyebrows shot upward.

“The fact is,” Ruth resumed, “that I need a lawyer, and a good lawyer right now, and I’ll need him more, perhaps, as time goes on. Further than that I need a lawyer who, I have reason to believe, won’t become personally interested in me.”

“What’s this? What’s this?” Judge Cullen cried, and stuck his head back and roared.

Ruth didn’t change her expression.

“You’d be surprised, Judge Cullen, at the experiences I’ve already had with men in my life, and I know that the age of a man doesn’t matter—they’re the same from the cradle to the grave. I’ve had a Bishop try to take me on his lap, and pet me, and I’ve had a couple of other men—and one lawyer—try to get too friendly.”

Judge Cullen was serious again.

“What do you need a lawyer for now, and what will you need one for later?” he asked.

“I’ll need one right now because I want to get out of this town and get to New York.”

“What has a lawyer to do with that?”

“That will develop,” Ruth said. “One thing I would like to know from you is, if I should have a good suit against any man in this town, no matter who it is, would you be my lawyer?”

Judge Cullen’s eyes were intent on Ruth’s.

“Even if the man should be rich and influential?” Ruth added.

Judge Cullen remained silent.

“And the other thing I want to know, is when I have other legal business

here, or in New York, or Boston, or London, or anywhere, if you will take care of it?”

“Have you any money to hire a lawyer?” Judge Cullen asked.

Ruth smiled.

“Oh, I don’t intend to let chivalry be your only reward, Judge Cullen. I think you will make more money by being my lawyer than you ever made from any of your clients.”

“What is the nature of the legal business?”

“I can’t tell you now,” Ruth said, “but I wouldn’t expect you to be my lawyer if I wanted to do anything that wasn’t strictly within the law.”

“By cracky!” Judge Cullen said. “You know, Ruth, you’re the only exciting human being in this town, and I wouldn’t dream of not taking this chance to be on the inside. Consider me your legal adviser from now on. By the way, did your Uncle Ben leave you any money?”

“No,” Ruth said, “he didn’t.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to do what he brought me up to do,” Ruth said. “I’m going out to get myself a good, healthy husband with money.”

“Do tell!” exclaimed the Judge.

Ruth arose and held out her hand.

“Thank you, Judge Cullen,” she said. “I think you’ll hear from me before long.”

“You take my breath away, Ruthy. But I hope you have luck; and call on me for help any time.”

After Ruth had gone, Judge Cullen stared at the door for five minutes without moving. Then he whipped a long, light yellow cigar from his upper right waistcoat pocket, bit off the end, and lighted it.

“Now I wonder what’s in that youngster’s pretty head?” he asked a life insurance calendar on the wall.

CHAPTER XI

"I shouldn't have come to Boston to meet you, Mr. Hasbrouck," Ruth said.

"It was perfectly all right, Ruth," J. Frederick Hasbrouck replied in a fatherly tone. "I couldn't see you to talk over your affairs in Southington."

"Why?" Ruth asked.

"There are many reasons," Mr. Hasbrouck replied.

"Among them, that your wife doesn't like you to talk to pretty girls, and that Deacon Brown, who hates me, runs your bank, and a lot of people think I'm a terrible girl because I'm a blonde, and because they say I believe in free love."

Mr. Hasbrouck leaned across the table of the discreet hotel dining room which he had made their meeting place.

"You're smart, Ruth," he said. "And that's another reason why I am interested in you."

"I wonder why you are so interested, Mr. Hasbrouck," Ruth said. "I was wondering when I got your note."

"Did you tear it up as I requested?"

"How can you ask?"

"That's a good girl," Mr. Hasbrouck said.

He stopped a minute, cleared his throat, and then said suddenly:

"When I am in Boston, Ruth, I sometimes have a cocktail. I wonder if you would have one with me before dinner?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Hasbrouck."

"Just one cocktail helps."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of taking a cocktail."

"Of course, I know you wouldn't say anything in Southington about my taking a cocktail," Mr. Hasbrouck said.

"I might write a story about it for the *Bulletin*," Ruth suggested.

Mr. Hasbrouck laughed as he beckoned a waiter, and ordered two cocktails.

"You'll have to drink them both," Ruth said.

As it turned out, Mr. Hasbrouck drank the two cocktails, and ordered a bottle of wine. When Ruth wouldn't take even a sip of the wine, he absorbed that too. Then he had some brandy in his coffee.

"I don't believe in drinking in Southington," he explained, "but it's all right in Boston."

"What was the 'vitaly important matter with regard to the welfare' of my aunt and me that you wanted to talk to me about, Mr. Hasbrouck?" Ruth asked.

Mr. Hasbrouck set down his coffee and brandy and leaned across the table. His usually pale cheeks were red, and his eyes were glowing. He kept wetting his lips with his tongue. He put his right hand on Ruth's left hand.

"Don't call me 'Mr. Hasbrouck,'" he said, "call me Freddy."

"It doesn't seem proper," Ruth said.

"Bother," exclaimed Mr. Hasbrouck. "Ruthy," he continued, "I think you are the most beautiful thing in the world."

"Thing!" Ruth repeated.

"Girl," Mr. Hasbrouck amended, squeezing her hand.

"What is it you wanted to tell me?" Ruth insisted.

"Well," Mr. Hasbrouck said, "the bank is going to foreclose the mortgage and institute suit on account of the two notes your uncle signed, and that would make you and your aunt homeless and penniless."

"But you're not going to let them do it?"

Mr. Hasbrouck squeezed her hand again, and made a reassuring grimace.

"Now, if I only had a shawl and a baby and a snowstorm," Ruth said. "I've got the mortgage on the old homestead."

"I'm glad to see that you're not the timid sort," Mr. Hasbrouck said. "And if you are as sensible as I think you are, then there is nothing for your aunt or you to worry about at all."

"What is your plan, Mr. Hasbrouck?"

"Not Mr. Hasbrouck—Freddy. Part of the plan is that you've got to call me Freddy. Now let me hear you say it."

"All right—Freddy."

"Now, I don't want you to be surprised at what I'm going to say, Ruthy—darn it, this is no place, Ruthy. Let's go where we can be by ourselves."

"Why isn't this all right?"

"It's too public."

Mr. Hasbrouck paid the check, and they left the table. In the lobby, he took Ruth's arm.

"We could go upstairs to a private dining room, where we wouldn't be disturbed," he suggested.

"Oh, I couldn't dream of it, Mr. Hasbrouck."

"You promised to call me Freddy. Call me it now."

"Freddy."

They finally got into a taxicab, and after Mr. Hasbrouck had told the driver to drive through the park, he took Ruth's hand again.

"Listen, Ruth," he said, his alcoholic breath hot on her ear. "You know how I feel about you, don't you?"

"No."

"I'm wild about you, Ruthy," he exclaimed, and put his arms around her,

and tried to kiss her mouth.

“Why, Mr. Hasbrouck! I’m surprised.”

“I know, Ruthy. You think I’m a married man, the President of a bank, and the Superintendent of the Sunday School at home. Well, I’m not anything you think.”

“You’re married.”

“I’m married, but you know my wife. She’s been given a year to live for the last five years. She’s never understood me, Ruthy, and she can’t live long. I love you, Ruthy, and I want you. And when my wife dies we’ll get married.”

Ruth pushed away Mr. Hasbrouck’s damp lips, and his hot, searching hands.

“You want to be engaged to me, Mr. Hasbrouck, and you will marry me when your wife dies?”

“It may sound crazy, Ruthy. But I’m crazy about you. I’ve watched you grow up, and I’ve been wild to tell you my plan. I have plenty of money, and we could go away from Southington. Or we could fix it so we could stay there. Oh, please say you will, Ruthy. And everything will be all right for you and your aunt, and neither of you will ever have to worry about anything.”

“Don’t. Please don’t, Mr. Hasbrouck.”

“But I love you, Ruthy.”

“This surprises me, Mr. Hasbrouck.”

“Please call me Freddy.”

“All right, Freddy, then.”

“I love to hear you say it.”

“Anyway, you can’t blame me for being surprised or wanting to take a little time to think this over. You see, I always had regarded you differently.”

“You’re not angry then, Ruthy?”

“How could I be angry?”

“I heard that you believed it was right to live with a man before you married him; and I think that is splendid.”

“But you couldn’t say it back home.”

“Good gracious! No!”

“You just want me to live quietly somewhere, so that you can visit me, and then after your wife dies, we’ll be married.”

“Oh, Ruthy, I’m wild about you. I’ve thought about this so long. And you’ll never have to worry about anything. Tell me you will. Tell me now.”

“Oh, I couldn’t tell you now, Freddy,” Ruth said. “Please keep your arm away, or I will have to leave you.”

“I never loved any one but you, Ruthy, and you can make me the happiest man in the world.”

Ruth leaned over, opened the side door of the cab, and gave the driver an

address in Beacon Street.

“What did you do that for?” Mr. Hasbrouck asked.

“That’s where I’m going to spend tonight and tomorrow,” Ruth said. “With a girl friend.”

Mr. Hasbrouck tried vainly to make love all the way to Beacon Street. When they arrived he said:

“Perhaps I’d better not be seen helping you out of the cab. Will you excuse me?”

“Of course, Mr. Hasbrouck.”

“Freddy, please.”

“Freddy, then.”

“When will you tell me? Oh, I don’t know what will happen to me if you don’t. And I can make you so happy, and so safe.”

“Good-night, Freddy.”

Ruth turned and ran up the steps of a private house.

“I’ll write you the same way,” Mr. Hasbrouck called, and the cab started away.

After it had disappeared, Ruth walked down the steps again and kept on walking until she boarded a trolley car for the North Station. There she caught a local train, and after sitting in a day coach four hours, arrived home at two o’clock the next morning.

Jerry Buckley, the night-hawk cabby of Southington, was the only human who saw her disembark from the train. Probably no one took himself and his profession more seriously than Jerry. When asked next day if he had had any passengers on the Owl, he said:

“Nope.”

CHAPTER XII

“They have these kind of cases in New York, Ruthy, but I never heard of any around here,” Judge Cullen said, looking up from the packet of letters on his desk.

“People around here are too respectable,” Ruth said.

“Well, it might be something like that.”

“They’d think a girl had lost her self-respect, and the lawyer was a blackmailer,” Ruth said.

“That might happen,” Judge Cullen admitted.

“Well,” Ruth asserted, “I’m not respectable. I’m the kind of girl that jabs a long hatpin into a specimen who thinks he’s a man, who paws me in a motion picture theatre or a subway.”

“If all females were like you there wouldn’t be much of that sort of thing,” Judge Cullen admitted.

“And I’m the kind of female that doesn’t intend to let any sanctimonious old hypocrite, who’s married and goes to church on Sunday, try to seduce me and get away with it,” Ruth said.

“You’re a great temptation, Ruthy,” Judge Cullen pointed out.

“I’ve come to believe I may be,” Ruth assented, smiling. “As a matter of fact, it was with that idea in mind that I retained you as my lawyer.”

“Good heavens,” exclaimed Judge Cullen. “Good heavens!”

“I read the newspapers, don’t I?” Ruth asked. “And I’ve read so many books they’d fill a city library. And I talked a lot with Uncle Ben, or rather he talked to me, and I’ve been talked to besides. Well, as nearly as I can gather, the great rules of gentility are that no gentleman should carry a brass band with him when he steps out of his part for any little diversion like corrupting a girl, and that no lady should advertise an improper advance.”

Judge Cullen merely let his cigar go out.

“I’ve a terrible reputation in my home town because I’m pretty, a blonde, an orphan, and poor, and because every one thinks I believe in free love, so I’m fair game. Well, Judge, I could have picked on some one else, but I thought the President of a bank and the Superintendent of a Sunday School would be a good start.”

“But you aren’t serious, Ruthy,” Judge Cullen interposed. “It would ruin J. Frederick Hasbrouck, and it would ruin you and kill your aunt.”

“Bother!” Ruth said. “Ruin is a word that has amused me for a long time. The way I am going to be ruined is the way every girl would like to be, but doesn’t dare.”

"I never heard anything like it," Judge Cullen said.

"I've got him legally, haven't I?"

"In my opinion you have, Ruthy; you've got him forty ways. It's funny how a man, otherwise sensible, can be such a fool when a pretty face is involved. There was old Tom Platt . . ."

"Well now, Judge Cullen, I don't want to wreck any one's life; I don't even care about spoiling any one's honest good time. I figure if you just start suit against Freddy, he'll settle for ten thousand dollars, of which you get five and I take five."

"Sounds like blackmail to me, Ruthy."

"It's law, isn't it?"

"It's law, all right," Judge Cullen admitted.

"It was provided, wasn't it, to prevent men from trying to fool women by promising to marry them?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm not the only girl that Freddy might have his eye on, and if we make him pay for his criminal intent, he may leave some other girl alone."

"Sounds good, Ruthy."

"That's for you, Judge Cullen. My own attitude is that Freddy is a nasty old hypocrite who ought to pay some one for being nasty, and as I need the money, I'd like to be the person."

Judge Cullen sat with his burned-out cigar in his mouth, and said nothing. Ruth arose and walked over to him, and put her white, generous-sized but shapely hand on his wrist.

"It's a legal way to sting those old stick-in-the-mud's, anyway," she said softly. "And anyhow, Judge Cullen, you're my lawyer, and you've got to do it."

Judge Cullen looked at the bunch of letters and frowned. Then he smiled.

"I'll do it, Ruthy," he said. "I'll do it."

"I knew you would," Ruth said.

"Bring me a millionaire next time," Judge Cullen said. "What's the use of wasting your talents on small fry?"

CHAPTER XIII

Ruth answered the door bell that night about eight o'clock, and opened the door to disclose Myron Brown. Myron had grown to be as tall as his father, but with a breadth of shoulder and depth of chest that his father lacked.

"Ruth!"

Ruth took Myron's outstretched hands and turned her cheek for him to kiss. He had been allowed that much liberty, and no more, after a long warfare.

"If your father knew you came here to see me he'd have a fit. Why aren't you in camp?"

"I wanted to see you," Myron said.

"Well, you're seeing me."

"Don't be like that, Ruth. For God's sake, be human. You know I've loved you all my life, and would marry you tonight, if you'd have me. And you love me, too."

"Do I?"

"Darn it!" Myron exclaimed. "I didn't come here to get into an argument. Ever since your Uncle Ben died I've been worrying about you. Somebody's got to take care of you—and I'm the one to do it."

"You can't even take care of yourself; you've got to finish college, and then go through medical school."

"Bosh! I can chuck it, and get a job. I'd rather be a bricklayer and have you than be the biggest doctor in the world without you. Oh, Ruth, can't you believe me?"

"Ssh! Not so loud. You don't know how your voice carries, Myron, and Aunt Katherine has enough to stew about."

Ruth led the way into the front parlor.

"I wasn't talking loud," Myron protested.

Katherine's voice came from upstairs.

"Ruth! ROO-OOTH!"

"Yes, Aunt Katherine."

"Did I hear Myron Brown's voice?"

"Why, you knew he was at camp in Maine for the summer."

"Yes, but I thought I heard his voice."

"I'll be upstairs in a jiffy, Aunt Katherine."

Myron grinned at Ruth.

"I suppose you think your method of not actually telling a lie in words isn't just as much of a lie as if you actually said it."

"I never lie," Ruth replied.

“You never say a lie with your tongue,” Myron admitted, “but you create a false impression plenty of times. You know you do.”

“Did you come all the way to Southington from Maine just to have the pleasure of calling me a liar?”

“Oh, Ruth, for God’s sake, can’t you be human for once?”

“I’m generally accused of being too human.”

“Oh, for gosh sakes! You know what I mean. Can’t you be a little soft and affectionate? I’d just love to take you in my arms and pet you, and protect you from everybody.”

Ruth smiled, and immediately was serious.

“The truth is, Myron, I don’t want to be protected. I feel like protecting some one myself. I feel worried about you right this minute—worried about how you’re going to explain being in Southington to your father, and worried about your career, and everything.”

“Father can go hang, and so can my career. I want you.”

“You don’t know me, Myron. I wouldn’t have any use, let alone love, for a man that would give up a chance for a big place in the world for me. I might love a bricklayer, or a clerk who was aiming and working for the best he could get out of life. But I wouldn’t have any use for a king who abdicated his throne for me. I don’t want to represent any sacrifices. I want to stand for achievement.”

“You talk like a high school graduation essay.”

“You’d be surprised if you knew all the varieties of essays I was brought up on,” Ruth said. “And darned few of them high school.”

“That fool business about living with a man before you marry him.”

“You’d live with me, wouldn’t you, without marrying me?” Ruth asked, tilting her face up to his.

“Darn it! Don’t talk like that.”

“All I’d have to do is give you a chance, that’s all.”

“You just try it with somebody, and see what I’ll do.”

“What’s wrong, if you think you love a man well enough to marry him, if you live with him first?”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake! Don’t go all over that again.”

“If I loved you, would you live with me without marrying me, Myron?”

“I’ll go crazy in a minute, Ruth. Will you stop? I’m wild about you. I’m crazy about you. I love you more than anything in the world. Come on and get married!”

“On what?”

“There you go again. I know you’re not as hard as you sound. You can’t be. I’ll get a job, and work the skin off my hands for you; money isn’t everything.”

“It isn’t everything, but it helps. And I want a husband with manicured nails, who has time to take at least one bath a day, and who isn’t above dressing for dinner once in a while.”

“You’re mercenary.”

“Another thing—I’m human. I want to be married before I’m much older. Uncle Ben said most civilized people get married too late in life, and I think he was right.”

“Ruth!”

“You’re a sweet boy, Myron, but you’ve got about seven years ahead of you before you’ll be a doctor, if you go about it right, and then you’ll be smelling of ether, and carrying stethoscopes, and comforting other women, and getting out of bed to make calls in the middle of the night.”

“That’s a fine way to talk about a great profession.”

“Just because I don’t measure up to it doesn’t make it less great, does it? But I can’t wait seven years. I wouldn’t have you if you gave it up, not because you never would forgive me, which is probable, but because I never could forgive myself, which is certain.”

“I know that isn’t the real you talking, Ruth. You’re too noble for that.”

“Noble!” Ruth exclaimed. “That’s the trouble, Myron. You don’t take me for just what I am, a healthy female of the species, who wants a man, and a home, and a baby or two, may be three, and some luxury out of life.”

“You can’t go bargaining for love,” Myron exclaimed.

“Well,” Ruth said, “if you call it bargaining to wait for a man to come along who can meet my requirements for a husband, then I’m a bargain hunter.”

“I’m not going to stand here and listen to you talk like that, Ruth. How about a young woman and a young man getting married and working together heart and soul for the best there is in life.”

“I’ll tell you something, Myron,” Ruth said, stepping closer to him. “You never talked anything about going ahead, regardless of anything, and getting as far as it’s possible for you to go. All you’ve talked about is that you’d give up your father for me, and you’d give up school for me, and you’d give up Southington for me.”

“Well, I would.”

“Then let me tell you something,” Ruth exclaimed, taking Myron by the arm, and leading him to the door.

“I can’t go like this,” Myron protested. “We’ve got to talk this out.”

“But you’re going,” Ruth insisted, “and we’re not going to talk it out. But I’m going to tell you something right here in the door first, and that is, that you never said to me, ‘Ruth, come on with me, and I’ll lick the world for you, and make my family and Southington like you.’”

“When I say I’ll live with a man before I marry him, you say, ‘Try it and you’ll see what I’ll do.’ You don’t even know what you’d do yourself, but I do. You’d give up something. There are plenty of times you could have had me, Myron, if you’d really wanted me. But you gave up.”

“But Ruth.”

Myron tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him violently away from her and turned towards the steps.

“You’d better go, Myron. What I want is a man who takes me in his stride. I want a man, not a boy.”

“You can’t talk to me like that, Ruth. You can’t.”

“Good-night, Myron.”

When the door closed, Myron stood for a moment on the porch. Then he walked down the steps to the sidewalk, to a big maple tree. There, he turned and looked back at the house. Suddenly he made a violent outward gesture with his arms, straightened his shoulders, and marched up the road.

Just as his figure became shadowy in the night, Detective Tom Guilfoyle, of the Southington Police Department, stepped into the grass beside the road and followed him.

CHAPTER XIV

"I got the money all right, ten thousand dollars, Ruthy, but there's the devil to pay."

"I'm not surprised, Judge," Ruth said.

"Maybe you'd be surprised to know that J. Frederick had Detective Tom Guilfoyle following you in the hopes of getting something on you, and Guilfoyle reported back that Myron Brown spent a quarter of an hour with you last Tuesday night."

"Oh, dear!" Ruth exclaimed. "I suppose Deacon Brown heard about it."

"I'll say he did," Judge Cullen said, grinning. "You can imagine how mad J. Frederick was when the only goat he could dig up was the Deacon's son. He was wild. He was so mad that he would just as soon have everybody in Southington know about your suit, except the Deacon. The Deacon really runs the bank. And he's one man J. Frederick has to please."

"How exciting," Ruth said. "I wish I had known I was being shadowed."

"Anyhow, J. Frederick told the Deacon that Myron had called on you, without telling how he knew. And he settled your suit—called me a blackmailer, too. And I gave him back his letters."

"What happened to Myron?"

"Well, between you and me, I heard all this from Tom Guilfoyle, who is a better friend of mine than he is of J. Frederick and the Deacon. The Deacon is the real political boss of this town, as everybody knows, and J. Frederick is his right-hand man, and when they say the word, the Police Department has to make a showing. Tom Guilfoyle thinks you're a grand girl, but his orders are to get the goods on you; and Chief Patten's orders are the same."

"Well, they can't get anything on me. But tell me, what happened to Myron?"

"All I know is what I got from Guilfoyle, and he says the Deacon went plumb out of his head, and told Myron never to darken his door again."

"I'm sorry about Myron," Ruth interjected.

"They had a hot argument, with the Missis crying; and Myron left the house, and went to the station, and took a train for Boston," Judge Cullen concluded.

"Now, I need some advice," Ruth said.

"Maybe it's me that needs advice," Judge Cullen countered.

Ruth smiled.

"I want to get out of Southington as fast as possible, and I want to take Aunt Katherine with me. You'll have to help."

“Whatever I can do, I’ll do, Ruthy.”

“I’ve been thinking over everything ever since I realized that Uncle Ben was going to die. My first idea was to get enough money to buy in the old place so that Aunt Katherine could live in it in peace.”

“That might be done,” the Judge said, blowing a cloud of blue smoke at the window.

“She figures she could sell apples and eggs and chickens, and do a little sewing or odd work here and there. Aunt Katherine believes in the humble, loyal school of philosophy.”

“She’d get along, I guess,” Judge Cullen said. “The people in this town aren’t so bad when it comes to helping anybody.”

“Sure, they’re not, particularly as they’d feel extra sorry for her because she was the sister of Benjamin Robbins, and the aunt of Ruth Robbins,” Ruth said. “They’d just love every little bit of help they gave her. But I’m going to do the helping myself.”

“Yes?” Judge Cullen said.

“And that’s where you come in. I want you to come out to our house tonight and tell Aunt Katherine and me about the mortgage and the notes. But begin the conversation by saying you have some good news along with what might look at first glance as bad news.”

“I see.”

“Then you say that Uncle Ben a long time ago gave you a sum of money in cash in my name, with the understanding that if anything happened to him, I was to use this money to go to New York and study to be a private secretary, and take Aunt Katherine with me to protect me.”

Judge Cullen puffed his cigar vigorously, never taking his darkly swimming eyes behind their shining lenses from his client’s face.

“Aunt Katherine probably will say that this money should be used to pay our debts,” Ruth said. “It’s your job to explain to her that they aren’t our debts: that Uncle Ben set this money aside before he signed the notes, and before he took out the second mortgage; that the money is mine, and no one else’s: and that the only debt involved is the debt to Uncle Ben’s memory and thoughtfulness—that we shouldn’t hesitate to follow out his wishes.”

“You may be wrong, but you’ve got courage; and it’s better to my way of thinking to be wrong and do something than to never do anything for fear of being wrong,” Judge Cullen said.

“If you asked me honestly, Judge Cullen, I couldn’t tell you the difference between right and wrong. I only know what’s right for me, as an individual. If I can go to sleep at night with a pleasant feeling of having done my best all day, I’ve done right so far as I’m concerned.”

“How will the money you got from J. Frederick affect you?”

“Oh, Judge, that makes me so happy. I know that most persons would think it was blackmail—but most persons are so stupid. They are taught on a system built up to protect the powerful and their money from the weak.”

“You a Socialist, Ruthy?”

“I should say not. I’m just figuring that I’m going to be one of the powerful, so I’m using the laws to help myself. Uncle Ben always said you could do almost anything, as long as you did it successfully. I don’t want to be loyal to any one except myself, but I won’t mind having people, so minded, being loyal to me.”

“You may be wrong, but I’m rooting for you, Ruthy. You sound slightly off the track, but I got cured of doubting anything except results when the Wright Brothers went flying one day at Kitty Hawk. Yes, sir. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and there’s no doubt about that.”

“You’re going to be my legal adviser, Judge, so I’m telling you more than I’ve ever told anybody. If I want anything—man, or money—I’m going after it hard. And, as long as I am within the letter of the law, I’m not going to be bothered much about conscience, in the ordinary sense of the word, when it comes to dealing with men without conscience. J. Frederick Hasbrouck, please note. He was trying to take advantage of my youth and innocence, and I took advantage of him instead.”

“You’re a wonder, Ruthy.”

“Another thing, Judge. Don’t tell Aunt Katherine how much money it was that Uncle Ben put aside for me. It’s just as well to have the amount flexible. And if some day it should furnish us with a steam yacht, or a villa on the Mediterranean, I don’t want her to be too much surprised.”

“I’d give a lot to know what’s in that pretty head of yours.”

“You know most everything, Judge. I was just thinking that you always can write to me, if we should add to the fund, that my money was in some stock that has gone up. But I don’t want any of my money really in stocks, ever, Judge. Savings banks and bonds, or whatever it is that savings banks are allowed to invest their money in, are good enough for me.”

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you, Ruthy?”

“Uncle Ben saved me the trouble of a good deal of experimenting. He tried stocks and showed me a pile of pretty certificates he collected. And he explained to me how he could figure out that the market was going down but that he couldn’t figure just when it was going to start; and that he could figure when it was going to go up, but not exactly the right moment. So he always was wiped out, although his judgment was excellent.”

“He gave you quite an education.”

“Oh, when I was only a little girl, he used to read the newspapers to me, and explain all the ways that men tried to take advantage of women, and

women tried to take advantage of men. He used to say:

“Ruthy, remember that most nice folks in a place like Southington shut their eyes and their ears to what really is going on in the world. They have run away from reality, or have kept as far away from it as possible. They know there is a police court in town, but they would consider it lowering to themselves if they read the police court news, or let on they were interested in it.

“These people know the world is a tough spot, but they won’t admit it to themselves. Every now and then when some bad human nature bursts through the surface in their own town, or in their own family, they are horrified, and forget it as soon as possible.

“One reason some of the men and women in a town like this are so much against sinners, is because they are repressing their own desires to commit the same sins,’ Uncle Ben told me. ‘Understand yourself, Ruthy,’ Uncle Ben said, ‘and if you would like to sleep with a man, or get drunk, or have a palace to live in, recognize the desire in yourself; drag it out into the light of your mind, admit you feel that way, and figure it out as a real problem, and as a true part of yourself. Don’t treat those urges merely as thoughts the devil has put in your mind. Blaming bad thoughts on the devil is only an easy way to excuse your own perfectly natural inclinations.’”

“Well, I’m darned,” Judge Cullen said. “I always knew Ben was a card, but what a way to bring up a girl in this town!”

“I’m glad he did,” Ruthy asserted. “The more I think of him, now that he’s dead, the more I admire him. What would have happened to me in this situation now, if I’d had the usual training, I don’t know. I’d have worked somewhere around here, been annoyed by men, gossiped about by women, married some dumb Isaac who couldn’t talk about anything but his business, his golf, the stock market, the food market, or the weather.”

“Well, what do you want a husband to talk about?”

“All subjects,” Ruth replied. “He should be the kind of man who, at least, never talks about his own business.”

“Well! Well! Well!”

“I want a man with hobbies. Uncle Ben could talk about birds, bees, philosophy, psychology, government, history, economics, poetry, music, books, plays, and the way they work the badger game nowadays, as compared to the way they used to work it when he was a boy.”

“But your Uncle Benjamin wasn’t what might be termed a successful man.”

“We don’t know yet, Judge Cullen. Give me a chance. Uncle Ben was a philosopher. He told me that when I saw a great man I could figure there was a great woman behind him somewhere—either a grandmother, or a mother, or a

wife. He said his job was to make me a great woman.”

“I’ll be darned. I’ll be eee-ter-nally darned.”

“He said, if I was going to be a great woman, I wouldn’t have to be bothered about ordinary morality. He said great women of the world had had lovers and love-children. But he also told me that a great woman doesn’t go in for ordinary loving.

“‘You’ll have your troubles, Ruthy,’ he told me, ‘but if you’re heading for a goal, which dominates your life, your troubles can’t be anything but incidentals on the road.’”

“It sounds a bit crazy; and still I don’t know,” Judge Cullen said. “Knowing you, Ruthy, I’m willing to bank on you.”

“He said most people didn’t have the brains to admit to themselves what they wanted in life, or the guts to go after it, if they did know.

“‘Be sure you’re right, and then go ahead—to hell with everybody,’ Uncle Ben said.”

“And you’re going ahead,” the Judge observed, biting off the bitter end of a fresh cigar.

“I am,” Ruth said, rising. “And now that you know more about your client, I’ll be running along.”

Judge Cullen returned from the outer office and stood in the window. There still was a scent of dried rose leaves mingling with the tobacco smoke. He looked out of the window until Ruth, dainty and assured, had vanished from his range of vision. He faced the life insurance calendar, his only confidant, and said:

“I wouldn’t have missed this for a farm.”

CHAPTER XV

“How did things go at school?” Katherine asked, putting down Sir Joseph, the six-toed cat, already reconciled to urban life.

“Fine,” Ruth said, taking off a black felt hat with a sparkling rhinestone ornament. “My sample business letter was read to the class as a model. And they are keeping my shorthand notebooks as the best they’ve ever had.”

“I always was at the head of my class,” Katherine said. “All of our family have been good scholars.”

“I’m going to be good at work, Aunt Katherine,” Ruth said. “What did you do today?”

“I took a ride in one of those sight-seeing busses, and I saw where the Vanderbilts and Astors live in Fifth Avenue. I wouldn’t take one of those houses if you’d give it to me.”

“I would—and all that goes with it,” Ruth replied. “There’s nothing I’d like better than a house here, and a house there, and a palace or two thrown in.”

“You’re a strange girl, Ruth. Sometimes I’m afraid for you.”

“Other people are just as strange to me as I am to them,” Ruth said. “They all pretend to be so contented with the barest necessities of life. I don’t. I want houses, servants, fur coats, diamonds, pearls, travel, and association with those who run the world, not those who are run.”

“Oh, dear!” Katherine sighed.

“You used to say you’d never live cooped up in a flat in a city,” Ruth said. “But here you are, and apparently as contented as a bug in a rug.”

“It’s very convenient,” Katherine admitted. “You press a button, and you’ve got light. You press another, and your oven is lighted. If you forget to order something, you call on the telephone and you get it in a minute. And there is the Metropolitan Museum, and the Public Library, and the American Museum of Natural History, and the Town Hall, and Grand Opera, and Carnegie Hall. I could move into the Metropolitan Museum and stay right there for a year.”

“And there’s Central Park, if you want a breath of nature,” Ruth suggested. “The way I look at it, a multi-billionaire couldn’t own a place like that in the center of the city; and if he did he couldn’t carry it around with him, or enjoy it any more than his footman, or any more than I enjoy it now.”

“It is a nice park, but it isn’t the country,” Katherine said.

“You’ll have the country again, if you want it,” Ruth promised, putting her arms around Katherine, and kissing her on the cheek.

Katherine hadn't kissed any one on the mouth since she'd been informed about germs. She always turned her cheek.

"I don't mind New York for a little while," Katherine admitted. "But it makes me feel sort of guilty, spending all this money. I'm so afraid. What if you shouldn't get a good job? What would we do? I would hate to go crawling back to Southington after leaving there like we did."

"When we go back we'll go in style," Ruth promised. "And please leave the worrying to me, Aunt Katherine."

"I can't help but think that you might lose your health, or that something might happen so you couldn't get work, or this money might be lost. You've got to figure on sickness, Ruth. And I just can't help thinking that they still have to have poorhouses."

"That's the way they talk in Southington, Aunt Katherine," Ruth said. "Poorhouses, rainy days and funerals are on their minds. My mind is fixed on palaces, good health, and happiness."

"But death and rainy days come to everybody."

"Whether they think of them or not, Aunt Katherine. I only keep my mind focussed on the things in life I can work for. You can get into a poorhouse without work, and you can die without lifting a finger when the time comes. But as I look at it, a human being who wants to be a little different from ordinary, has to think different."

"I wish you weren't quite so different, Ruth."

"That's why I'm studying to be a secretary, and at the same time, taking riding and fencing and dancing and swimming lessons. I've got to keep my golf and tennis up, too."

"What does that Mr. Hartman who comes here have to do with you, Ruth? Does he pay for any of those lessons?"

Ruth laughed.

"You don't have to worry about Albert Hartman, Aunt Katherine. Yes. He is paying for all these. He would like to have me go to dramatic school. He thinks I would be a great success on the stage."

"I don't like it."

"Albert Hartman is Marion West's uncle. You know that, Aunt Katherine. And he has just tons of money, and he has helped any number of girls who wanted to sing, or act, or paint. Music and the stage are hobbies with him."

"It looks more to me as if pretty girls were a hobby with him. I worry so."

"You can trust me, can't you?"

"I think I can, Ruth, but you don't know the world, as I do. Men like that aren't giving away money for nothing."

"Well, how about the time Albert offered the cloak and suit workers two thousand five hundred dollars a week as long as they were on strike, or how

about all the young people—artists and singers—whose studies he has financed? Albert is more of a philanthropist than a banker. He says he loves youth and ambition. And, anyhow, I'd take anything I can get from anybody."

"It isn't right, Ruth."

"Uncle Ben told me that only poor people wouldn't accept presents. He said rich people don't hesitate. They're glad to get them. Poor people are too proud. I have to keep telling myself that I'm rich, so it's a very small matter for a very rich man like Albert Hartman to give me a few riding and fencing lessons—he's a regular Lorenzo the Magnificent."

"You are basing your arguments on a fallacy. You're not rich: you are poor, Ruth."

"I'm rich in my mind, and nothing exists if you don't think it. A rich man in an insane asylum, who thinks he is poor, is more miserable, I've read, than a really poor man."

"It isn't right to take presents from men, Ruth."

"I'll take anything they give me," Ruth asserted. "I'll take anything from a bunch of daisies right up through pearl necklaces."

Katherine put her hands over her ears. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"Oh, Ruth, don't talk that way," the older woman protested. "I know you wouldn't do such things."

"You watch me," Ruth replied. "Thank God I wasn't raised as a lady."

"Benjamin was a good man, Ruth, but he had his shortcomings like all the rest of us. I pray every night that you will outgrow the awful things he taught you."

Katherine took a handkerchief from her apron pocket, and dabbed at her eyes.

"There! There! Aunty."

Ruth began to pat Katherine's plump back. Katherine pulled herself away, and removed the handkerchief from her eyes.

"Don't you start 'there, thereing' me," she cried.

"I'm sorry, Aunty."

"And don't 'Aunty' me."

Katherine turned and walked through the living room, and pushed through the swinging door which led into the kitchen of the three-room flat—two bedrooms, living room, and a kitchen, which really was a kitchenette.

The flat was furnished mostly from the Robbins home—mahogany and walnut. Two Chippendale chairs and two gate-legged tables, two old rockers, an old curvy, spindly sofa, and two overstuffed easy chairs, with three small Oriental rugs on the hard floor, and portraits in oil of Major Adoniram Robbins, of the Continental Army; Captain Adoniram Robbins, of the Grand Army of the Republic, and Hosea and Samantha Baines, great-grandparents of

Katherine's mother, looking down from the walls.

"They make a grand front," Ruth said.

Ruth's bedroom was in walnut, and Katherine's was in mahogany. Hooked rugs were on the floors. Etchings and prints were on the walls of Ruth's room. But in Katherine's room were family photographs, a print of "Hope," a print of Sir Galahad, and the Robbins' family Bible.

The telephone rang a moment after Katherine went into the kitchen. Ruth picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Albert," she said.

"I'm great. How are you?"

"Still the best in the class."

"I am pretty good at that."

"Not tonight—I have to study."

"No, not tomorrow night, either."

"Oh, I haven't spoken about that to her yet. I haven't had time."

Ruth looked at the kitchen door. She was speaking in her naturally low-pitched contralto, but she subdued it a trifle.

"If I said anything about a larger apartment and a maid right now, I think she'd have heart failure."

"No, everything is fine. There isn't a thing I want, except to get my work done."

"You're a peach."

"No, don't. This is Wednesday. Don't call me until Saturday."

"Yes. Yes. Yes. No. All right, then, good-by."

Katherine came from the kitchen. Her face was a trifle redder than usual from the heat, and her gold-bowed spectacles were a trifle steamed.

"Was that Albert Hartman?"

"Yes, Aunt Katherine."

Katherine stared at her niece for a few seconds.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," she exclaimed.

Ruth smiled, and went to hang up her coat and hat. Katherine went to the side of the room and removed a vase and a doily from a gate-legged table, set the table in the center of the living room, and started pulling out the leaves.

CHAPTER XVI

“Who’s that blonde you’ve got under cover, Albert?” asked Richman Peters.

Albert Hartman, smart and erect in his evening clothes, removed a big, imported cigarette from between his lips. All around them first-nighters were greeting each other under the marquee and on the sidewalk. Hartman’s iron-gray hair showed crisp and plentiful under his shining two-quart hat. His brown eyes, brilliant as a bird’s, and as bold, dominated his strong face, clean-shaven except for a close-cropped iron-gray mustache.

Peters, a big, dominating figure, in a dinner jacket and soft black felt hat, was publisher of *The Express*—a man of electric personality. He had yellow hair, slicked straight back, and a clean-shaven, big-featured face, blood showing through thin skin.

“She’s the best looking female I’ve seen in a year,” Peters added. “Where did you dig her up?”

“She’s a remarkable girl,” Albert Hartman said seriously, his dark eyes meeting Peters’ blue ones. “She is out to beat the world, and I’m her friend.”

“I gathered as much,” Peters said crisply.

“I am her friend, and nothing more than that,” Hartman said equably. “I pay for some fencing and riding lessons, and a few odds and ends. She has a curious poise. She accepts everything I offer most cordially—and gives nothing in return. She interests me.”

“She would interest me,” Peters countered. “What career is she after—opera or stage? Perhaps I could be of some assistance?”

Albert Hartman shook his head, his carefully brushed hat shining in the street incandescence, where the smell of burnt gasoline blended with the odor of a thousand perfumes and thousands of cigarettes to form an outside-of-theatre-during-intermission atmosphere.

A rumor of voices—sopranos, contraltos, basses, tenors, and in-betweens—nasal grunts from taxi horns, and shuffling of feet on pavement—beat against ear drums.

“I don’t know myself just what her goal is, but she insists it is not the stage,” he said. “At present she is studying to be a secretary.”

“I will give her a job any time,” Peters volunteered.

“I have told her that she would have no worries on that score.”

“Perhaps you will introduce me sometime?”

“Perhaps.”

Both men smiled as they parted to return to their seats. The seat beside

Hartman in the eighth row, where he invariably sat at such affairs, was empty.

CHAPTER XVII

Katherine opened the door, disclosing Myron in the hall. He held his hat in his hand; his hair looked a bit long, and his face looked a trifle thin. He was brushed, pressed, shined, and bathed, but he didn't have an opulent appearance.

"Hello, Miss Robbins," Myron said, bowing. "Is Ruth in?"

"Why, for land's sakes!" Katherine exclaimed. "Myron Brown! Why, Myron, come right in! Let me take your hat and coat."

Katherine closed the door and began to help Myron off with his overcoat. Two torchères, one at each end of a console table, lighted a rich gallery, a separate room in itself. Furniture and soft rugs, shining floors, doors leading off, straight ahead and to the left and right, gave a sense of luxury.

After his coat and hat had been put carefully into a closet by Katherine, Myron followed down the gallery and to the left into a big living-room, beautifully furnished. A wood fire was burning in an antique grate. Outside French windows, a terrace was visible.

"We have a cook and a table girl," Katherine said, in an unconvinced tone. "Some stocks Ruth bought with some money she had. It doesn't seem real to me. I'm so glad to see some one from Southington."

"Stocks?" Myron repeated.

"Yes," Katherine said. "She had some money Ben had set aside for her years ago—I don't know how much. She got a letter from Judge Cullen at home—it was all in there—that she had made a lot of money on some deal. And Ruth moved right away. I hope she really has money enough to pay for it. I'm so worried."

"Where is Ruth?"

"She is working. She went through a secretarial school, and was the brightest student they ever had there, and then she took a position as secretary to a vice-president of the CaaCan Oil Company. That was three months ago. And just yesterday she was made secretary to the president.

"I'll bet the president grabbed her," Myron exclaimed. "She's too good looking to be in business. She needs to be looked after."

Katherine's blue eyes opened wider behind their lenses.

"I thought at first I was looking after Ruth," she confessed. "But I find I am helpless and bewildered. I don't understand anything of what is happening. It seems like a dream. Benjamin died, and I thought our affairs were in such a mess that I would have to sell eggs, or be a housekeeper, or something."

"And what happened?" Myron asked.

“Well, Judge Cullen sent for us and told me that Ben had given this money to him to keep for Ruth years ago; and Ruth insisted on coming to New York and bringing me with her. I didn’t approve, but when I saw how determined she was I felt it was better for me to go along than let her go alone. So we came to New York last fall.

“That’s funny—that money business.”

“Then she met a man named Albert Hartman. You’ve heard of him. A big man downtown.”

Myron shut his jaws till the muscles showed in ridges.

“I never liked the man, but so far as I could see he always behaved with the height of propriety. When he calls they both seem glad to have me in the room; and when he takes Ruth for a ride in the country, I always am invited. They go to the theatre alone once in a while. But that seems to be the custom in this day and age. I can’t make head nor tail of it, Myron. And I’m glad to have home folks to talk to. I’m sort of cut off from Southington.”

“You’re no more cut off than I am,” Myron said.

“Why, what’s the trouble, Myron?”

“Ruth must’ve known. Didn’t she tell you anything?”

“Ruth tells very little; she’s a queer one.”

“Why,” Myron said, “I had a row with father, and he told me to get out, and I did. I came right here to New York, and now I’m earning my way through medical school.”

A rustle in the hall caused Katherine to straighten up.

“There’s Ruth now, I think,” she said.

Myron arose, just in time to stand face to face with Ruth. She started a trifle when she saw him, and then held out her gloved right hand. She was wearing a felt hat of deep tan, and a brown monotone tweed coat with a brown beaver collar. Her cheeks were blooming, and her eyes were shining.

“Hello, Ruth.”

“Hello, Myron; it’s certainly nice to see you. How did you find out where I lived?”

“I read in the real estate columns that you had leased this apartment.”

“Darn!” Ruth exclaimed. “I wasn’t saying that because you found us that way, Myron,” she added quickly. “But I didn’t want other people in Southington to know anything about me. I have an unlisted telephone, and don’t tell any one except my intimate friends where I live. I never thought of the real estate columns.”

“Probably very few persons do,” Myron observed. “But why so secretive?”

“Oh, I’m not running away from any one,” Ruth laughed. “But I like to feel that no one of whom I am not fond can find me easily.”

“Miss Robbins has been telling me of your stock deals, and your school,

and your work,” Myron said.

“Aunt Katherine misses Southington people, I guess,” Ruth exclaimed. “She must have been glad to meet some one she could talk to.” Turning to Katherine, she added, “Weren’t you?”

“You never told me that Myron had a fight with his father and that his father put him out, and that he has been working his way through medical school,” Katherine said. “Did you know it?”

Ruth nodded.

“I heard about it,” she said.

“I suppose you were the cause of it, too, Ruth. You and the wild ideas your Uncle Benjamin put in your head.”

Ruth jumped up.

“I’ll tell you what, Myron,” she said. “Let’s you and me go out to dinner tonight. I’d love to.”

“I can’t afford any dinners,” Myron said, not unpleasantly. “I earn my money hard, and I spend it harder.”

“Oh, I’ll pay for it,” Ruth exclaimed.

“You’ll pay for nothing for me,” Myron asserted, without heat. “I’m an old-fashioned gent, and when I take a girl out I do the paying. But I also find I’ve got a streak of Father in me which I wouldn’t have believed if I’d been told.”

“What’s that?” Ruth asked.

“I don’t get anything unless I can pay cash for it, and I would rather starve than owe anyone a nickel.”

“Well, we can have dinner here,” Ruth said. “That’s easy. You’ll be my guest, won’t you?”

“I can’t, Ruth,” Myron said, gripping his jaws until the muscles showed, and moving his fingers nervously.

“Come in the library a minute, Myron,” Ruth said, arising. “I’m sure Aunt Katherine will excuse us for a minute. We can talk better in there. Come on.”

She led the way to a cozy room and closed the door.

“Look here, Ruth,” Myron exclaimed. “I’m going crazy.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Matter! What’s the matter? Where did you get the money for all this? You can’t expect me to swallow that cock-and-bull story about your Uncle Ben. How did you get it?”

“It’s none of your business, Myron.”

Myron stepped forward and took hold of her arms.

“You tell me,” he insisted.

“You can’t get anything out of me that way,” Ruth said. “I suppose you know you’re hurting me,” she added, looking up at him from a still face, in

which blue eyes looked black.

Myron, face flushed and hazel eyes hard, held her arms for a moment longer. Then he dropped her wrists as suddenly as he had seized them. He turned blindly to the fire, and stood with his back turned, while Ruth unconsciously felt the tender places made by his hand. Suddenly, he sobbed once—a convulsive, racking effort. He wheeled then and faced her.

“I don’t believe in any hocus-pocus, or any mysteries between people, Ruth,” he said, speaking with effort. “I find I’m weak only in one way, and that is my love for you. Whatever that feeling is, it over-powers me. I had made up my mind to forget you and go ahead with my work, but I haven’t been able to forget you.”

“Why forget me?” Ruth asked.

“You and I are far apart,” Myron exclaimed. “Your theories of life are different from mine. You are cold, and I am hot. You throw aside old principles. I hold to them.”

“I’m not much good, it would seem,” Ruth interjected.

“Nobody’s much good that lives a lie,” Myron cried. “You’ve been repeating what your Uncle Ben told you for years, but by God you’ve managed to forget one of the most important things I ever heard him say.”

“What was that?”

“That was when he said that the only way to live was as if you lived in a glass house. Don’t do anything or think anything consciously that you wouldn’t be glad to have the world know.”

Ruth’s mouth opened just far enough to show a dazzle of white teeth.

“That’s right. He did.”

“You’re whooping, he did. You wanted to forget it, so you’ve forgotten it. Even your Aunt Katherine, who loves you to death, doesn’t know where all your luxury comes from. She doesn’t admit to herself that you’re lying to her. But I know you’re lying. You’ve grown from those smooth lies of the old days, when you never said it in words, to the rougher lies of the present day, when you don’t mind putting it in words.”

“Don’t talk so loud, Myron. You know how your voice carries.”

“The devil with my voice. You gave me hell because I said I was willing to give up anything in the world for you. You said you wanted a man who could take you in his stride. Well, that of itself wasn’t much of a lesson for me. But when my father started raving and ordered me out, I learned something. I learned another great lesson that your Uncle Ben taught.”

Myron paused a minute, and swallowed nervously.

“Your Uncle Ben said that the first rule is to be your own boss—that you haven’t any power to help others until you don’t need any help yourself. When I left home, I thought Father would come around, but I made up my mind that

whether he did or not, I'd earn my way from then on. And I've been doing it. I'm going to be a surgeon, despite hell and high water, the devil, and you."

"Why, Myron," Ruth exclaimed gently, "you're talking just as I told you I wanted to hear men talk."

"Bah!" Myron roared, making a sweeping gesture with both arms. "You and your wants! You want the world with a fence—a gold fence—around it. You think you're so darned smart."

"I'm struggling with what few brains I have," Ruth said, glancing around.

"You're not smart: you're dumb. I don't have to ask you if you've given anything for your furniture and your apartment, and your furs and your servants. You aren't honest enough. You trimmed some one out of 'em—Albert Hartman, I guess."

"You and Aunt Katherine had quite a chat, didn't you?"

"Don't try to get away from what I'm saying by being sarcastic. You're hiding yourself away from people in Southington, the way you explain it. But what you're trying to do is hide away from yourself. And you can't do it."

"From the way you always acted before, Myron, I wouldn't have suspected you knew me so well."

"My God, Ruth! Haven't you any heart? Haven't you any feelings for the really fine things of life? What kind of parade is this, anyway? A girl like you, of the family you come from, coming down here to New York and living like a kept woman."

"It seems they live well, Myron."

"Most of them give up something rather tangible for it, but I know you don't."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Myron, stop giving me fits, and come down to earth. I'm going my way, and you're going yours. You say you love me, and there's no one I like better than you when you're reasonable."

"How the devil can I be reasonable with you the way you are?"

"But Myron—I want to be reasonable. I want to be pleasant. I don't want to scream at any one, and I don't enjoy having any one scream at me."

"But you deserve to be screamed at. You deserve to be spanked. You should be sent to bed without any supper. You think you're a woman of the world, but you're only a bad, wilful little girl, who's making faces at the things that make life worth living."

"What things?—And for the love of Pete, remember how your voice carries."

"What things? What things? Honesty, loyalty, true love, sanity."

"Oh, dear! Myron, you sound so hopelessly middle class."

"Middle class!" Myron roared.

"Your voice, Myron—it car . . ."

“Oh, stop that voice-carrying business, Ruth. Stop it.”

“You stop making it carry.”

“Oh, Ruth, what am I going to do?”

“Well, if you ask me, Myron, that isn’t any way to be a man who’ll take me in his stride—asking me what to do, when you tell me everything I do is all wrong.”

“It is all wrong. It’s horrible. It’s awful.”

“My suggestion, if it excites you so much, is to forget about it.”

“I can’t forget about it. The trouble is I’m wild about you. I’m crazy about you.”

A clock in the corner began chiming.

“Seven,” Ruth said.

She took a step to Myron.

“Myron, will you stay for dinner?”

“No, I won’t.”

Ruth took a half step, which brought her against Myron. She turned her head up to him, with the faintest suggestion of kiss in her lips.

“Myron.”

He grabbed her with both arms, and ground his lips to hers. Neither of them answered a knock on the door. They paid no attention to a second knock. Myron still held her when the door opened, and Katherine looked in.

CHAPTER XVIII

Katherine stood motionless for three heart beats. Shining circles of glass, a bit of nose and dropped chin gradually withdrew, and the door as gradually and as silently closed.

Myron took his lips from Ruth's, and transferred them to her right ear.

"I love you; I love you; I love you."

Ruth's eyes were moist and she was breathing quickly.

"Tell me you love me. Tell me!"

Ruth was silent, strained against him, his arms close around her. She put her partly opened lips to his again.

"Tell me you love me!" Myron repeated, breathlessly, after what might have been a second, a minute, or ten years, depending upon whether time is figured by movement of spheres in space, or by emotions of a man and a girl in each other's arms.

"Tell me. You've got to tell me!"

Ruth sighed deeply.

"You make me thrill all over, Myron," she said.

"You always have. If that is love, I love you."

"Why do you keep yourself from me then? Why do you, Ruth?"

Ruth put a well-kept white hand over his mouth and patted his lips gently.

"Now don't spoil everything by asking a lot of questions, Myron," she said. "But you'll have to do one thing for me now."

"What's that?"

Ruth put her arms around his neck, pressed her body against his, and put her lips on his again. When they drew apart, they were both breathless.

"What'll I have to do for you, Ruth?" he asked, cheeks red, and eyes bright.

"Stay to dinner just for tonight, and visit with me afterwards."

"Say you love me first."

"If I love any one, I love you."

Myron tried to take her in his arms again, but she pushed him away with extended hands, and bent her head back.

"Not any more—now," she protested. "It's twenty-five minutes past seven, and we eat in five minutes more. I won't bother about dressing. Here, straighten your tie, and your hair."

She twitched and patted Myron's hair, and pulled and caressed his cravat, at the same time evading his efforts to encircle her again with his arms.

"Wait," she said. "We want to look respectable when we go in for dinner."

Do I look all right?"

"You never looked more beautiful in your life," he said hoarsely. "I never saw a girl like you—never knew you to have even a strand of hair out of place from the time I first knew you as a little tot."

"Come on, Myron," she cried, taking his hand, and walking to the door. "We'll have to hurry! I'll show you a bathroom."

Ruth led the way.

"Here you are," she said, pushing a wall switch. "When you're ready walk straight down the hall."

Closing the door behind him, she hurried through the hall into the dining room, and into the service pantry. The maid looked up.

"What's for dinner tonight, Jennie?"

"Roast chicken, Miss Robbins."

"We'll have a guest, Jennie, and please serve champagne."

"Must be an extra special guest," Jennie said, when Ruth had left the pantry. "Only time wine is served here is for Mr. Hartman. And he drinks it alone."

"I saw the gentleman," said Sarah, the cook. "He looks like a poor relation, but he's good lookin'."

"You never mind about the poor relations, but get the dinner ready."

When dinner was half over, Katherine suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, Ruth, is that champagne you are drinking?"

Ruth set her empty glass down on the lace and damask.

"Why you know, Aunt Katherine, that I never drank any champagne in my life."

Jennie, in the doorway of the service pantry, put her hand to her mouth.

"Well, I thought it was champagne, or I might have taken some."

"You don't like charged cider, do you, Aunt Katherine?" Ruth asked.

"You know I don't," Katherine said, making a little face. "I don't like any drink with carbonic acid gas in it; it's made from marble dust."

Myron's cheeks were more flushed and his eyes more bright than when he first sat down at the table. He gazed hard at Ruth for a moment, and then took another long drink of champagne.

Katherine chatted about Southington during dinner. When they had gone to the living room she said:

"I know you and Myron have a good deal to say to each other, Ruth, so if you'll excuse me I'll go to my room and do some sewing."

As soon as she left, Myron moved along the sofa on which he and Ruth were sitting. But Ruth got up.

"Wait a minute," she said softly, and went across the hall again to the dining room. When she reappeared, she had a liqueur glass in each hand.

“Come on in the library,” she said. “I’ve told the maid not to disturb me any more tonight. ‘Not even in case of emergency?’ she asked. And I said, ‘Not for anything.’ ”

They tiptoed down the hall like two children, and slipped into the library. Ruth held one tiny glass to Myron.

“Take this,” she ordered.

Then she laughed, and turned the key in the lock.

“We’re all alone in the world now,” she said, her eyes glowing. “Here’s to crime.”

She held out her glass. He tinkled his against it, and raised it in front of his face.

“Here’s to love,” he said hoarsely.

They both drank the sticky liquid at a gulp, and then gazed at each other with strained faces. Myron suddenly drew his arm back and smashed the glass in the fireplace.

“Break yours, too,” he said.

Without answering, Ruth reached back and pushed a switch, cutting off all light except that furnished by the wood fire. Then she dropped upon a soft leather couch. Myron settled beside her and took her in his arms.

A silence followed, broken only by deep-drawn breaths, the ticking of the clock, and the muffled roar of traffic outside.

“What are you going to do to me?” Ruth whispered.

CHAPTER XIX

“When are we going to be married?” Myron asked.

Ruth, fastening her dress, bent over and kissed him on the ear. Then she straightened up and shook down her skirt. Myron arose from the sofa, and held her under the chin with both hands.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said. “I know I shouldn’t get married for years yet. But this changes everything. We’ve got to plan on getting married.”

Ruth’s blue eyes met his brown ones with an enigmatic expression. Her fingers still were busy putting her wearing apparel in order.

“I’m so thirsty,” she exclaimed. “My throat itches, and my tongue is like a burr.”

He shook her head, not too gently.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded. “You seem a thousand miles away. And if ever you should be close to me, it’s right now.”

“Don’t do that, Myron,” she said. “My head doesn’t exactly ache, but it’s tender.”

“Answer me, then. When are we going to be married?”

“Oh, dear! Myron! why do you have to talk about marrying? You can’t support a wife, you can’t afford to get married; you have to study, and you have your career ahead.”

“Ruth! Don’t talk like that. You know we will get married, and you know everything will be all right. Two people who love each other can lick the world.”

Ruth pulled her chin from his grasp and backed away. “Why spoil this evening? Let’s leave everything serious for another time.”

“You make me tired, Ruth. For God’s sake, this is the time we have to discuss ourselves and the future.”

“We have different opinions,” Ruth said. “And if you want to make me happy, you’ll just be cheerful, and talk about me or the weather.”

The clock in the corner began to chime.

“Four o’clock,” Ruth exclaimed, “and I have to be at the office at nine. For goodness’ sake, if I don’t get some sleep I’ll fall asleep at my desk.”

“But Ruth, I can’t leave you like this.”

“You’ll have to, though,” Ruth said. “You can’t stay here all night very well, unless you’d like to give Aunt Katherine the surprise of her life.”

“Before I go you’ve got to tell me that you’re going to marry me,” Myron insisted.

Ruth opened the library door softly.

“Shh!” she ordered in even lower tones. “Remember how your voice always carries, Myron.”

“Darn!” he exclaimed in a hoarse murmur. “Shut that door.”

Ruth already was in the hall, her finger, a warning, at her lips. She started down the hall, Myron in her wake. He bumped against a chair in the foyer. She opened a door, and handed him his hat and coat.

“Listen, Ruth,” he whispered, desperately.

“Sssh! Myron.” In a moment she was holding the hall door ajar. Myron was trembling.

“If you aren’t going to marry me, what did you let me love you for?” he rumbled.

“Let you!” Ruth repeated, closing the door to a six-inch crack with Myron outside. “I’ve been years wondering if you ever would.”

Myron stared at her.

“And at that, it wasn’t you; it was the champagne,” she charged. “Good-night, Myron.”

The door closed softly. Myron stood in the hall for a minute. He went to the door and listened. He tapped gently and tried the knob. The door was locked and there was no sound inside.

Mechanically, he pressed a button for the elevator, and rode down to the lobby. He walked past the night doorman without giving him a glance and out into the street. At the corner, he stopped under an arc lamp and turned his face back towards the apartment house. Then he made a sweeping gesture outwards with both arms.

CHAPTER XX

“Good morning, Aunt Katherine,” Ruth said, walking briskly into the dining room.

“Good morning, Ruth, dear,” Katherine said, looking up from her boiled eggs and toast.

Katherine always insisted that unless one were ill, one should have enough get-up-and-get to dress and go to the dining room for the morning meal. Ruth ate breakfast in bed, or in the living room, or wherever it suited her whim. She had drunk some orange juice before she took her shower, and a cup of coffee while she was dressing.

“You look so sweet and pretty this morning,” Katherine observed, after she had received Ruth’s good-morning kiss on her right cheek. “Have you anything to tell me?”

“About what?”

“I thought perhaps about Myron.”

“Why, no. Nothing special.”

“You are keeping it secret, aren’t you, Ruth? But it’s no secret from your Aunt Katherine.”

“What do you mean—secret?”

“You and Myron, and I’m glad of it. He’s a nice home boy, and the Browns are a good family.”

“I suppose a little bird told you something.”

Katherine shook her head and smiled sweetly.

“I didn’t need any little bird this time, Ruth. I saw you and Myron in the library.”

Ruth, who was just finishing pulling on her gloves, and on the point of leaving, stopped abruptly.

“You what?” she asked, looking at her aunt’s placid features—smooth forehead from which the hair went neatly back to a bun, even eyebrows, kind eyes behind their spherical lenses, small nose, virginal mouth, and chin about to begin to go double.

Katherine made a quick lap with her tongue to retrieve a stringy bit in her spoonful of egg, wiped her lips with a napkin, and raised her eyes.

“I knocked, but you didn’t answer,” she said. “And I thought you must be in another room. I opened the door, and you were kissing each other.”

“Oh, I see,” Ruth said, the words framed on a long-held and suddenly released breath.

“I was surprised a little, but I was glad when I thought it over,” Katherine

continued. “You don’t know how much more comfortable I will feel when you are safely married and settled down.”

“Marriages sometimes just start trouble,” Ruth suggested.

“Maybe they do, although I don’t like to hear you talk that way. But when a girl marries a fine young man, it is the best thing in the world. Money isn’t everything. Love is what counts most.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t marry, Aunt Katherine. You would have made a wonderful wife for somebody.”

“My family made fun of the only man I ever loved,” Katherine said. “And I was ashamed, and I wasn’t kind to him. He went away and married some one else.”

“Weren’t there any other men?”

“I never even thought of any others,” Katherine said simply. “It just seemed to me that I should have married that one. Your Uncle Benjamin called him Old Hoss Face.”

“Uncle Ben was always fooling,” Ruth said.

Katherine smiled.

“He did look remarkably like a horse when you come to think of it,” she explained. “But since then I’ve often thought the horse men are the most admirable of all the men.”

“The horse men?” Ruth repeated. “What kind of man was Uncle Ben?”

“Benjamin was a dog man—a big, Newfoundland dog man.”

“What is Myron?”

“He’s a dog man—a nice spaniel.”

“What is Mr. Hartman?”

“He’s a bird man—a hawk.”

“What’s Myron’s father?”

“He’s a squirrel.”

“I guess I never knew you, Aunt Katherine. What am I?”

“You’re a cat-girl—a lioness,” Katherine said. “I’d like to see you tame so you’d lap milk.”

“Why, Aunt Katherine!”

“I suppose it’s silly, Ruth, to think of people as animals. But I can’t help it.”

“I’m late,” Ruth exclaimed, glancing at her wrist watch. “See you at dinner. Good-by.”

CHAPTER XXI

Ruth, in brassière and step-ins, was sitting on the edge of Myron's single bed in the room shared by him with George Peabody, a fellow medical student. George and Myron were driving cabs at night in order to eat, dress, and pay tuition. Ruth's arm was extended on Myron's lap. He was massaging her upper arm and neck with cold cream.

"How did you know that this would take away black-and-blue marks?" Ruth asked.

"I had to do it for George once, when a girl bit him," Myron said. "He couldn't let his fiancée see him with those things on him."

"What do you bite me for, anyway? Does it give you pleasure?"

"I dunno," Myron said. "I guess I get kind of wild."

"I like it all right when you're doing it—I'd like anything then, I guess, but it isn't so nice afterwards."

"Just be patient, and there won't be a trace by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? There'd better not be a trace tonight. I've got to wear low neck tonight."

Myron stopped the rubbing and kneading motions.

"So you're going out with that fish-face again tonight. I'm a good mind to leave these darned marks. Then he'll know you belong to some one else."

"Probably that's why you put them there in the first place—staking out your claim," Ruth suggested.

"Don't be nasty," Myron said. "And I'm going to tell you something right now, and for the last time. And that is that this business can't go on this way. I'm not going to stand for it."

"You've got me, haven't you?" Ruth asked.

"That's just it—I haven't got you," Myron retorted.

"Once you'd have given anything in the world just to touch my leg above the knee. Wouldn't you? You said you would, anyway."

"Oh, don't go into that again. Please."

"And you said if you could just touch my breast once that was all you'd ever want," Ruth continued.

"Don't. For Pete's sake. Don't repeat all that again."

"And now you've got everything I've got to give you, and there's still something more. I think you're unreasonable."

"Unreasonable! My God! My good gracious God Almighty!"

"Well, aren't you? I'm your girl, am I not? I go to bed with you, don't I?"

"But you're not mine, and I'm not going to stand it. I'm going crazy."

“You’re funny, Myron.”

“Funny? I’ll slap you.”

“No, you won’t slap me. But you’d better go ahead and rub those spots some more. Here, rub now.”

Myron dabbed his fingers in the cream jar and smeared more grease on her skin. He began to knead the flesh again.

“Breaking up the coagulated blood,” he explained. “But just because I’m doing this doesn’t mean that you and I have finished our talk. I’m no cad, to have you go out of here like this. But I’m no door-mat, either. And you and I are going to have a showdown.”

“I always was afraid, even when I was pretty young,” Ruth said, “that I’d never know what it was like to be with a man before I died. I always was afraid I would die before I would be old enough to get married.”

“For Pete’s sake!” Myron said.

“And I always was hoping you would do something to me, but you never did.”

“Yes you were. I couldn’t get near enough to you to touch you with a ten-foot pole, ever since that time in your parlor when you were going away to school.”

“Oh, yes, you could have, only you didn’t know enough. All you had to do was just grab me.”

“You would have hollered like a wild cat.”

“I might have objected,” Ruth admitted, “but I wouldn’t have objected too much.”

“By Christmas! Sometimes I wonder if you ever were cut out to be a good, normal woman, Ruth.”

“Don’t be silly, Myron. That’s the trouble with you and a lot of other people. You’re just silly. Girls have just as much feelings as boys. Uncle Ben told me there’d be precious few virgins if sixteen-year-old boys had forty-year-old brains. Ouch! That arm is sore. Don’t take the skin off.”

Myron picked up a towel and dried off the massaged areas, red from friction.

“I guess that’ll do,” he said. “But now, darn it, you and I are going to have a showdown.”

“Are you going to keep that up?”

“This is the last time.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“But this is,” Myron declared.

“Well, I know the lesson by heart. I’ve got to give up my apartment, which is paid for by Albert Hartman, you think, and marry you, and live on my salary as a secretary until you get to be a doctor. And I musn’t see any other men, or

go to theatres with any other men—only live for you.”

“It doesn’t sound just right, the way you say it, but it’s about time,” Myron said. “I’d be perfectly willing for the time being, if you preferred, to just have us formally engaged. Personally, I think we should be married. I’d feel better.”

“As nearly as I can make out, your proposals to me always have been based on the idea that they would make you feel better,” Ruth said dispassionately, first tugging up one stocking, and then straightening the seam in the other.

“That’s a mean thing to say.”

“All right,” Ruth admitted. “Look at it from my point of view. I’m happier not being married to a poor man. I don’t want to be a poor man’s wife. I don’t want to be a working wife. I don’t want to be guided by my emotions into signing a contract that my intellect tells me isn’t right.”

“Your Uncle Ben certainly fixed you up,” Myron exclaimed bitterly. “Your emotions, and your intellect! My God!”

“It’s the truth, anyway. If getting married was just lying in bed, and loving, I’d marry you within an hour. But marriage is eating, and sleeping, and paying bills, and worrying, and taking one another’s burdens. It’s a serious business.”

“Marriage between a man and a woman who love each other is a wonderful blending of flesh and spirit,” Myron said. “I can’t think of anything more marvelous than the thought of facing the world with some one who loves you only, and whom you love more than any one else.”

“It sounds fine,” Ruth admitted. “But it doesn’t reason out so fine to me. And the divorce courts, and the domestic relations courts are a pretty good answer to how it works out in practice.”

“You’ve got to admit, Ruth, that the real people don’t get into divorce courts, any more than they get into the police courts. You can’t make me believe that the good sound majority of people in this country—the solid middle class—don’t live good, healthy, happy domestic lives.”

“Several of those husbands have tried to make love to me,” Ruth said. “You can call me hard-boiled, or anything you want to. But so far as I am concerned, I’m not going to get myself married just because of my sensations. I certainly don’t feel as if I had to have a husband to support me. I certainly don’t want to support one.”

“If I had plenty of money, would you marry me?” Myron asked.

“I won’t answer that question, Myron, but I’ll ask you one. Haven’t I done everything to show my feelings, Myron, except marry you?”

“I suppose you have,” Myron admitted.

“That’s a splendid spirit,” Ruth exclaimed. “My, but you’re enthusiastic!”

“I can’t make you understand how serious the situation is,” Myron exclaimed, pausing in front of her, and pulling his dressing gown more closely

about him. "I can't live this way any more. I'm going out of my head."

"Oh, if you could only just take things as they are, wouldn't I be happy," Ruth said. "We've everything to live for—you and I. We're young, and we're healthy, and we're fond of each other. I can't see why you aren't happy. It isn't very flattering."

"Darn you, Ruth. You don't consider the most important part of it. We're sneaking. You're sneaking, and I'm sneaking. We don't belong to each other in the eyes of the world. We're just police court cases in the eyes of the law."

"You would, Myron. You would. You'd think of police courts, when I'm thinking of empires. I regard myself as mistress of a king, or some great man—something splendid and proud. And you're thinking of police courts. I'm thinking Ninon de L'Enclos, or Maintenon, and you're thinking Mamie So-and-So, street walker."

"They're all the same."

"You really mean that?"

"I certainly do. You've got to have standards. A family is the foundation of the state. Marriage is a contract, and a sacrament. Those who are outside are in the half-world, or the underworld. They don't belong."

Ruth put her head back and laughed musically.

"Pish! Tush!" she said. "You aren't worth arguing with, Myron. You're too middle class."

"If you say middle class again . . ."

"What?" Ruth asked, arising.

"We've got to stop, that's all," Myron cried wildly. "I can't study, and I can't think."

Ruth put her arms around his neck. He started to pull away, but she put up her mouth, lips puckered. He kissed her, a peck. She ran her hand inside his dressing gown and over his bare breast.

"Wuzzee angwy?" she murmured, her lips against his.

He kissed her shoulder, and her arm. She reached a hand up her back, and unsnapped her brassière. He kissed her rosy nipple.

"Oh, Ruth," Myron groaned, "I don't know what's going to happen."

"Well, try and remember not to bite," Ruth whispered.

CHAPTER XXII

Albert Hartman and Ruth dined together at Robert's, a perfect meal, with Robert himself anxiously watching each delicacy from ice box to fire, and from fire to table. Afterwards they rode to the theatre. And after the theatre they went to the Montmartre. On their way to her flat, Ruth said:

"I enjoy these Saturday night bats because I know I can sleep in the morning."

Albert was smoking one of his special, fat cigarettes.

"I wonder," he said, "if I might see you for a few minutes before you go to bed. There is something I would like very much to talk over with you."

"A conference!" Ruth smiled.

"You might call it that, Ruth," Albert granted pleasantly, moving his head so that his flashing, brilliant eyes rested upon her for a moment.

"It must be very important," Ruth said. "We have been together all evening, and we are together now."

"I feel that I would rather talk with you on this occasion where we are alone," Albert said. "You and I have not talked together alone for a long time."

"Of course, I'll be glad to," Ruth said.

Once home, Ruth led the way immediately to the library.

"It is cozy here," she said. "My Aunt Katherine has gone to bed long ago."

Albert closed the door, and then went over to the fireplace. He set two logs on the embers and made motions with a pair of tongs, his efforts being rewarded by some smoke and a tongue of flame. Ruth sat on the couch. And when he had the fire arranged to his satisfaction, Albert sat down in a chair in front of the fire and opposite her. He leisurely drew a cigarette case from his pocket, selected a cigarette, extracted a patent lighter from another pocket, puffed a fiery end on the cigarette, and settled back, one knee over the other.

Ruth, chin on hand, was watching him. And he watched her in turn.

"I was just thinking how brains and achievement show in a man's face and carriage," she said.

"And I was just thinking how beautiful you are," he returned. "But," he added, making a gesture with his smouldering cigarette, "I didn't come up here to exchange commonplaces with you. I've brains, and I've achieved things, and you have beauty and individuality, and that is what has brought us together."

Ruth pulled up one leg and doubled it under her.

"I thought it was time," Albert continued, "to talk with you about us—about you, particularly. There is a young man—his name is Myron Brown—

about whom I particularly would like to know.”

Ruth’s eyes grew dark, and natural color flooded artifice in her cheeks.

“Myron is from Southington,” she said. “He is a medical student here. I have known him all my life.”

Albert placed his cigarette between his lips, and the tip burned brightly as he inhaled. He said, not as a question, but as a simple statement of fact:

“You are having an affair with him.”

Ruth dropped her foot to the floor and sat up. Albert kept his eyes, full of the sparkle which denied his years, squarely upon hers, and his voice low-pitched and clipped in the fashion of a cosmopolite.

“I am not raising any question of propriety. That would be silly. The point I wish to make is that it is not fair to me under the circumstances. It isn’t honest.”

Ruth opened her mouth as if to say something, but shut it again without saying a word. Albert Hartman tossed his cigarette stub into the fireplace.

“I know from observation,” he continued, “that you are a young woman of more than ordinary mental ability—in some ways. But there are two matters which frankly I don’t like. One of them concerns a question about how you got the funds to establish yourself and your aunt here in New York, and the second is this affair with Myron Brown.”

“What is it you wish me to say?” Ruth asked, finally, as Albert sat silent for a few seconds.

He smiled.

“I said you had a certain admirable mental ability,” he nodded. “Your first impulse was to deny the real situation between yourself and Myron. But you thought that I am not the sort of man to make a charge like that without proof, so you checked yourself.”

“What chance have I when you can read my thoughts?” Ruth asked.

“Very good,” Albert said. “Admirable, in fact. And I might say far better than the second thought you were going to express, which was that all of this is none of my business.”

Ruth sighed, and spread out her hands, white, capable hands, with nails manicured in their natural shape, and no jewelry.

“There is a certain comfort in being understood,” she murmured, “even if the result is not too flattering.”

“I must say it isn’t, from my point of view.”

“I suppose detectives have helped you some,” Ruth ventured. “I had forgotten that I had read that rich men do that.”

“I have my means of getting information.”

“What do you want me to say, Albert?”

“I don’t want you to say anything that you don’t want to say. It’s answer

enough for me that you have to ask the question. I had flattered myself that I might win your regard, perhaps your affection. I had hoped to be of assistance while you accomplished something in the world, perhaps on the stage, perhaps in the cinema, perhaps even as my wife in the great world.”

“Well?”

Albert Hartman went through the process, very deliberately, of lighting another fat cigarette, which he tucked leisurely under his mustache. Ruth waited with no outward sign of impatience, or anxiety.

“This is a peculiar situation,” he said finally. “I don’t think I would have minded the fact that you aren’t a virgin. In fact, I am very sure of it. I think, however, the fact that you had an affair with another man, the relationship between you and me being what it was—in other words, deceived me—might have caused the final break.”

Ruth, silent, kept her eyes upon his.

“What really would make it utterly impossible to go on, however, was that matter of your getting money in Southington. I’m not in a position to prove it, but I am convinced that you blackmailed a banker—J. Frederick Hasbrouck—of Southington, out of what must have seemed a large sum of money to you, and to him—ten thousand dollars.”

Ruth suddenly relaxed on the couch. She looked more like a schoolgirl than she had since the day she first went away to school.

Albert Hartman leaned forward in his chair.

“Ruth,” he said, “this has broken me up pretty badly. You probably never will realize until you are older, and have suffered more, exactly how fond of you I had become. I suppose you are wondering just when I am going to take this apartment, and the means to keep it up, away from your aunt and you.”

Ruth smiled wryly.

“Of course, I had thought of it, Albert.”

“Well, we are going to do nothing in haste, Ruth. You will have all the time you need.”

Tears gathered in Ruth’s eyes.

“And I can thank you, Albert, for not making another sort of proposal, now or ever.”

The banker moved those facial muscles with which a human being both laughs and weeps.

“That’s one thing I was pretty certain about you, Ruth. You’re not the kind of girl that sells your affections. I had hoped I would be able to win those.”

“I wonder why I am not?” Ruth asked. “I always could work it out all right in my head, but when the time came I went to Myron.”

“Perhaps matters will adjust themselves,” Albert Hartman said. “I certainly hope so, and I will help you in every way possible.”

Ruth was about to speak when the telephone bell rang.

CHAPTER XXIII

“My telephone almost never rings,” Ruth said, “and never at night. It must be a wrong number.”

She lifted a cover from a stand at the head of the couch, and put the instrument, a transmitter and receiver in one piece, in position.

“Hello.”

She started.

“Myron! What is the matter?”

“What?”

The blood drained from her face as she listened, leaving the make-up in high relief on her cheeks and lips. The ticking of the clock smote ear-drums dismally.

A man’s voice, high-pitched and strained, escaped from the receiver into the room, filled with the sweetish, acrid haze of smouldering Turkish tobacco. The words were unintelligible, but the note of excitement was inescapable. She moved her lips in the form of words, but no words came.

Albert, sitting quietly in his chair, suddenly broke the silence, his even, correctly modulated tones thundering on the charged atmosphere like shouts.

“What is it, Ruth? Perhaps I can help.”

He arose as he spoke, and stood beside her. She dropped the instrument, clamorous with a faint, elfin voice, in her lap, and looked at him, horror stamped on her features.

“It’s J. Frederick Hasbrouck,” she said, speaking with controlled effort. “He was caught stealing money from the bank; he said I blackmailed him of ten thousand dollars, and he’s killed himself—shot himself. Now Myron . . .”

Albert stood looking down at her for a moment, as unperturbed as ever. His eyes reflected more curiosity than any other emotion. He placed a firm hand on Ruth’s shoulder and held it there.

“Keep hold of yourself,” he said quietly. “There is no evidence against you.”

Ruth slowly raised the shining black contrivance to her ear, her shoulders stiffening and her mouth hardening.

“Here I am, Myron,” she said clearly. “I was somewhat upset at first.”

She held the receiver from her ear for a moment, as a torrent of lilliputian sounds came from it. Then she put her mouth to the transmitter and said firmly:

“You are out of your head now, Myron. I will call you tomorrow.”

She listened a moment, her figure strained.

"I am going to hang up, now, Myron. I don't think you are going to do anything. No, I won't listen any more. No, I won't. I'm going to turn off the telephone."

She put the French telephone back on its pedestal, replaced its cover, and bending over to the baseboard, disconnected it.

"Now it will only ring in the front hall," she said. "And I think I will stuff some paper in the box there."

She arose, crossed to the door, opened it, and hurried down the hall. Albert Hartman, following more slowly, arrived just as she straightened up from the bell box. He watched her as she went into the service pantry, where she called the doorman.

"I am not in to any one, John," she directed. "It doesn't matter who calls from now until I notify you to the contrary—I have gone to the country. Will you tell William when he comes on duty, and let every one know?"

When she replaced the receiver, she went back to the hall and met Albert.

"I've got to be alone," she said, her deep contralto hitting a husky note. "I've got to be alone."

"I know, Ruth, I know. But if I can be of any help, let me know."

She stood quietly while he got into his Inverness and picked up his beautifully ironed silk hat. At the door, she took his hand.

"Thank you, Albert. Good night."

"Good night, Ruth," Albert said. "Remember what I said. You are safe, at least, from a public scandal. And there is no situation so difficult that brains and moral force can't overcome it. Good night."

As soon as the door closed, Ruth walked back through the hall to the library. She looked aimlessly into an ash stand, and at the books, sitting in even rows on their shelves. She walked out of the library and across the hall into her own room. She closed and locked the door. Then she ran to her bed, buried her face in the covers, and began to sob convulsively.

"Oh, God! Get me out of this, and I'll promise never to do anything bad again."

"Oh, God! Oh, Christ! Oh, help me, and I'll be good."

"Uncle Ben! Oh, Uncle Ben! Oh, God!"

She slid from the bed to her knees and buried her face in her hands. She got up, grabbed a pillow, and threw it against the wall. She kicked over a light gilt chair, which was in her path. Automatically, as she passed, she switched on the lights. She stopped in front of a full-length mirror and looked at her reflection.

Red eyes, and a white face patched with red, looked back at her. It was a haggard, grief-ridden face with a tortured mouth, but beautiful.

She raised her hands to her temples, and smoothed them back, hard. Taking out a handkerchief, she dried her eyes, watching the effect. She compressed

her jaws.

“You never asked God for anything in your life,” she said to her mirrored self. “You’re being a coward. You’ve got to take yourself in hand and get out of this mess yourself.”

She put her face closer to the mirror.

“And don’t talk to yourself; you might go crazy,” she said.

She turned away from the mirror and began to walk swiftly about the room. For a half-hour she walked steadily. Then she sat down and sat, stiff as a figure in wax, for fifteen minutes. Again she got up and walked. She threw herself face down on the bed, but instantly arose again and went to the mirror.

She remained in front of the mirror for several minutes, watching, out of masked blue eyes under which dark smudges showed, her features regain an approximation of their habitual calm.

She pulled her dress over her head and adjusted it carefully on a hanger. She got out of a white silk slip, which she tossed over a chair. Her brassière followed. She lifted her hands to her breasts and felt them tenderly. She touched the firm flesh delicately as if it were bruised.

Suddenly, her caressing fingers gripped the white skin, and she raised her eyes to her dressing-table mirror. They slowly widened. Stooping over, she pulled out a drawer and rummaged a second until her hand grasped a little red memorandum book. She opened the book to a calendar. On each month a date was marked with pencil—except the current month, April. She raised her head, tossed down the book, looked at herself again in the mirror, and began to laugh.

She got up and went into the bathroom. She looked carefully at her step-ins as she let them fall about her feet. She looked at herself closely. She choked a sob, and sat down. She sighed, and went to the bowl, and turned on both faucets, water pouring from a central spigot. She brushed her teeth, gazing at herself in the mirror over the bowl.

She turned out the light in the bathroom and got her pyjamas. She put on only the top. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled off her slippers and then her stockings.

She got up again, and turned off the wall switch. Then she lighted a night-light on a little stand beside the bed and got into bed. She kicked viciously with both feet and then was quiet for a few minutes. After that, she arose, put on a silk dressing gown, and walked around the room.

She went to a window, drew aside the lace curtains, then the dark shade, and looked out. The window faced east, and the sky over the roof tops was brightening with first indications of the new day.

A motor truck pounded and rattled many floors below. Garbage cans clanked on the sidewalk. Off in the direction of the East River a steamer’s

whistle sounded.

With her face pressed against the cool glass, Ruth gazed blankly across the roof tops at the steadily brightening sky.

CHAPTER XXIV

Ruth made five trips to the door before the *New York Times* finally was delivered. She picked it up and hurried to her room. She went through column after column and page after page. The self-destruction of J. Frederick Hasbrouck was noted in two paragraphs under a Southington date line. She read the item carefully, and went again to the door, and dropped the refolded newspaper outside.

She paced around her room, bathed, carefully made up, and clad herself in a blue tailored suit, then waited until quarter past eight. Then she rang for her coffee.

A few minutes later, blue felt hat shadowing her face, she went into the dining room. Katherine was eating soft-boiled eggs and toast and drinking coffee. As soon as she saw Ruth, Katherine wiped a bit of egg from her lips, and turned her cheek.

“Good morning, Aunt Katherine, how did you sleep?” Ruth asked, kissing the proffered cheek, and putting her own cheek in position for a return peck.

“I had a terrible nightmare,” Katherine said, laying down her egg spoon. “After that I didn’t sleep a wink. I dreamed I was in an elevator, and the elevator began to drop, and it kept on dropping even after it should have hit the bottom. It went down faster than anything you could imagine. And there was a colored man in a red suit who leered at me. What do you think that meant?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Ruth said. “But I guess it’s nothing serious.”

“I believe in dreams,” Katherine said.

“I know you do,” Ruth assented. “I must run along now. I have a good deal to do today. By-by.”

“Good-by, Ruth; come home early,” Katherine said, spectacles shining over her eggs and cup of coffee, which breathed a domestic aroma over the room.

“Remember that there is nobody home at any time, William,” Ruth warned the doorman.

“Oh, we all have that straight, Miss Robbins,” William said, touching his cap, which perched becomingly on gray hair over twinkling gray eyes and red cheeks.

“Thank you, William,” Ruth said, pressing a ten-dollar bill into his palm.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that, Miss Robbins,” William protested. “I am glad to do anything for you.”

“That’s all right, William. I want you to have it. And here is another one. Give it to John when he relieves you tonight and tell him what to say.”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

William touched his hat again, and bobbed his head.

“And may the good Lord bless you, and bring you nothing but happiness all your life.”

“And call me a cab.”

“Certainly. Excuse me.”

William blew his whistle, and ran into the street, and blew it again, and three cabs darted towards the canopy. William helped Ruth into the one he selected.

“Where to, Miss Robbins?” William asked, holding the door ajar.

“Broad and Wall Streets,” she replied.

The cab turned the corner into Fifth Avenue and started downtown. Ruth rapped on the window.

“Drive to the Hotel Plaza,” she ordered.

From the Plaza she telephoned her office that she would not be down. Then she left the hotel, walked south, and then east. She stopped at a private house. A small brass plate on the ground floor was inscribed “Peter D. Meredith, M.D.” A maid in black uniform and white cap and apron opened the door and ushered her into a comfortable room at the left of the hall. A door opened, and a nurse, competent, middle-aged and kindly, stepped in with a rustle of starched white skirt.

“Have you an appointment?” she asked.

“I have no appointment,” Ruth said. “But I have heard of Dr. Meredith, and I am very anxious to see him as soon as possible.”

“I don’t know,” the nurse began, when a pleasant, bass voice interrupted from the hallway.

“We’ll make time somehow,” Dr. Meredith cried cheerfully, and he walked up to Ruth, and bent a big, shaggy, iron-gray head the barest trifle; but it was such a leonine head that the half-nod had the effect of a complete bow by a less imposing man.

At the same time Ruth’s hand was engulfed in a big warm, dry palm, a palm which closed on hers with a friendly, reassuring pressure.

“Now, who sent you to me?” the big man wanted to know.

“Nobody sent me,” Ruth replied. “But I had heard of you.”

“Well, you come right into my office,” Dr. Meredith invited heartily, opening a door and disclosing a large room in the center of which was a desk, bare except for an inkwell, a pen and a blotter.

“You sit right here, Mrs. . . .” he directed, twisting an easy chair to the side of the desk.

“Miss Robbins—Ruth Robbins,” Ruth supplied.

“Miss Robbins,” Dr. Meredith repeated, as he seated his great bulk in his

leather-cushioned chair. "You know," he smiled, raising unusually thick black eyebrows over black eyes, "nothing shocks my office nurse so much as to have some one come here who wasn't sent by another doctor, and who hasn't an appointment. Such a procedure isn't arranged for, and it shouldn't be allowed."

He tilted his head back an inch or two, and laughed, not loudly, but with infectious cheerfulness.

"But," he continued, becoming serious, and leaning forward, and fixing his eyes on Ruth's with an effect of solemnity, "I would rather see some one come in here once in a while who isn't scheduled. The moment I saw you, Miss Robbins, I knew that what you needed most is a friend, and I like to be a friend even more than I like to be a doctor."

Dr. Meredith pressed a button, and the nurse came in, expectantly. While she waited, he wrote hastily on a prescription blank.

"Get this filled right away, Miss Stiles," he directed, tearing off the scrawled sheet of paper and handing it to her. "And now," he said, turning to Ruth, "what seems to be the difficulty?"

Ruth hesitated for an instant. Then she said:

"I am afraid I am going to have a baby."

Dr. Meredith's face became serious for a moment, and then it became cheerful.

"You just tell me everything," he directed. "Sometimes these things aren't as bad as they look at first glance. And two heads are better than one, and all that sort of thing. Now you just go ahead."

Ruth had just begun to talk when Miss Stiles entered with a glass on a tray. Dr. Meredith took the glass, and held it out himself to his patient.

"You drink this right away," he said seriously. "This is my first prescription in your case. It's some sherry and egg," he explained. "A little nourishment and a little stimulant for a young lady who hasn't slept and hasn't eaten. It will do you good: drink all of it."

Ruth dressed and came out of the little white examination room off the office. Dr. Meredith was awaiting her. He put his arm loosely and comfortingly around her.

"Now, you just remember what I've told you, Miss Robbins. You've yourself and your conscience to consider first. If you are going to have a baby, and indications point strongly that way, you must decide your course.

"Many persons nowadays don't think anything of aborting a baby. I'm old-fashioned. I prescribe contraceptives, but I draw the line at interfering with nature after conception has taken place.

"You are young, and healthy, and beautiful. You should have a beautiful baby. From what you have told me, I should say that the young man in the case

would be only too glad to marry you. I am not going to advise you about that. The world is changing, and we doctors see a lot of human nature which is closed to laymen.”

“I used contraceptives,” Ruth said, “some of the time.”

“That isn’t at all unusual,” the doctor nodded.

“And I thought I could go ahead and get rid of it without thinking twice about it,” she said.

“Thousands of them do.”

“And I think it’s perfectly all right—if they feel all right about it,” Ruth said.

“And . . . ?” Dr. Meredith said with a rising inflection.

“But I’ve come to the conclusion that I have an old-fashioned New England conscience concealed way down deep, and just to be sure—well, I’ll have my baby.”

“It might be easier the other way,” Dr. Meredith cautioned.

“Not for me, I think.”

“Well, I’m glad you feel that way,” the doctor said heartily, straightening his big shoulders. “I’m rather old-fashioned, as I said, and I’m a sort of nut on seeing good, healthy babies come into the world. That’s why I specialize the way I do. I don’t like to see a woman have too many babies, and I help them on that score, but I do certainly enjoy seeing a healthy female of the species reproduce herself, within reason.”

“Isn’t life funny, doctor? If I had gone to another doctor, I might have gotten rid of it without thinking twice about it. And now I’m going to be a mother.”

Ruth made a sound like a laugh, which was really nearer a cry.

“You call me up any time,” Dr. Meredith said. “I live right here, and I am in all the time, except afternoons. Just remember, I will do everything I can. And come to see me, as I said.”

“All right, Dr. Meredith. Good-by, and thank you.”

CHAPTER XXV

Myron and George drove cabs for the Green Squadron. They had become friendly with Tom Maxey, an old-time newspaper man, who looked after the advertising and publicity for the outfit.

Tom always wore a black derby hat, slightly tilted to the left. His clothes were cut along the latest college lines as advertised by the leading manufacturers for the retail trade. His ties were riots. His socks were massacres. He wore a gold ring with a solitaire diamond on the little finger of his left hand, and he carried a split-second repeater on a gold-and-silver chain across his waistcoat.

He carried his chest out and his stomach in, and he walked on the balls of his feet with a youthful spring. His teeth shone like a good grade of china. He had bold gray eyes, with slightly yellowed and prominent whites.

Myron and George never had seen him without a ten-cent cigar, either lighted or unlighted, tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees from his lips, or carried in his gloved left hand. Tom never was seen without his gloves in public, and they always were of yellow chamois.

When Tom did remove his derby for an instant, he disclosed a curious coiffure, if it might be so termed. His reddish hair was cut long, and brushed from the left ear straight across his head sidewise to the right ear.

Tom never referred to his age, but he told eye-witness stories of Civil War episodes. George and Myron had figured him as a well-preserved fifty-five until they had known him longer. Now they referred to him between themselves as probably a miraculous eighty.

Tom Maxey entered Myron's and George's room about three o'clock in the afternoon.

"What ho! What ho!" he roared. "How are me bold buckos?"

"Hello, Tom," said George. "Gee whiz, I'm glad to see you! Maybe you can cram some sense into Myron."

George got up from the one dilapidated armchair, and pointed to Myron on his cot. George was an alert, stocky mid-westerner, about five feet nine inches tall, with quick, intelligent blue eyes, red cheeks, natural, big white teeth, and a quick smile. He radiated health, vitality and confidence.

"What's the matter with the lad?" Tom asked, removing neither the hat from his head, the gold-headed walking stick from the crook of his arm, the cigar from his mouth, nor the gloves from his hands. "What's the matter with you, Myron, me bucko?" he grinned, jabbing softly at Myron with his stick.

"Oh, shut up all of you, and get the hell out of here," Myron exclaimed.

“All I want is to be left alone.”

“Aha! Ahhh-HaaAAH! The boy has girl trouble,” Tom announced.

“Aw, please, Tom. And you, George. I feel rotten, honest. Won’t you leave me alone?”

“He’s been having a swell time with a girl,” George explained, “and she’s blackmailed one guy, and is being supported by another duck, a rich one, and he wants to marry her and she won’t.”

“So that’s the way you keep secrets,” Myron cried. “A great friend you are.”

“The best friend you’ve got in the world,” George said. “I’m telling you to can this dame. You won’t listen. So, here’s Tom Maxey, who’s had more troubles of his own, and more experience with other people’s troubles than anybody I ever even heard of. Let him talk.”

Tom caught George’s eye, lifted his left eyebrow and nodded backward with his head, at the same time indicating the door with vigorous back stabs of his gloved right thumb. George nodded, grabbed up his hat and coat, and slid out into the hall. Myron, in a rumpled suit, continued to lie prone, with his face buried in his arms. Tom, stepping on his toes, went to the door, which opened, just as his hand touched the knob. George put his face in the room.

“I just wanted to say,” he said, “that my advice was to keep the dame, and thank God she don’t want to marry him. Gosh! I’d like to find one, half as good looking, that was being kept by a rich gent.”

Tom made impatient signs for George to get going.

“All she wants to do, as near as I can discover, is have a good time with Myron, and the damned fool insists on complicating it. My God!”

With those last words George withdrew his head, and began to descend the threadbare staircase. Tom closed the door gently, turned the key in the lock, picked up a straight-backed chair and braced it under the knob, and then covered the keyhole with Myron’s soft hat.

After that he went to the window and stuck his head out. He looked up and down, and to the right and left, and then he closed the window and drew the shade. Then he pulled a chair up to Myron’s cot, sat down and cleared his throat.

“Myron, my boy,” he said, bending his head close to Myron’s, “I’ve had the same thing exactly happen to me. Her name was Lotta Spinozza, and she was a snake charmer with the old Flotso Show. My gad, but that woman had a body. Yes, sir. By gad, sir.”

Myron groaned, and Tom put a gloved hand on his arm.

“Now, Myron, I want to talk to you like a son. I haven’t any sons of my own—that I know of. But my heart goes out to you two young fellows here driving cabs in order to get your educations. If anything went wrong with

either one of you I would take it personally to heart. Yes, sir. By gad, sir, I would.”

“It won’t do any good, Tom,” Myron said mournfully. “I’m just sick, that’s all.”

“I was sick myself,” Tom asserted, pawing Myron a bit more vigorously with his hand. “Come on, now, me bucko, turn over here and look at me, while we thresh this thing out. Come on here, Myron.”

Myron rolled over reluctantly, and clumsily.

“The first question I have to ask you, sir, is: Are you a man?”

“I suppose so.”

“You suppose so. By gad, sir. Aren’t you sure? Don’t you know whether you’re a man or not?”

“Yes,” Myron said petulantly.

“Then you are a man? Well, if you are a man, are you going to act like a man, or a nincompoop?”

Myron bounced to a sitting position, his cheeks flushed.

“That’s about enough of that, Tom,” he said. “I can stand so much and no more.”

“Bully for you, me bucko,” Tom exclaimed. “That’s what we expect to see from a man—a little ginger, a little iron, a trifle of self-respect.”

“I know everything that can be said,” Myron protested. “What’s the use? I can’t help the way I feel, can I?”

“If you’re a man, sir, you can help the way you feel—if you’re a nincompoop, you can’t help the way you feel.”

Myron pushed Tom’s hand away, straightened his hair, and smoothed out his jacket.

“Don’t call me that name any more,” he objected, scowling.

“Aha! Ahhh-HaaAAH! My boy, there’s life in the old carcass yet. Let me ask you another question. If you’re going to look after other people some time, don’t you think you should look after yourself?”

“Damn it! That’s what I want to do, but you and George won’t let me.”

“That’s the point,” Tom said, poking Myron stoutly in the rib with his gloved fingers. “You’re not looking after yourself. But you can.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s interest for you,” Tom crowed delightedly. “By gad, sir, you are a man, and I knew it.”

“What’re you talking about?” Myron demanded a trifle belligerently.

“My boy, I went through exactly this same thing the first time in my life with Lotta Spinozza. She was kept by the boss of the show, but she loved me, she said. I could sleep with her whenever she saw fit, but I couldn’t when she wasn’t in the humor. And when I went off my noodle, and asked her to marry

me, she laughed at me. Yes, sir. By gad, sir. I was pretty low.”

“What was low about that?” Myron demanded. “You couldn’t help loving her, could you?”

“I’ll tell you what was wrong with the situation,” Tom Maxey asserted with emphasis. “I wasn’t even an equal partner in the association. I was just a nincompoop.”

Tom leaned back and regarded Myron with bulging eyes, beads of sweat on his brow testifying to his earnestness.

“That’s what you said I might be—a nincompoop,” Myron said.

“That’s what I was until I performed a surgical operation on myself,” Tom said forcefully.

“A surgical operation?”

“Yes, sir. Just that. I took a knife, and I cut that woman right out of my heart. It hurt me worse than if it had been an actual knife. But I did it. I couldn’t eat, and I couldn’t sleep, and I lost eighteen pounds in three days. All that kept me alive was that there was no use living if you weren’t the boss of yourself.”

Tom arose to his feet, and his voice which, from years of whispering in corridors of court houses, and waiting rooms of hospitals, and anterooms of statesmen, normally was a sort of husky rumble, boomed out like a trumpet.

“Myron Brown, you’re a man, not a worm. You’ve got to be boss of your own soul before you ever can help others. Go through your agony, my boy, and when you come out of it, you’ll see the world with new eyes.”

Tom paused for a moment, and his eyes were wet with tears as he added: “And above all things worth while in the world, my boy, you’ll have self-respect.”

The way he modulated the last two words was worthy of the attention of a revivalist.

Myron saw the tears and heard the hushed, trembling voice. He hadn’t had any sleep, and he hadn’t had anything to eat. His lips trembled in sympathy. He arose to his feet, and said:

“Tom, I’ll do it.”

“My boy, I’m proud of you,” Tom said, taking Myron’s outstretched hand and squeezing it forcibly. “And I’ll suggest something to help. You throw a couple of things and a toothbrush in a bag and come down in the country with me for a day or two.”

“Oh, I can’t,” Myron protested.

“You’ve got to,” Tom insisted. “This dump,” he waved his hand around, “is all right when you’re healthy and in good spirits, but it’s all wrong when you’re performing an operation on yourself. You come with me, and you don’t have to eat unless you want to, and if you want to wander around the house or

the neighborhood, or wake me up and talk to me, it's O.K."

"I've got the cab and my classes," Myron said.

"They'll wait until you're right," Tom said. "You come down in the country and get this operation over with. Do you feel sick?"

"Terrible."

"Do you feel as if life wasn't worth living?"

"Yes."

"That's right. And feel worse. Just twist that knife in your heart till it seems as if you couldn't stand it, and then twist it some more. Peace will begin to come into your soul when you've cut the woman out."

"You know, don't you, Tom?"

"Do I, my boy? It's hell. But the satisfaction you'll get from being a man will more than balance for the worry and stew you went through being a nincompoop."

"I was a nincompoop, all right."

"I was one, too, once," Tom said. "Let's get started."

CHAPTER XXVI

"I see you've stopped your swimming, fencing, and riding," Albert Hartman said, sitting down in the easy chair by the fireplace and beginning the fastidious ceremony of lighting a fat cigarette.

"Doctor's orders," Ruth replied. "I'm going to have a baby."

Albert's eyebrows raised the merest trifle. Otherwise, he revealed nothing of his thoughts during a silence of a few seconds. Then he said, somewhat stiltedly:

"I am to take it for granted that, when you asked me to call, you acted on the assumption that I am interested in your welfare, and that you are taking me into your confidence as a friend."

"There is no one in the world whom I would consider a better friend, Albert," Ruth replied simply.

"And you feel that this affair of yours is my business too?"

"You don't have to be so delicate about it," Ruth smiled. "I feel that I owe you a great deal anyway, and more since I know now I have a bad conscience because of having deceived you as I did."

"I am glad you feel that way, Ruth," Albert nodded, exhaling a stream of thin blue vapor. "The first question then, which naturally comes to mind is: Are you going to marry Myron Brown?"

"I am not," Ruth asserted crisply.

"And why not? He would like to marry you, wouldn't he?"

"He has been wanting to marry me ever since I can remember. In fact, we always quarreled because he insisted we should be married."

"But you love him, don't you? I must confess that I don't understand this situation. Won't you tell me about it?"

"It's very simple," Ruth said, shrugging her shoulders slightly.

"But it doesn't seem simple," Albert suggested.

"Well, it's this way," Ruth explained. "We went around together when we were young, and I always was attracted to Myron, but he was going to be a doctor, and I knew that meant a good many years before he could support a wife.

"His father didn't like me, and finally, when he found out Myron came home from summer camp just to see me, he got mad and ordered Myron out. Myron showed more spunk than I thought he had because he came right to New York, and started driving a taxicab nights and going to medical school days."

"That sounds as if he might have the right stuff in him," Albert nodded.

“But he always was trying to get me to marry him. He said he was willing to give up everything for me. And I don’t want a man like that. I couldn’t stand a man giving up things for me. I want a man to get things for me.”

“A good many men might be willing to give up things for you, Ruth,” Albert suggested.

“Anyway, I know I would be miserable married to Myron.”

“But you must have cared for him. This baby . . .”

“Oh, I’m wild about him that way. It gives me a thrill just to see him. But I feel there would always be the idea that I came between him and his family, and him and his career. And besides, I don’t like struggling with poverty, except in books, or plays, or movies.”

“Well, don’t you think you love him?”

“I don’t know what love is, Albert. What is it? If love is just thrilling in every fibre when you hear a voice, and going funny all over when some one touches you, then I’m in love with Myron. If love includes respect and admiration, then I don’t love Myron. He’s too wishy-washy. I could shake him. He is always teasing like a little boy.”

“Very interesting,” Albert murmured.

“He would be sad if I couldn’t see him when he wanted to see me, but he would cut his classes, or leave his taxicab at any corner, if I called for him.”

“I would call that true devotion.”

“Whatever it was, it didn’t make a hit with me. I want a man, not a schoolboy, nor a slave. If he had told me just once that he was too busy to see me, I might be married to him now. I don’t know.”

“I am rather sorry for Myron,” Albert exclaimed.

“It must be frightful to have had so much of such a beautiful woman, and to have been denied the entirety.”

“Why, that’s something like what Myron was always saying,” Ruth said.

“It is always unfortunate,” Albert asserted, “when there is a physical attraction between a man and a woman, and either one is able to give the other only a small part of his, or her, personality. Myron never touched more than, say, a third of your personality, the purely physical side.”

“But the physical side is so important,” Ruth sighed.

“Perhaps you never have thought of a very simple solution to the problem of sex,” Albert suggested, crushing his cigarette in a brass receiver. “And that is, that if a person expresses himself to the utmost in any art, or occupation—athletics, oratory, writing, painting, acting, or business—he really is turning his sex powers into another channel.

“It is a notorious saying that an athlete is a poor lover. But whether or not that is true, and I believe it is, it holds good that any human being who pours all of his concentrated energy into work, is using his sexual power for creation,

just as much as if he were using it to make babies.

“Sex colors every human act and occupation. For instance, a surgeon may be a man who has turned into useful channels a sadistic tendency. He isn’t a sadist, by any means, because he is using that urge normally. In the same way, an actor is making legitimate use of an exhibitionistic tendency.”

“You mean that if I get tremendously interested in some task I will not be so conscious of my physical side?” Ruth asked. “It has bothered me so, ever since I was a little girl.”

“I think that it might,” Albert declared. “I don’t say that work would make you cold, where you are passionate, but I have an idea that it would be a good way to burn up excess energy.”

“But I’m working now,” Ruth protested.

“You are working, but you are not working towards a shining goal, Ruth. You are working like most persons work, with only a small part of yourself. You belong to the five-and-one-half-days-a-week, eight-hours-a-day group, which works just to exist. My suggestion is to come out of that rut, and set yourself an objective which will compel you to work at least sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, and dream of your work while you are sleeping.”

“That’s not such a happy picture,” Ruth said.

“That’s why there aren’t more successes,” Albert said. “What I’d like to see you do, is chuck this secretary business and study acting. You have the face and figure, and brains. And I have the money to push you, if you give yourself a start.”

“I would still be being helped,” Ruth pointed out. “And I was planning to be independent.”

“No one can be helped unless he helps himself,” Albert said. “I couldn’t help you make up your mind about yourself. You had to choose your own road. And I can’t help you now unless you are prepared to give up all your time to study.”

“I never even thought I wanted to be an actress,” Ruth said.

“It’s a hard game,” Albert said, “but all roads that lead to fame and money are difficult. And it is not so hard as might be. I know if you will work like a dog that you can make good. There is no place like the stage for exploiting a beautiful woman; and if she happens to have brains, there is no place where she can win a great name so rapidly. And there is no way in which you could get the money to pay your indebtedness to me so quickly, either.”

“Albert Hartman,” Ruth said, “you’re a mind reader. How did you know I wanted to pay you back as soon as I could?”

“That’s very easy,” Albert said, lighting a cigarette. “It’s merely the ordinary reaction of an ordinarily honest person. And now I should say you were putting yourself in the way of being intellectually honest.”

“I don’t know,” Ruth sighed. “It seems so easy to tell all about myself. I’ve told my doctor, and I’ve told you. And it’s much easier than not telling it.”

“Facing facts, and admitting them, is much easier than dodging,” Albert said. “But so few persons know it.”

“My Uncle Ben used to tell me that,” Ruth admitted.

“You have an excellent doctor,” Albert observed. “There isn’t any better man than Meredith.”

“Still having me followed,” Ruth charged. “I don’t like that, Albert. But I suppose I deserve it.”

“You’ll be followed no more, Ruth,” Albert smiled. “Have you told your aunt about the baby?”

“That is something I have tried to dodge,” Ruth confessed. “I’ve tried to tell myself that I must save her worry and trouble. But I’ve got to tell her.”

Albert sat in silence for a moment. Then he said:

“I don’t wish to hurry you, Ruth, but if you are going to study for the stage, we must be making plans. You can go to the country for the interesting event—or abroad. And, in two years, we will see.”

“Perhaps I have no right to refuse this suggestion,” Ruth said.

“Oh, no, Ruth. You must please yourself.”

After Albert Hartman left, Ruth went into Katherine’s bedroom.

“You are frowning,” Katherine said. “What are you thinking about?”

“That’s funny,” Ruth exclaimed. “You know I was thinking that it has been more than a month since I heard from Myron. I wonder if he is all right.”

CHAPTER XXVII

T. S. Good, president of the CaaCan Oil Company, was a broad-shouldered, six-foot dynamo, who had made no one knew exactly how many millions before he was forty. His blonde hair was thinning on top, but his round gray-blue eyes were full of electric energy.

It was said of him that he was one of the best dressed men in New York. His office would have made an excellent motion picture set, with its carved desk, carved ceiling, lovely paneling, and amazing rugs. The only permanent adornments of the desk were an inkwell, and a gold and mother-of-pearl pen, and a vase in which always was one red rose.

When Good, who had been born Goodstein, walked into the corridor of the building, the starter and the elevator men stood at attention. As soon as he entered a car, the starter signaled it off. He always gave the operator a quarter. As a matter of fact, he never carried less than five dollars in quarters, and he handed out quarters all day long for every conceivable sort of service.

Arrived at the floor occupied by the CaaCan Company, Good was met by sight of Minnie Dugan, a red-headed, and far more than ordinarily comely young woman who guarded the entrance. Minnie always was sitting up primly when T. S. was about to appear. And her flotilla of office boys were as upright as so many little soldiers.

Humans and machines were humming when Good walked through the outer offices on the way to his own private sanctum. A word over the telephone from one set of employees to the other always preceded T. S. Good. He was a man who got service, respect, and then more service and more respect.

Ruth, as his private secretary, never entered his private office unless the buzzer sounded on her desk. Then her job was to get there as fast as possible to take his lightning dictation without a word for as many letters or documents as might be, to receive instructions in general about other matters, and to get back to her desk when he said, "That is all."

But Ruth went in to see Good on the morning of the day after she had talked with Albert Hartman without waiting for the buzzer. Good was sitting, apparently doing nothing, at his shining desk. He turned when he heard the door close, and said:

"Good morning, Miss Robbins."

Ruth walked the seventy or eighty miles which lay between the door and the desk, and said:

"Good morning, Mr. Good. When you have time I would like very much to

talk with you for a minute.”

T. S. Good turned the battery of his eyes on her. At first they were like a violent blow. But they softened imperceptibly until they became a glowing violet.

“It is a rule,” he said, “that I never discuss office routine or personal affairs. You know that.”

“Well,” Ruth said. “I felt I had to talk to you.”

T. S. Good smiled suddenly.

“Sit down, Miss Robbins,” he ordered, indicating the chair in which he usually interviewed visitors, in contrast to the less comfortable chair in which Ruth sat when she was on official business. “I would be less than human if I couldn’t break a rule for such an efficient secretary.”

“That is just what I wanted to talk about,” Ruth exclaimed.

“If you are not getting enough salary,” T. S. Good said, “we will double it. What salary are you getting now?”

“I came here for thirty-five dollars, and I was given your usual secretary’s salary of seventy-five when she left.”

Good pressed a button on his desk.

“Will that be satisfactory?” he asked Ruth.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Good,” Ruth exclaimed. “Thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me, thank yourself.”

Mr. Dinant, Good’s assistant, came in hurriedly.

“Dinant,” said Good, “see that Miss Robbins’ salary is doubled, to take effect immediately, and put her on my personal pay roll.”

“Yes, sir. Very good, sir,” Dinant said, bowed and wheeled, and went out noiselessly.

“It wasn’t really about my salary that I came to see you, Mr. Good,” Ruth said, “although indirectly that bears on the situation.”

“Well, what is it?” Good asked.

“Well, I am going to have a baby about seven months from now, and if I am really being kept in your office just for my work, I would like to know if I can keep on working under those conditions and have three months off, perhaps, when the time comes.”

“Good God!” Good said. He dropped his erect attitude, and reached for a cigarette, and lighted it. Then he looked at Ruth again.

“Are you crazy, to come in here and tell me that?” he demanded. “Don’t you know I won’t have a married woman around me in the office?”

“I’m not married,” Ruth replied. “I’m just going to have a baby.”

“My God!” Good exclaimed again. “Just going to have a baby!”

He looked at Ruth, and then he began to laugh. He never had been known to laugh in the office before. But he made up for it this time. He put his head

back and laughed, and he kicked his feet up and laughed.

There had always been rumors in the office that T. S. Good was two persons, a martinet in the office, and a he-man and general all-'round hell-raiser outside. He was reported to have broken the bank at Monte Carlo once or twice, and to have supported a long string of nationally known women as his mistresses.

Good suddenly stopped laughing and sat up as straight as ever in his chair, but there was a humorous quirk in his customarily hard eyes.

"You see," Ruth said, "I have had a wonderful offer to prepare for a stage career, and the man who made the offer is willing to back me, but I would rather take care of myself."

"Is he the . . . ?" Good asked significantly.

"Oh, no," Ruth replied earnestly. "He is a good friend, and that is all. But I would rather do work that I know I am doing just because of my ability. And so, if that is why I am working for you, I would like to keep on, if you are willing."

T. S. Good drew a fine Irish linen handkerchief, elaborately monogrammed, from his pocket. It was such fine material that the single tear he mopped from his right eye saturated it. He drew a deep breath, and said:

"Miss Robbins, I don't know the story behind this. I'd like to, but I shouldn't. I really can't let human feeling creep into my business life. I'll tell you as a secret, just between you and me, that the reason I don't notice everybody is because I am so soft-hearted that I would be taking everyone's troubles on my back."

"I won't tell anybody," Ruth promised.

"And don't you let anybody else around here know when you go away that it's only to have a baby, either. Miss Robbins."

"I won't tell them anything, Mr. Good, but I felt that as you were my employer you had better know everything about me."

"This will be the last time we talk like this for a long time, Miss Robbins. And I will tell you something. You stick to anything the way you have to this job here, and there's nowhere you can't get."

"Thank you."

"In this day when most everybody is watching clocks, I've never seen you watch one. I've never seen you show the slightest dissatisfaction when I deliberately have driven you right through your lunch hour, and given you work enough for two days. And I know you've stayed late many nights. You can be my secretary as long as you wish. You're on my private pay roll now, and no one ever is taken from that without my personal order. As I won't mention it again, let me take this occasion to wish you good luck with your baby."

“Thank you, Mr. Good.”

When Ruth arrived home that night, Katherine asked:

“How did the day go, Ruth?”

“Fine,” Ruth said. “And I learned something more. And that is that the copy books aren’t all wrong. I got a big raise today.”

“What has that to do with the copy books?”

“Well, in this case it was good work, and not those eyes and these hair that did the trick.”

Katherine sighed.

“But I guess your appearance had something to do with it, Ruth. A nice appearance helps a lot.”

“Well, that’s in the copy books too,” Ruth said, and went over to kiss the cheek that Katherine had ready for her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"I'm glad to be back in the old apartment with our own old furniture," Katherine said. "You don't know how restful it is."

"I prefer more swank," Ruth replied, "but I've found out that one can pay too much for it."

"I never did understand how you could afford the way we were living," Katherine said, "and if I didn't have a world of faith in you, Ruth—if I didn't know at bottom that there wasn't a truer, purer soul living—I couldn't have stood it for a minute. As it was, I had my sleepless nights."

"Aunt Katherine, I guess I haven't been exactly honest with you, any more than I have been with myself."

"I have prayed for you, Ruth, every night, ever since that terrible day you were born."

"Yes, I have heard about it so often, I imagine I can remember it."

"Your Uncle Benjamin frightened me so, then, and all through the years. I hoped that my prayers would help guide you in the right path."

"I owe everything to you two, Aunt Katherine. If it weren't for Uncle Ben I wouldn't be in New York. I probably still would be in Southington."

"There are worse places," Aunt Katherine said.

Ruth arose from the couch, and went to where Katherine was rocking.

"Aunt Katherine," she said, "I am sorry our conversation this evening took this turn, because I had made up my mind to tell you something that I think you should know, and when I tell you, I don't want you to think that it was Uncle Ben's fault or that he was to blame in any way."

Katherine raised her face and focussed her hazy blue eyes on her niece. Her features were worn; there were little wrinkles under her eyes; there was a little yellow discoloration at her temples through which the blue veins showed; her lips were dry; she looked like a very good woman who was very tired.

"I don't know just how to tell you, Aunt Katherine," Ruth said, dropping on her knees beside the rocker. "I don't want to hurt you by telling you, but I can't stand hurting you by deception—when you might learn the truth later in some way."

"What is it, Ruth?" Katherine asked. "Don't scare me. Tell me."

"I am going to be a mother," Ruth said, her bright, dark-blue eyes on her aunt's faded ones.

Katherine gazed back at her, fascinated, as a bird by a snake. She didn't move. She didn't change expression. She just looked her amazement.

"I don't expect you will understand all at once, Aunt Katherine," Ruth said,

her deep voice husky, and earnest. "But it is no one's fault, no man's fault."

"Am I hearing correctly?" Katherine asked slowly. "I can't believe it."

"I am going to have a baby," Ruth said. "And I am glad of it. At first I was ready to die. I thought of it. But ever since I made up my mind to have it I have been glad—except thinking that it might hurt you. And I wouldn't intentionally hurt you for worlds."

"Ruth!"

"Yes, Aunt Katherine."

"I can't seem to think. You mean you . . ."

"Yes, I wish you would understand, dear Aunt Katherine. He wanted to marry me, but I wouldn't marry him. I think . . . I know . . . he wouldn't . . . I wouldn't be this way, if it hadn't been for me."

Katherine had shut her eyes; her lips were moving.

"Other women have had babies without being married," Ruth said. "And I would rather have a baby without being married, than be married just for the sake of being married."

Katherine's eyes remained closed, and her lips continued to move slightly.

"You know I have always said I didn't believe in marriages until both the man and the woman were sure they wished to live together permanently."

Katherine put her hands on the arms of her chair and raised herself to her feet. Then she raised her face and her hands aloft.

"Benjamin Robbins," she called. "Look here, upon your handiwork."

"Don't blame Uncle Ben," Ruth said quietly.

Katherine dropped her arms. Her figure drooped for a moment. Then she squared her shoulders.

"The man is Myron Brown," she said.

"I'm not . . ."

"Don't lie to me; the man is Myron Brown," Katherine said.

"I am not going to lie," Ruth protested mildly. "But I will never tell any one who the man is."

"The man is Myron Brown," Katherine repeated. "I deliberately blinded myself when I saw you and him in the library."

"Whoever the man is has nothing to do with us now," Ruth said. "I am going to have this baby."

"Such shame never has come to a Robbins," Katherine exclaimed, her voice shaking. "Your grandfather or your great grandfather would have killed a daughter for such a disgrace."

"And added a bit of murder to the situation," Ruth said, her voice rising a trifle. "Now, look here, Aunt Katherine, I know you're shocked, and I didn't expect you'd be anything else, but you're my aunt, and I'm your niece, and I'm going to have a baby. And those grandparents are buried, and a lot of their

primitive ideas with them.”

“I never thought I could live through anything like this,” Katherine said, setting her lips in a straight line. “I should think the shame of it would have killed me.”

“You’ll probably be more surprised when you find you eat three meals a day, make some baby clothes, and get to love your grandniece.”

“This is no time for levity.”

“Well, I’ve done all the weeping about it I’m going to do, Aunt Katherine,” Ruth asserted. “When I first suspected it I forgot all my principles, and I even considered having an abortion.”

“It might have been better if you did,” Katherine exclaimed.

“What? You would encourage an abortion?”

“Almost anything is preferable to public shame,” Katherine said.

“My God! I think you mean it.”

“Mean it? Of course, I mean it,” Katherine declared, her jaw square, her lips trembling with the intensity of her emotions, her hands clenched at her sides.

“If you had drowned yourself I could have understood it better than I understand you this way.”

“Why, Aunt Katherine!”

“How you could stand there and tell me this, I don’t see.”

Ruth gazed wide-eyed at a picture of outraged virginity.

“Aunt Katherine, I hoped you loved me enough to see with me in this. I can’t feel ashamed just because I did something everybody does, or wants to do.”

“I am going to my room and pray,” Katherine said. “I must pray. And if I were you, Ruth,” she said with frantic intensity, “I would get down on my knees, and I would stay there until I received some revelation from God Almighty on His throne in heaven, or until I was dead.”

Katherine went to her bedroom and closed the door after her. Ruth raised her arms with a helpless gesture, looked at the clock, which was indicating ten-thirty, looked at her wrist-watch which agreed with the clock, looked at her aunt’s door, which definitely remained closed, and sat down and picked up a magazine.

After turning a few pages of the magazine, she tossed it back on the table, and went to the window and pulled aside the curtain. Only windows and roofs were visible. She looked at them for a few minutes, finally focussing on a fat female figure in an unshaded window diagonally across the street, and down a couple of floors below her. The unshaded window was in a bathroom, and the fat female, who had nothing on, was washing herself at the bowl. Her breasts drooped down to her abdomen.

Ruth's hands went to her own hard breasts, and patted her still flat stomach. She let the curtain drop back into place, walked briskly over and snapped off the lights, and went into her own bedroom. She hummed a bit as she quickly undressed. Then she went to the bathroom, and then she went to the bed, pulled down the sheets and jumped in.

Ruth never snored, but she breathed rather hard once in a while when she was tired. She was breathing rather hard about five minutes later.

CHAPTER XXIX

“So your aunt didn’t put her arms around you and kiss you when you told her about the baby?” Albert Hartman repeated. “What did you expect?”

“I knew she was very religious and strait-laced,” Ruth said, “but I thought cardinal principles of Christianity were love and forgiveness.”

“Well, she’s all right now, isn’t she?”

“Oh, she speaks to me, but she spends most of her time praying for me. She thinks I should publicly confess my sins and accept Jesus for my Lord and Saviour.”

“You are the Mary Magdalene of the family.”

“Of course, the trouble is that she can’t understand my point of view at all.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, don’t smile. You understand, Albert. The trouble was that the little thing was bothering me, and I had to do something about it.”

“A great many tragedies, comedies, wars, sickness, happinesses, joys, sorrows, made careers and ruined careers, all emanate from the same source,” Albert Hartman remarked in a casual manner.

“I am hoping that mine will be just a happiness with very minor inconveniences,” Ruth said.

“What particularly interests me,” Albert said, dusting his cigarette ashes onto an ash tray, “is whether it was the man, or the idea, in your case.”

“I think you first suggested that problem to me,” Ruth said seriously. “And I am of the opinion that it couldn’t have been any man except Myron, since I knew Myron. But, if I hadn’t known Myron it would have been some one.”

“Yet you still do not wish to marry him?”

They had just finished lunch in Whyte’s downtown, and the hum of voices at the thronged tables made their own conversation as private as if they were on a desert island. Ruth’s eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks were touched with a blush of health, with just a dash of creamed coffee from the sun. She made a little face at Albert.

“Every one, including you, seems to have marriage on the brain,” she said.

“Somehow,” Albert said seriously, “I feel that away down underneath you are the marrying sort. I don’t think you really know yourself yet.”

“You know me better than myself, it appears.”

“It wouldn’t be strange if I did. So few persons know themselves. I can tell you one thing. You should be very careful of that New England conscience of yours.”

“Oh, do you think I still have one of those? Oh, dear!”

“I know you have,” Albert asserted, crushing a cigarette stub. “I think it was your New England conscience that caused you to refuse to accept my suggestion of a career on the stage, and which made you leave the large apartment which you loved for the smaller one.”

“It was simply a case of not wanting something I couldn’t pay for,” Ruth explained.

“No. The reason went deeper than that; you must have believed me when I told you that it was a real pleasure for me to make that setting possible for you, and that I gladly would accept repayment for everything I had spent when you made your success on the stage.”

“I was not so sure of the success on the stage.”

“You couldn’t fail,” Albert assured her. “With your beauty, and brains, and charm, and personality—why, I could name a half-dozen men in New York who would be only too delighted to back you.”

“You are very flattering—and I love to be flattered,” Ruth smiled.

“You are contagiously alive,” Albert said. “I like to watch you.”

“I passed Marion on the street the other day,” Ruth said, “and I thought she made an effort not to see me.”

“Perhaps,” Albert nodded. “The combination of me and that apartment, and the theatre and me now and then, probably has given many persons, including Marion, the idea that I am keeping you.”

“I thought perhaps that was the case.”

“The fact that I am Marion’s uncle, a bachelor, and wealthy, also might incline her to be a trifle harsh in her judgment,” Albert pointed out. “Unmarried, I am much more of a potential asset than married.”

“You hadn’t thought of marriage, had you, Albert?”

Albert’s sparkling eyes, so young in contrast to his close-cropped grayish hair, looked into hers hard for a moment or two.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I know it was rather a shock when I found out those things about you, particularly about Myron.”

“What did you think?”

“Well, for one thing, I found myself wondering if I could marry a girl who, knowing me, had chosen another and much younger man to be the father of her baby.”

“What did you decide?”

“Despite my reputation as a man of quick decisions, I can’t say that I have made any decision in that matter yet.”

“You are just fooling, Albert.”

“Fooling and sincerity are separated only by a very thin line.”

“But a thin line in the mind can be thicker than the Rock of Gibraltar,

actually, you know.”

“We are just making words, Ruth, which is usually an indication that two persons have too much, or too little, to say to each other.”

“It seems to me, perhaps naturally enough, that you are the one who is making words,” Ruth said. “I like to consider myself frank. And frankly, I have considered Myron as a possible husband and found him wanting, but I never considered you as a possibility.”

“What did you think of me—honestly?”

“You know what I always said about men and love? I wondered if you had an idea that you might possibly persuade me to be your mistress.”

“Yes.”

“And I thought that under all your kindness and courtesy might be concealed a plan to finally have me.”

“Very interesting, Ruth. Please go on.”

“And I thought that if you really had such a scheme that it was perfectly legitimate for me to get everything I could out of you—that we both were playing a fair game.”

“Really!”

“Yes. And I wondered how it would be to have you for a lover.”

“And what did you decide?”

“I am just like you were. I never reached a decision—because the thought of Myron always came into my mind, and just spoiled everything.”

“And yet you insist you don’t love Myron?”

“Well, Myron always was a torment to me. If Myron only had known how I felt about it I might have had this baby years ago—when my Uncle Ben still was alive.”

“You were very fond of your Uncle Ben.”

“He was a great man. The only mistakes I have made were when I followed only a part of his philosophy. I am afraid I can’t follow it, after all, because he didn’t live long enough to finish his teaching, and because I am not quite intellectual enough. I’ve begun to believe I am far too emotional.”

“For instance, Ruth?”

“You’d better call for the check, Albert,” Ruth said. “I am late as it is.”

Albert turned his head, and a waiter laid the check on the cloth. “I would like to know just one reason for your last statement?” Albert said.

“Well, one big reason, Albert, is that if I were the girl I always had thought I would like to be, I would have had at least a trial marriage with you by this time.”

“You would?”

“I certainly would have. You are handsome, immensely wealthy, and brilliant.”

“I suppose Myron was the obstacle.”

“He was—and a purely emotional one,” Ruth replied.

“You always seem to have felt rather sure of yourself about this trial marriage theory of yours,” Albert exclaimed, as he rose from the table.

“I’ll tell you why,” Ruth breathed, leaning close to him, so that a fresh, heady perfume rose to his nostrils. “I always felt that after a man had tried me he wouldn’t want to leave me.”

CHAPTER XXX

“How do you like being the college terror?” George asked.

“They’d better leave me alone—and you’d better, too,” Myron said, knotting a shoelace and getting up from the edge of his cot.

“But how did you ever lick Walter Wendell? My God, he’s supposed to be the best heavyweight boxer in the place?”

“I got mad,” Myron said.

“You didn’t get mad. You’ve been mad for two months—ever since you took the rest cure at Tom Maxey’s. What did he do—feed you sulphur and brimstone?”

“Don’t fool, George,” Myron said.

“Well, I dunno,” George exclaimed. “I dunno but what I like you better this way, at that. You used to be always worrying about that dame. And it used to be fun to kid you. I guess we were kind of jealous, at that. Boy, but she was a looker. Why don’t you give a friend the address?”

Myron leaped from where he was standing and jammed George against the wall. His face was distorted with rage.

“For Pete’s sake! Don’t ever mention that business again,” he cried. “I’m through, and that’s that. It’s done! See?”

“Hey!” George breathed, when Myron released him. “Hey! Don’t do that any more to me or there will be a fight!”

Bop! Myron’s left fist hit George in the jaw. Smack! His right fist hit George’s stomach. Wham! George’s left hand met Myron’s nose at speed. Then two pairs of doubled hands flailed the air, and two pairs of feet stamped on the floor for a minute. George suddenly sailed across Myron’s cot, his head thumping the wall. Myron stood, breathing heavily; his head protruded so that the Burgundy flowing from his nose cleared his clothes and splattered on the floor; and he glared at George.

“Have you gone crazy?” George demanded.

“Call it whatever you want to,” Myron said, between deep gasps for breath, “but God damn it, when I tell you pleasantly to do something, do it.”

“I didn’t know you felt that way about it, Myron,” George said, hauling out a handkerchief and applying it to his own nose.

“It’s a go then?” Myron asked.

“Sure it is,” George agreed, gathering himself together, and springing from the couch. “I wouldn’t have said a word anyhow, if I’d realized.”

“Better not,” Myron said, extending an open right hand.

George took it.

“Boy,” he exclaimed, looking around, “wait till Sadie sees this.”

Sadie was the colored maid, who made the beds, and pretended to clean the room.

“Well, so long, George,” Myron said. “I’ve got to get on the job.”

“So long, Myron.”

It was a hot August night, and Myron was cruising slowly on frying asphalt up Broadway about ten o’clock when two men hailed him at Fifty-first Street. They were of medium size and dark complexioned, and wore straw hats and light suits. They gave Myron an address in Brooklyn.

Myron drove across the old Brooklyn Bridge, continued for a quarter-hour on that side of the river, and stopped at the designated house. A third man stepped out of the shadows of a building, and joined the two passengers on the sidewalk. After a short talk, one of the passengers said to Myron:

“You wait here, and our friend will wait with you. Keep your motor running; we’ll be gone about two minutes.”

Myron, who had gotten out of his cab, turned to watch them, when the third man jammed a revolver against his back.

“Get in there and sit down,” he ordered. “And be ready to drive like hell. If you make a wrong move, I’ll blow your guts out.”

Myron jerked around and grabbed the gun. Its owner pulled the trigger and the gun exploded.

“You son-of-a-bitch, you’ll pay for this,” panted the thug.

Myron hit him, and, knocking him down, jumped on his belly with both feet, and then kicked him viciously in the jaw. The thug lay quiet. Myron picked up the revolver and waited.

Came a sound from around the corner, something like a tire blowing out, only sharper, then a beat of feet on pavement, and a murmur of voices drawing nearer. The two passengers, running, rounded the corner, about twenty-five feet away.

Myron dashed towards them. One of the passengers fired, and then the other. Myron’s body twitched back twice as bullets hit him, but he kept going until he grabbed one of the passengers and smashed him over the head with his revolver butt. He and the passenger fell, Myron still whaling away at his head with the clubbed revolver.

The second passenger fired another shot as he ran past. He met a policeman at the next corner. Some pursuers had stopped near Myron and his second victim. Others were right behind the second passenger. The second passenger whirled his arm, and his revolver, which was tied to a string, sailed to a nearby roof. The policeman belted him a tremendous thwack over the head with his nightstick, knocking him cold.

“What did you do that for?” a man in the crowd demanded. “That guy had

surrendered.”

Wham! The nightstick cracked down across the questioner’s skull, and he staggered back, a dark stain beginning to spread over his left ear.

“Come along, you,” the policeman said, grabbing the questioner and hamstringing him with a horizontal sweep of the cruel hickory.

“What did I do? For God’s sake!” the questioner screamed.

He put his hands to his head, and shrieked with agony.

“Shut up, you bastard,” the policeman ordered, “or I’ll quiet you.”

The questioner continued to scream. The policeman dropped back his arm and swung the nightstick down on his skull once more. The questioner sank to the sidewalk. Voices in the little press of men murmured. The policeman, his eye on the two other policemen near the taxicab, wheeled viciously.

“Any more of you murder-lovers want something?”

The men were silent.

Myron was sobbing, and pounding at the body under him with the revolver, when a powerful hand yanked him to his feet.

“What’s this?” asked a big policeman.

“That’s the guy there that got the bandits,” a voice called. “He’s the guy—the taxi driver.”

Myron nodded feebly.

“I was driving them,” he said, “when that one back there stuck a revolver in my back, and I took it away from him.”

A half-dozen policemen had gathered, including a lieutenant. A new arrival came running up, a blackjack swinging in his hand. He grabbed Myron and swung up the jack. A policeman shoved his nightstick up just in time to take the blow meant for Myron’s head.

“Lay off, Mac,” the policeman said. “This ain’t no gunman; this is the taxi driver that got them guys.”

“You’re a brave boy,” the lieutenant said, slapping Myron on the back. “But why didn’t you shoot? You had that first fellow’s gun.”

“I just wanted to mash ’em,” Myron said feebly. “I didn’t even think of shooting.”

The lieutenant held the hand with which he had patted Myron close to his eyes.

“This driver is hurt, boys,” he said. “Lay him down and we’ll look him over till the ambulance surgeon gets here.”

Two policemen and the lieutenant went over Myron. They put one tourniquet on his left arm, and another on his left thigh. They put a dressing on his chest on the right side, and on his back on the same side.

Myron was barely conscious.

“This guy seemed to like getting shot,” a hoarse voice exclaimed.

“I did,” Myron announced weakly.
Then he fainted.

CHAPTER XXXI

“Well, I do declare!” Katherine exclaimed, turning so suddenly that her morning newspaper tilted her cup, spilling a trifle of coffee into the saucer.

“The Lord moves in his mysterious way his wonders to perform,” she added, looking grimly at Ruth.

“How now?” Ruth asked.

“Myron was shot last night,” Katherine said, “and he is in the Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn.”

Ruth sat rigid, a bit of buttered toast halted halfway to her mouth; her lips remained parted, just showing white teeth; her eyes widened; the color left her cheeks.

“According to the papers he captured some murderers, and now he is a hero. Who ever would have thought of Myron being a hero?”

Ruth swallowed hard, and said:

“He is all right, then?”

“The paper says he has a chance of living,” Katherine said. “Who would ever have expected it from any one from Southington?”

“Let me see the paper,” Ruth asked, putting her toast down, untasted.

“‘Honor student at medical school, who drives taxi at night, captures bandits,’” Katherine read. “There it is all over the front page,” she concluded, handing the newspaper to Ruth.

Ruth took the paper in her steady white hands, and skipped hastily down a column on the first page, and then turned to where it was continued on the second page. Katherine watched her through her spectacles, which she removed long enough to clean on a napkin.

“What is that you are saying, Aunt Katherine?” Ruth exclaimed suddenly, thrusting the newspaper aside, and raising her head.

“‘The wages of sin are death!’” Katherine repeated more clearly.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Ruth asserted, her voice raised a bit, and a barely perceptible catch in her breath.

She arose from the table, pushing her chair back more vigorously than necessary, and stood facing her aunt. The color had rushed back into her cheeks, in feverish quantity, and her eyes were suffused with moisture. She and her aunt looked into each other’s eyes for an instant.

“Oh, why are you this way, Aunt Katherine?” she cried. “You naturally are so kind and loving and good, but you are so hard where your own sort of religion is involved.”

Katherine’s features were set stubbornly. Her attitude was stiff and hostile.

“Ruth,” she announced firmly, “you know there is only one way to find the Kingdom of God, and that is to publicly confess your sins and accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your redeemer.”

“I don’t know it,” Ruth replied, her lips trembling, “and if I did know it I would have to feel I had sinned. I don’t call perfectly natural actions sinning, even if you do.”

“The Lord will find a way to humble you,” Katherine said. “Now you are proud in your sin. But the time will come.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, stop preaching—please!” Ruth begged. “Please. They aren’t even using that religion any more in most places.”

She finished speaking at the door to her bedroom. She stepped inside and closed it, and went to the telephone. In a moment she was connected with the hospital. After five minutes, she replaced the receiver.

“What did they say at the hospital?” Katherine asked, when Ruth returned to the living room.

“You know how they are at hospitals,” Ruth replied. “But I understood that, if no complications set in, he will live.”

“Let this be a lesson to him,” Katherine said.

Ruth shook her head impatiently, opened her mouth as if she were about to make a retort, and then closed it again. She sighed, then returned to the telephone, and called Albert Hartman.

“Hello, Albert,” she said.

“Yes, I’m all right, but I’m terribly worried. Myron was shot last night.”

“You read it?”

“I called the hospital, and couldn’t learn much, but I thought with your influence you could find out the truth for me.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes. I’ll wait right here.”

Ruth walked up and down the bedroom, and walked out into the living room, and back into the bedroom again. After moving restlessly about for five minutes, she stopped at the living room window and pulled aside the shade.

“That Albert Hartman is another sinner,” Katherine said, directing her voice at Ruth’s back.

Ruth gestured helplessly with her hands and shoulders, and left the window and walked quickly towards her bedroom.

“I don’t blame you for hiding,” Katherine said. “I would go and hide if I were you. A girl of your family getting into this mess. To think I have lived all these years for this.”

Ruth remained in her bedroom until the telephone rang again. Within a minute she was back in the living room, her face bright.

“Albert says that, discounting the customary caution of doctors, Myron

will get well,” she said. “Prompt action by the police prevented him losing very much blood, and he is young and healthy, and should be all right soon.”

“You were pretty upset, though, weren’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be, Aunt Katherine? I’ve known Myron ever since I was so high.”

Ruth indicated with her outspread palm a point about a foot from the floor.

“And he is the man—don’t tell me,” Katherine declared.

“Oh, dear! Good morning, Aunt Katherine, I’ll be late for the office as it is.”

Ruth went out. The kiss-on-cheek had been discontinued since Ruth had told her aunt she was pregnant.

Katherine watched the door for a few minutes after Ruth had left. Then she got up slowly from her chair and walked listlessly to the window. She put her head out. Far below, Ruth was getting into a cab. When she turned back, her eyes were wet. Before her fumbling fingers grasped her handkerchief her cheeks were wet; two big drops splashed on the polished floor.

“Oh, God!” she said, as if speaking to some one she knew, who was just above her. “Oh, please help me, a humble sinner, to save this erring soul.”

She choked back a sob. “If you will save Ruth, God, you can work your will with me.”

CHAPTER XXXII

The telephone bell in Myron's room rang. Miss Goss, the day nurse, picked up the receiver.

"Miss Robbins is downstairs," she said.

Myron, on the afternoon of his third day in bed, turned his head slightly on the pillow, but before he could say anything, Deacon Brown jumped to his feet, and exclaimed:

"Tell her that Mr. Brown won't see her now, or at any other time."

Miss Goss, Irish, with wide-set gray eyes, brown hair and white face, dusted with faint freckles, looked from father to son, holding the transmitter against her chest. Myron's brown eyes, eager for a moment, moved from Miss Goss to his father, to his mother, and then back to his father again. The Deacon took two steps to the nurse's side and took the telephone from her.

"Hello," he said. "This is Deacon Brown. My son doesn't want to see you, now or any other time."

The Deacon's cheeks flamed.

"You don't believe me?" He turned to Myron.

"She says she won't believe any one but you, Myron," he said. "I'll hold the mouthpiece down so you can tell her. I guess that'll settle her hash once and for all."

"I don't want to be too harsh, father," Myron said weakly.

"Harsh! This ain't being harsh. One clean cut, and the sore is out; you're cured. You can't fuss around with things like this, my boy."

The Deacon held the mouthpiece in position. "Go ahead, tell her now," he commanded. "Just say, 'Father repeated my message correctly.' That is all."

Myron put his lips to the transmitter, which his father held in one hand while with the other he held the receiver at his own ear. From it escaped into the breathless silence of the room, a fresh, vibrant, insistent contralto voice. Myron swallowed hard, and exclaimed huskily:

"Father spoke for me. Oh, I am awfully sorry, Ruth, I will . . ."

He stopped and looked at his father, his eyes wet.

"She hung up on me."

Deacon Brown withdrew the old-fashioned instrument from near Myron's mouth and replaced it on the stand beside the bed. His finger had depressed the hook, cutting off the connection, as soon as Myron had said "Father spoke for me."

Deacon Brown glanced around at Miss Goss, but she had turned her trim back to the bed and was gazing from the window. Hetty was sitting in a

straight-backed, cane-seated chair on the other side of the hospital bed.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” Deacon Brown said, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his thin neck with each syllable.

“You said yourself you were through with that girl, Myron,” Hetty exclaimed, reaching out a warm hand and laying it on his bare forearm—the hand of a good housekeeper, with callouses from brooms and mops and needles, and stains from fruits and nuts, and broken nails from all forms of household effort combined. “You meant it, didn’t you, darling?”

Myron blinked his eyes, and nodded his head:

“Yes, I had given her up two months ago.”

“And you don’t know how that pleased your father and me, Myron,” Hetty said. “Your father isn’t as well as you might think, and having you go off like that has preyed on him. Your father would be glad to die for you, Myron, a hundred times over. You are his only son, and you should think of him.”

Myron’s eyes closed as his mother’s slightly raspy but experienced hand soothed his arm gently. Hetty Brown had rubbed her children to sleep on countless occasions—the two who were alive, and the three who were gone. She knew just how to rub.

“Deacon,” Hetty said in a softer tone, “I wouldn’t be surprised if we kept quiet, and I just sat here and rubbed Myron, that he might drop off. He always used to love this when he was a little fellow.”

Deacon Brown cleared his throat.

“You should have seen your mother, Myron,” he said. “She wouldn’t wait for a train but she drove all the way down here herself.”

“Your father wanted to come just as much or more,” Hetty exclaimed softly, continuing to rub steadily with practised, light sweeps of her arm.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Myron said.

“And we’re glad to be here,” Deacon Brown said. “And I guess, after this, we’ll sort of kind of stick together.”

Miss Goss, on soft feet, reached the side of the bed, and took Myron’s pulse. She put her gold watch back in her belt, and looked at Mrs. Brown.

“If you don’t mind,” she said in a low voice, “I think your son has had enough excitement for one day.”

“Oh, dear!” Hetty cried. “Then we’ll be going. May be we can come back tonight?”

“You might see about it,” Miss Goss replied. “But I wouldn’t do it unless the doctors say it is all right.”

Hetty bent over and kissed Myron. Deacon Brown took his hand awkwardly, and said:

“Well, good-by for now, son.”

“Why don’t you kiss him, too, Deacon?” Hetty asked.

Deacon Brown reddened a bit, but he stooped over and made a smacking noise with his lips on Myron's forehead. Then Hetty took him by the arm and they went out.

As soon as they were gone, Miss Goss straightened Myron's pillow, puffed it and turned it, and smoothed the sheets. She laid her cool, soft hand on his hot forehead.

"You're wonderful, Miss Goss," Myron said.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Brown, about anything. If you want any messages sent to any one, or you need anything, you just ask Miss Goss."

"There isn't anything, thank you. But you seemed to know I wanted to be alone."

Miss Goss opened her lips and took a breath, and then sighed, and closed them again. She repeated this performance three times before she finally said:

"Mr. Brown, I don't know if you knew that some wonderful flowers and fruit came here for you from a Miss Ruth Robbins, and that your father had everything distributed in the wards."

Myron remained silent.

"And Miss Robbins has called up three or four times a day," Miss Goss said. "I was wondering whether or not I should tell you, but whether I should or not, I just had to."

"Thank you," Myron said.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"If you would just sit there—and hold my hand," Myron said.

Miss Goss, starched uniform rattling, adjusted a chair, sat down, and put her hand in her patient's. He opened his eyes and looked at her for an instant, and then closed his eyes again. His eyes remained closed, but his breathing was not that of a sleeping person. Slowly a tear trickled from under one eyelid, and rolled down his cheek, and made a tiny damp spot on the pillow case.

Very carefully, using her free hand, Miss Goss extracted a bit of cambric, which looked oddly feminine in contrast to the severity of her official attire, and applied it daintily to her eyes. Then she blew her nose, rather needlessly.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“I don’t know what ails that boy,” Deacon Brown said, the first Monday in September, swallowing the last of a big dish of oatmeal and cream with sliced bananas.

“I was hoping that I might get him to go to the meetings with me next week,” Hetty confessed. “If he only really would get religion, I believe he would be all right.”

“There’s something on his mind—there’s no doubt about it,” the Deacon said, helping himself to a generous slice of ham and two eggs, and smearing butter over a hot baking-powder biscuit.

“May be the revival will do what none of the doctors or his own folks that love him have been able to do,” Hetty suggested. “There is nothing like a revival for really curing ills of the mind.”

“If Myron should get the light, and accept the Lord Jesus, it would be a miracle,” Deacon Brown agreed, his Adam’s apple moving briskly as he absorbed a generous gulp of hot coffee and cream, and buttered his fourth biscuit.

“We can be mighty thankful for Dr. Prescott, I say, in this day and age,” Hetty exclaimed. “He couldn’t be more interested in Myron if Myron were his own son. He is a dear, sweet man, and a pillar of strength in time of sorrow or trouble.”

“Not all our members feel the same way about it,” Deacon Brown observed. “We have some pretty warm arguments in the vestry. A good many of the young people, and some of their parents, I am sorry to say, want to bring the gospel up to date. You know, they want a young minister.”

“I don’t know what the world is coming to,” Hetty sighed.

“They want moving pictures and dancing in the church, I guess,” the Deacon said, “like they have already in a good many churches around the country. As a matter of fact, Ingersoll could have been the preacher in a lot of churches that are calling themselves Christian these days.”

“It was only the other day that Helen asked me if I really believed that the whale swallowed Jonah,” Hetty said. “And she said she never could understand, if Adam was the first man and Eve was the first woman, and they had two sons, Cain and Abel, and Cain killed Abel, how it could be that Cain went forth to the Land of Nod and took unto himself a wife.”

Hetty wiped her eyes, from which tears had begun to flow, with her napkin.

“It’s time we had a revival in this town,” Deacon Brown said, dipping his

seventh biscuit in maple syrup. “What did you say to Helen?”

“I prayed with her,” Hetty replied, her voice strained from repressing sobs. “I told her that she must have faith, and that without faith she never could see the light nor hope for the Life Everlasting.”

The Deacon nodded, his jaws working rhythmically.

“And Dr. Prescott talked with her for a long time. He is such a wonderful, spiritual man. Helen was very respectful, but, oh, Deacon, I am so afraid that she is concealing a doubt.”

“The young are likely to be that way, particularly in this day and age,” the Deacon said, reaching for a toothpick in a pressed green glass bowl. “They are so full of this science business, and the monkey theory, that they can’t understand that the Spirit is all that counts. They have forgotten they have souls.”

The Deacon smacked his lips and opened his mouth to release, with sound effects, a sudden uprush of gas from his stomach.

“Why, Deacon!” Hetty exclaimed.

“What do you want me to do, Hetty,” her husband inquired, “keep all that gas on my stomach?”

“I think you should get rid of it,” Hetty said, “but I think you might at least make an effort to control yourself—put a napkin or your hand in front of your mouth. And you never think of saying ‘Excuse me.’ ”

“I guess I never did put on enough airs for you, did I, Hetty?” the Deacon demanded, licking his mustache first with his tongue, and then drying it vigorously with his napkin.

“There are some little things that make life so much pleasanter that you sometimes forget,” Hetty said. “But after all, when I think of what I read in the papers, and what I hear about other men, I can thank my stars that I have such a good man for a husband.”

“Well, you are a good woman, Hetty,” the Deacon exclaimed, rising from the table, and revealing his skinny frame which, like a magician’s magic receptacle, was capable of absorbing tremendous quantities of eggs, ham, biscuits, steaks, chops, baked beans and liquids, without any change in outline.

Hetty groped over the floor in front of her chair with her foot.

“I never can find that buzzer,” she exclaimed.

“Why don’t you just call her?” the Deacon asked.

“You know that isn’t proper, Deacon,” Hetty protested.

“Jingle a glass with your knife,” he suggested.

Hetty looked at him, a hurt look changing to an expression of satisfaction. She turned her head to the service door, which opened to admit a raw-boned young woman in a gingham dress—black hair coiled loosely, cheeks red, eyes a smiling brown, and crimson lips ready to smile.

“Deacon Brown and I are through, Bridget,” Hetty said. “But I don’t know when Myron and Helen will be down for breakfast. I called and called them, but they seem to want to sleep their lives away.”

“That’s all right, Mum,” Bridget exclaimed heartily. “I’ll have their breakfast ready whenever they come down. Sure, I don’t mind, at all, at all.”

“I’d like to have seen myself staying in bed when I was a young feller,” the Deacon observed. “By this time I had the cows all milked, and the chores all finished, and the milk delivered.”

“Times are different, Deacon,” Hetty pointed out.

“You don’t have to tell me,” her husband exclaimed. “Here it is seven o’clock, and they’re still in bed.”

Hetty followed her husband out into the front hall, waiting while he took his derby hat from the hat rack—golden oak, with a box below which was full of rubbers and arctics and odds and ends, such as a pair of grass shears, an odd fur-lined glove, a broken electric torch, and a trowel. He stopped at the door and pressed his ragged mustache to Hetty’s chin.

“I’m going to see Dr. Prescott again today,” Hetty said. “I am praying to God morning, noon and night, that this revival will mean new lives for Myron and Helen. Dr. Prescott is arranging it before school opens, on purpose to reach the young folks.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

Emma Putney set down one of Molly Parker's best hand-painted China tea cups on the tea wagon, and took a deep breath.

"You should have been at the revival meeting last night," she said. "I never heard Dr. Prescott talk so beautifully. He told a story about a little girl dying of diphtheria, and of how awful her father and mother felt, and how wonderful it was when her face lighted up at the end because she knew she was going to Jesus."

Mrs. Parker, a nervous, alert little woman, with dark, humorous eyes, a rather large, but shapely nose, and beautiful legs which she was at great pains to encase in the sheerest silk she could afford, sipped at her tea and nibbled at a dainty lettuce sandwich.

"Of course, we all knew that Hetty Brown and the Deacon were wild to get Myron to go forward and accept God, and so, I guess, we all were watching. And when everybody was crying over the little girl with the diphtheria, sure enough, Myron got up, and walked down front, and dropped on his knees.

"I wish you could have seen Hetty cry. She was so happy. And, of course, we all were glad. And then, my dear, Myron made public confession of his sins."

Emma Putney looked sharply with pale eyes at Mrs. Parker, and made her uppers click with a practised thrust of her tongue. Then she picked up her teacup and drank, holding her little finger out at right angles.

"I would never have believed it of Myron," Emma exclaimed, holding up both skinny hands, palms outward.

"I guess Myron never did much sinning," Mrs. Parker said.

"That's all you know about it," Emma announced triumphantly. "That's all you know—and none of us would have known any better if we hadn't been there. Why he has drunk wine and been with a woman."

Her face flushed, and she leaned forward, red-eyed, and stared at Mrs. Parker, clicking her uppers excitedly.

"And he has gambled," she continued. "And he liked to dance. And he took the name of the Lord in vain."

Mrs. Parker took another sip of tea and watched her visitor without making any comment.

"It must have been just too terrible for poor Hetty Brown," Emma Putney went on, catching her breath. "There, she and the Deacon have been such pillars of the church all their lives, and their only son has to go and make a beast of himself."

“But it’s all right now that he went forward and accepted Jesus, isn’t it?” Mrs. Parker asked.

“All his sins are washed away in the Blood of the Lamb,” Emma Putney agreed, nodding her head vigorously. “He has taken Jesus Christ for his Lord and Saviour before the world, and now he will enter into the House of Many Mansions.”

“But the fact that he used to be a sinner still has its points of interest?”

Emma looked sharply at her hostess, and clicked her uppers. Then she leaned forward again.

“He only mentioned one woman,” she whispered, her eyes eager, “and I was wondering if it wasn’t probably that Ruth Robbins.”

Emma Putney leaned back in her chair, head up, so that the shaking line of loose skin under her chin was plainly visible.

“Probably they were drunk together,” Emma Putney said.

“I always liked Ruth Robbins,” Mrs. Parker said. “Both the doctor and I always thought she was an unusually sweet, beautiful girl.”

“But she believed in free love,” Emma snapped.

Mrs. Parker, high color a trifle higher than usual, and dark eyes snapping, set down her empty cup of tea, and arose.

“I know that the Browns think it is wonderful that Myron has done this thing,” she said crisply. “But, as you probably know, neither the doctor nor myself place much stock in revivals. We think they are rather hysterical affairs.”

Emma clicked her teeth, gathered her reticule, and arose too.

“I suppose you believe that young men should have carnal knowledge of women, and drink wine, and gamble,” she panted. “I suppose you believe in that too.”

“Well, a good many fine young men do, I’m afraid,” Mrs. Parker said, smiling with apparent effort. “I am so glad you called,” she added.

“I thought you might be interested,” Emma Putney said. “You know, perhaps you and the doctor don’t realize it, but your playing golf and tennis on Sunday, and his going fishing on Sunday, are considered by many in this town to have a bad moral influence.”

Mrs. Parker, her eyes even brighter and her cheeks even redder, but her voice as calm as ever, said:

“Personally, I think it would have been better for Myron if he had had more golf and fishing, and less praying. He seems to me to be in a highly nervous and run-down condition. And I might mention,” she concluded, “that when people are sick they don’t mind having the doctor work on Sundays.”

“Thank you so much for the tea,” Emma Putney said, bobbing her head, as she stepped out the front door.

Dr. Parker met his wife as she returned down the hall.

“Jiminy Christmas!” he exclaimed, taking her by the arms with both big hands, and lifting her from her feet. “What’s happened to my little Spitfire?”

“I’m so mad I could yell,” Mrs. Parker cried. “Oh, Wally! That terrible, awful Emma Putney came here just to tell me that Myron Brown was converted at the revival meeting at the First Church last night.”

“Great!” her husband boomed.

“But the real reason she came was to let me know that among the sins that Myron confessed publicly was that he had had relations with a girl, and that she figured the girl was Ruth Robbins.”

“She’s a grand female—Emma Putney,” Dr. Parker said.

“Maybe I wasn’t very diplomatic for a doctor’s wife,” Mrs. Parker confessed. “I told her I thought it would have been better for Myron if he had had more fishing and golf and less praying, and that you and I didn’t have much use for revivals.”

“Well, you didn’t tell anything but the truth, Little Sugar Plum,” replied the giant man of medicine.

He carried her into the living room, and dropped down on the couch with her. He ran a hand up her silken leg, and playfully snapped the garter.

“Still have the prettiest legs in the United States, haven’t you, Wootsie?” he said.

“You see enough of them—you ought to know.”

Dr. Parker tilted back his big head, and, opening his mouth, roared briefly, but checked himself and said:

“All the good ones are in the revues you and I see when we go on bats in New York. Got any angel food left for me? I could eat a cow.”

Mrs. Parker jumped to her feet and felt of the teapot.

“I’d better get some fresh tea made,” she said, “and have some nice thick sandwiches—ham, maybe.”

“Cold tea is all right, and I’ll mop up what’s left of this butterfly fodder here,” Dr. Parker said, putting three lettuce sandwiches together, and popping them into his mouth.

“Wally!”

He grabbed his wife, and, wresting the pot from her, poured what was left of the tea into a cream pitcher.

“Wally! You pig!”

He added three spoonfuls of sugar to the mixture, stirred it, and took a drink.

“Great!” he exclaimed, smacking his lips and rolling his eyes.

He jammed the three remaining sandwiches together, and bit off half of them.

“This’ll hold me till dinner, Kitten,” he observed, after he had swallowed.

“Wally,” his wife said.

“What is it, Skeeziks?”

“Wally, I was wondering about Ruth and Myron. I wonder if there is anything in what that terrible Emma Putney said?”

Dr. Parker put down the cream pitcher, empty, wiped his lips on a discarded napkin, and pulled his wife over on his lap.

“Cooty,” he said seriously, “I’ve wondered the same thing myself. Something has happened to Myron besides getting himself shot.”

“And Ruth never writes, and Katherine’s letters have sounded queer for months,” his wife said.

“If we get half a chance, Sweetness,” Dr. Parker announced, “you and I’ll do what we can for those young folks—and professional etiquette won’t bother us a hell of a lot.”

“You know, sometimes I almost like you, Wally,” Mrs. Parker said, kissing his ear.

CHAPTER XXXV

Albert Hartman followed a nurse down a shining corridor and into a pleasant, immaculate room. Ruth Robbins was propped up on pillows in the tall white hospital bed. At its foot hung a cardboard on which was printed:

“DO NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO KISS OR HANDLE
YOUR BABY . . .”

And added in amateur letters was:

“. . . OR YOUR NURSE.”

Ruth smiled a greeting.

“Hey, there, Albert,” she exclaimed, holding out her hand.

Albert held the warm, smooth fingers, while he stood for a moment gazing down at her with his brilliant brown eyes. Her yellow hair, which he always had seen tidily dressed and smoothed back, now cascaded smoothly down over the pillows. She wore a pink silk jacket, covered with little pink bows over a real lace nightgown. Her blue eyes looked translucent; her cheeks were full of color.

“I never saw you look so beautiful, Ruth,” Albert exclaimed solemnly.

“It’s not an accident, Albert,” Ruth confessed, laughing delightedly. “I spent one hundred and fifty dollars for this nightgown, and I think Miss Moyer must have spent an hour fixing me up just before you came.”

“It was worth it,” Albert said.

“Oh, I planned it to be a sight worth seeing,” Ruth replied. “And those perfectly wonderful flowers you sent helped out a lot. I can’t thank you enough for them.”

“I just told Morley’s to go ahead,” Albert said.

“Well, they certainly did. There were so many that I had some distributed. But you see I kept enough. I just love those pale yellow roses. And those orchids must have cost a fortune!”

“I wonder if I may smoke?” Albert inquired.

“Why, of course you may, Albert.”

Albert lighted a cigarette.

“Well,” he said, exhaling a stream of blue vapor, “I suppose you are all equipped now with one of those birth tales which I hear women fighting to tell each other every once in a while when Central gets the telephone wires

crossed.”

Ruth laughed, and shook her head.

“Mine wasn’t at all like that,” she cried. “You know, I was wondering when it was going to hurt, and I heard a baby cry, and the doctor said, ‘It’s a boy.’ I didn’t mind it at all.”

“I’m glad,” Albert said.

“I guess I was lucky,” Ruth nodded. “Dr. Meredith said women didn’t come any healthier than I, and he said little Ben has a chest like a barrel and a voice like a bull.”

“Yes, I noticed you named him after that uncle of yours.”

“I didn’t tell you something else, though, Albert.”

“What was that?”

“When they asked me for the name of my best friend here, I gave them your name. You don’t mind, do you?”

Albert laughed, and extinguished his cigarette end.

“I am flattered,” he said. “I hope you always will consider me your best friend. Where is young Ben now?”

“Oh, they tag them, and keep them somewhere all together. But in about two minutes he will be brought in for a meal.”

Albert raised his eyebrows.

“Are you planning to nurse him?”

“I most certainly am,” Ruth said. “That was one of Uncle Ben’s favorite theories. He said that a human being got a constitution from his mother’s breast, and that a year wasn’t too long. And Dr. Meredith says that six months is about right.”

A nurse entered, carrying the baby.

“Here is the precious now,” Ruth said, holding out her arms.

“I will be going,” Albert ejaculated, rising. “Or perhaps I could wait in the hall until tea is over.”

“Oh, stay right here, please, Albert,” Ruth said. “I would love to have you see this little savage getting his meal.”

With the nurse’s help, Ruth had her son suckling in a jiffy. “I’m full of milk,” Ruth said. “I’ve got so much of it that I’ve been lending it to a little baby whose mother isn’t so fortunate. How is Thomas Walter Wagginthaler, Miss Moyer?” she added, turning to the nurse.

“He isn’t so lucky as your baby,” replied Miss Moyer, a plump, brown-haired, blue-eyed, competent looking woman of middle age. “His mother isn’t very healthy.”

Albert was watching with interest the operation of feeding young Ben.

“You know,” he said finally, “I don’t think I have thought of the word ‘divine’ for years. But it came to my mind watching you and your son.”

Ruth laughed, gently, putting her hand down to restore her milk-dewed nipple to eager lips.

“It’s a just life,” she said. “And I think life makes all of us a bit solemn when we stop to think of it. And when life is healthy, and natural, it makes us glad, too.”

“You are glad to have this baby, aren’t you, Ruth?”

“Glad is a mild word, Albert. But look how fortunate I am. I have you for a friend, and I have comfort and health, and my baby is beautiful. And I am earning money.”

Albert, a freshly lighted cigarette between his fingers, sat silent, his eyes directed between the two snowy-curtained windows through which the afternoon sun was pouring, but obviously focussed on some thought, rather than upon any object.

He sat silently without changing his position while Ruth and Miss Moyer spoke to each other in low tones, and only started and turned his face to Ruth again when Ruth said:

“Snap out of it, Albert, and say good-by to Ben.”

Albert arose, and gazed down upon the plump red face and clutching fingers in Miss Moyer’s arms.

“Kiss him, Albert,” Ruth directed. “He won’t bite.”

“On the cheek,” Miss Moyer warned.

“Oh, bother with your old germs,” Ruth exclaimed. “All right, Albert, kiss him very gently on top of his head.” Albert bent and pressed his lips to the soft down on the baby’s forehead, and then went to the door and opened it for Miss Moyer. He closed the door and returned to his chair.

“Babies are homely little things, aren’t they?” he asked.

Ruth bounced up off her pillow.

“Homely! Albert Hartman, I’ve a good mind to send you packing out of here. I’ve a good mind never to speak to you again. Homely! There was never anything so sweet and lovely and utterly adorable on this earth as a baby. And Ben is the most beautiful baby that ever was. Everybody said so.”

Albert held up a protesting hand.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I didn’t think. But I guess a man doesn’t look at a baby the same way a mother does.”

“Worse!” Ruth cried. “Worse! Now you’re insinuating that it’s only because the baby is mine that I think he is beautiful. Everybody just raves over him.”

“I noticed he had blonde hair and blue eyes,” Albert said hastily, “and if he takes after you in other respects, he certainly should be handsome.”

“You can’t smooth my fur like that, Albert,” Ruth exclaimed scornfully. “And it shows how much you know about babies, anyway. Most babies have

blue eyes and a good many of them have blonde hair, which changes color later, just like their eyes. I hope Ben takes after his father. I prefer dark-complexioned men.”

“Now that you have mentioned it, do you still feel the same way about Myron?” Albert inquired, suddenly.

Ruth’s face smoothed into sober lines, and she answered Albert’s questioning gaze with enigmatic eyes.

“I haven’t seen Myron since before that night he telephoned me when you were with me,” she said slowly.

“You went to the hospital when he was injured?”

“I went there,” Ruth replied, “and I couldn’t believe it when his father told me that Myron didn’t want to see me, then or ever. But then Myron told me himself, over the telephone. He said his father was repeating his message.”

“He doesn’t know anything about the baby?”

“Of course not,” Ruth said with emphasis.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have brought up this subject,” Albert suggested.

“It’s all right,” Ruth assured him. “I never felt better in my life physically. Why, I’d like to go skating, or skiing, or horseback riding right this minute. I’m only in bed because it’s the doctor’s orders.”

“You’re not as happy as you pretend,” Albert said solemnly.

“Reading my thoughts again,” Ruth said, parting her lips in a smile.

“I’m not especially enamored of Myron,” Albert asserted, “but if there is anything I can do—anything in the world—to make you happy, just call on me. You will, won’t you?”

“I am happy,” Ruth said, still smiling with her lips.

“Remember I said—anything,” Albert said, emphasizing especially the last word.

“I believe you, Albert.”

Albert arose, and picked up his hat and stick.

“I have a director’s meeting,” he explained.

“Kiss me good-by,” Ruth said. “You have been so dear.”

Albert stooped and kissed Ruth’s upturned lips. A bit pale, a single muscle twitching in his cheek, Albert went to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, looked back at Ruth, half-opened the door, and then closed it again.

“Did you ever consider,” he asked in his close-clipped, perfectly enunciated way, “that on that occasion in the hospital, Myron was rather ill and weak, and that it must have been very difficult for him, with his father and mother there?”

Ruth’s face was void of expression. She didn’t reply for an instant. Then she said:

“He hung up the receiver before I could speak.”

“May be the receiver was hung up for him,” Albert said. “The truth is that you gave that boy some awful shocks. Remember what I said about only giving him a part of your personality—and remember you were living in an expensive flat that I was paying for, and that he had heard a prejudiced story about you and Hasbrouck?”

Ruth stared at Albert.

“I don’t know what is the matter with me,” he said. “It is not like me to speak like this—perhaps at the wrong time. But I have seen that you are not really happy. And it has been on my mind so long to suggest to you that Myron is the only person who doesn’t know all the truth about you, and that you might begin to consider whether it really was his fault or yours, that this situation has arisen.”

“Good-by for now,” Ruth said.

“Good-by, Ruth, and remember that I’m always yours to command.”

Albert closed the door behind him. For five minutes Ruth lay staring at the wall. Slowly tears gathered in her eyes. Suddenly she began to sob—great, racking sobs, which shook her.

Miss Moyer came in and found her weeping convulsively.

“I—I—I’m sorry,” Ruth said. “This is the first time in my life . . . I . . . ever . . . acted like this.”

Miss Moyer placed a cool hand on Ruth’s forehead, and then removed the extra pillow from beneath her head.

“Sometimes a good healthy cry is the best medicine in the world,” she said.

“I . . . feel . . . so small . . . right now.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

When Ben was six weeks old, Ruth met Marion face to face in Saks Fifth Avenue. Marion was wearing a small black velvet hat, a black caracul coat with a silver fox collar, and carrying a needle-point bag. Ruth was wearing a black and white checked sports coat of rough imported material, with a badger collar, and a gray hat of tailored felt with a black band, from which protruded a tiny red feather.

Marion eagerly held out black-gloved hands, her plump, rouged cheeks dimpling in a glad smile. Ruth extended her hands, encased in pigskin gloves, and answered smile with smile. The eyes of each already had run over the other, from smart hat to dainty shoes. They kissed.

“Oh, Ruth,” Marion exclaimed. “You’re just the person I’ve been dying to meet. I have so much to tell you.”

“I’m glad to see you, Marion,” Ruth replied. “I have passed you once or twice, but you didn’t see me.”

“I’m like that,” Marion exclaimed. “That’s me all over. I’m sort of near-sighted—you know that—and besides, it seems that I’m always and forever thinking of something. Come on to the Institution for lunch.”

“I shouldn’t,” Ruth said, glancing at a tiny platinum wrist watch on her left wrist. “I have some shopping to do, and I should get home.”

“Are you married yet?” Marion gurgled.

“No,” Ruth said, “but I’ve been working at it.”

“How killing!” Marion exclaimed. “Come on to lunch, please. We haven’t seen each other for ages, and I’ve loads to tell you. Come on; it’s just around the corner.”

Jacques, the chief functionary at the Institution, bowed to Marion, who nodded, or waved a hand, at a half-dozen individuals, men and women, as they walked among the tables, occupied by smartly clad patrons.

“I’ve heard of this place, but I’ve never been in it,” Ruth said.

“It’s a bore,” Marion shrugged. “All places seem to be bores unless some one finds a new place in Harlem. But everybody comes here, and they have the most marvelous cocktails. Will you have one?”

“No, thank you.”

“Won’t you just try one? They’re really different.”

“I never drink them,” Ruth said.

“You look simply stunning,” Marion exclaimed. “Why, I think you look even better than you did at school, and even more developed, I should say,” she added, her gaze on Ruth’s bust.

"I am a little stouter," Ruth admitted, smiling.

"It's awfully becoming," Marion said. "Not being exactly skin and bones, myself, I never had much use for these toothpick shapes."

Marion ordered a cocktail, and they both ordered chicken hash and coffee. Marion drank the cocktail as soon as it arrived in a tea cup, and ordered another one. She leaned across the table.

"You know," she confided, "you have had more influence on my life than any one?"

"No, I didn't know it."

"Well, you have, Ruth. If it hadn't been for you, and what you said about trial marriages, I might be married now to the awfulest stick."

Ruth's eyes widened. Marion beamed.

"Oh, I've changed," she boasted. "I used to pretend I was shocked at your ideas, and may be I was a little, at first. But they fascinated me. And when a man—he was a foreigner—wanted to marry me, I couldn't keep out of my mind what you always had said."

"Did you try him out?" Ruth said.

Marion nodded, and leaned further across the table.

"It was frightful," she confided. "He drank too much, and snored with his mouth open."

"Did you . . . ?"

"Oh, no," Marion exclaimed, shaking her head vigorously. "I wouldn't do that. I said I would trust him. But he was awful."

"For goodness' sake, tell me about it."

"My dear, you would have died. I told him I would stay with him in a hotel, but that we would act just like friends."

"Did you love him?"

"I had a perfectly frightful crush on him. He wears such stunning clothes, and he dances simply divinely!"

"And . . . ?"

"Well, he was always asking me to run away with him and get married. I knew my family would be utterly disgusted—he is a Count and there are so many Counts being exposed in the newspapers—you know, those tabloids, which everybody pretends are terrible, but which everybody reads. My dear!

"So, he promised on his word of honor he would do what I said, and we went to a hotel—the Titan—one of those new hotels—you may not even have heard of it. And he tried his best. I had a frightful time."

"I can imagine."

"But you can't, Ruth. And we both had been drinking cocktails, and he had some Scotch with him, and he got drunker and drunker. He only had his underwear on, and he looked so skinny and funny, and there was hair on his

legs. Then he got mad and went to sleep and snored with his mouth open. And I think most of his teeth were false.”

“If he had been an adventurer it might have been dangerous,” Ruth suggested.

“Well, nothing happened,” Marion said, ordering another cocktail. “And since then, I have had real affairs with two men. And I am so glad I didn’t marry any of them.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“Of what?”

“Babies, and things?”

Marion giggled.

“Why, my dear! Nobody has to worry about anything any more. How about yourself?”

“Well, I never exactly preached free love,” Ruth explained. “I only said I thought that it was a good plan for a girl to know whether the man she thought she loved was really the one she should tie herself to for the rest of her life.”

Marion giggled again, and took a sip of her fresh cocktail.

“I like it,” she nodded. “I may try five hundred men before I want to get married.”

“That’s a lot of men, Marion,” Ruth said.

“Well, give me time, my dear,” Marion exclaimed. “What’s sauce for the goose—isn’t it? How many have you tried?”

Ruth hesitated a moment.

“One.”

“And you’re not going to marry him?”

“It doesn’t look that way,” Ruth said.

“Was it Uncle Albert?” Marion asked.

Ruth shook her head.

“Whoever it was, I wouldn’t tell.”

“Where is Myron?” Marion asked. “I always was crazy about him; he was so tall and broad and so intense. I love an intense man. And I liked the way he wore his hair. I always thought he was the handsomest thing.”

“I guess he’s back home in Southington,” Ruth said.

“Perhaps I’ll stop a day or two in Southington,” Marion said, dabbing powder on her nose, and digging a lipstick from her bag. “I like men big and strong.”

Ruth was silent. Marion held the lipstick poised for a second, and then suddenly burst into a fit of laughter.

“I think you really love Myron, Ruth. I’d like to get him away from you.”

Ruth smiled. “I’ve got to go,” she said.

“I think I’ll stay here and have another cocktail,” Marion said. “Would you

like to come with us tonight? The boys have found a perfectly killing place, where the men paint and powder and dress like women and act like women—Nancies, they call them.”

“I can’t. Awfully glad to have seen you, Marion. Good-by.”

“Wait a minute,” Marion called. “Where are you living now?”

Ruth turned, and replied:

“On the West Side.”

Then she walked swiftly to the street.

CHAPTER XXXVII

“What’s the matter with you? You haven’t eaten any dinner, Wally?”

Molly Parker gazed anxiously across the table at her husband.

“You love lemon meringue pie, and Norah outdid herself with this, and you haven’t even touched it.”

“I don’t feel hungry, somehow, Angel Face,” Dr. Parker said, lighting a cigarette.

“Something’s on your mind,” Mrs. Parker exclaimed. “And you’ve got to tell me what it is.”

She arose from the table, walked around to his chair, perched on the arm, and rubbed her cheek against his.

“Ooh, but it’s like sandpaper,” she cried, drawing her head back quickly and running her hand along his cheek and chin. “You forgot to shave today.”

“I guess I did at that.”

“OooOOH! And there’s a blackhead right in your ear. Wait a minute till I get it.”

Molly Parker pulled a fresh handkerchief from her husband’s breast pocket, in which he also carried a thermometer on a gold chain, bent his head over, and squeezed with both hands.

“That operation was a success,” she announced proudly. “How is the patient doing?”

“All right, Molly,” Dr. Parker said. “Thank you.” And he reached for the handkerchief.

“‘All right, Molly,’” his wife mimicked. “‘All right, Molly.’ There *is* something the matter. You don’t talk that way to me when you are your normal self.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“You come into the library,” Mrs. Parker said, taking Dr. Parker by the ear, and sliding to the floor. “We’ll get out of the dining room so Norah can get the dishes cleared away. Come on, Wally.”

Wally bent over almost double so that his little wife could keep hold of the ear, and she marched with him into the library, backed him up to a big leather chair, and pushed against him. He fell into the chair, and she promptly hopped upon his knee.

“Now, tell me,” she commanded. “Tell Molly.”

“It wouldn’t do any good to tell you,” he said, reaching for his cigarettes and lighting a fresh one from the stub of the last one.

“And there’s another sign,” Molly Parker cried. “You’re smoking one

cigarette after another, as fast as you can. That's no way to live to be a hundred years old."

"I guess being a doctor is no way to live to be old," Dr. Parker grunted, drawing fiercely on his cigarette and exhaling a Niagara of smoke.

"You stop that," his wife said. "You stop that kind of twaddle right away, and tell Molly what is the matter."

"If I told you it would get you upset, and there's nothing that can be done about it," Dr. Parker replied.

"You make me tired, you big hulking thing," Molly said. "May be we can do something."

Dr. Parker shook his head impatiently, suddenly got up, sat his wife in the chair, and walked across the room. Then he walked back.

"What is it, Wally? I can't stand this."

Dr. Parker lighted another cigarette from the one he had been smoking, and faced her.

"All right, I'll tell you," he said. "Myron Brown has pneumonia, and those Browns, and Dr. Prescott, are praying him to death. They've got him all ready to go to Heaven, and by God, if they keep on, he's going!"

"They're praying him to death, Wally?"

"That's exactly what they're doing. He was in a run-down condition anyway; and they've been working on him for weeks. They got him to publicly confess his sins and accept Jesus for his Saviour, and now that he's sick they're telling him that he will go to Heaven, and that Jesus is waiting for him."

"Could he be cured?"

"No one could say that as a certainty, of course. Pneumonia isn't a nice disease. I would say that he would have a chance under normal conditions, but that the way things are he hasn't a Chinaman's chance. He's going to die just as sure as you're sitting there. They're unconsciously willing him to die, and he's all prepared. He's quit, and ready to go to Jesus."

Molly Parker jumped out of the big chair, in which she always looked lost, and confronted her husband.

"Well," she said, "what's the matter with you then? It's perfectly simple. Just stop them praying around him; tell him he's going to get well, and take care of him."

"That's just like a woman," her husband groaned. "I can't do anything. Humphrey is their doctor."

"Well, tell Humphrey then."

"I told him," Dr. Parker roared, drawing his arm back, and pitching his cigarette stub in the general direction of an ash tray and missing it by three feet. "He called me in consultation this afternoon."

“And what did he say?”

“He hemmed and hawed and said the family’s wishes were to be considered in the matter, and that, after all, he was not such a man of science that he doubted the efficacy of prayer.”

“He’s hell fire and infant damnation, too,” Molly observed, picking up the burning cigarette end from the rug, and crushing it in an ash receiver.

“I told him that if they were praying in their own rooms, or in church, or any place except the sick room, and were praying for his recovery instead of praying for his welcome by Jesus, it would be all right.”

“What did he say?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Only before I left, Dr. Prescott and Mrs. Brown were in there praying, and Dr. Prescott was telling God that here was a lost sheep that had been restored to the flock, and to accept him into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

“It doesn’t sound possible, but I know it is,” Molly said.

“They’re doing it right now,” Dr. Parker said. “They’re killing that boy just as effectively as if they were using guns.”

“And you’re standing here, and letting them do it? A fine specimen you are!”

“I can’t do anything,” Dr. Parker said.

“Of course you can, you fool!” Molly said, scowling and stamping her foot. “All you’ve got to do is just go in there and take charge. Myron Brown will die if you don’t and he has a chance to live if you do. What kind of man are you anyway?”

Dr. Parker was smoking again. He was scowling savagely, too. On his face, the scowl looked leonine, ferocious.

“Don’t call me a fool, Molly,” he roared. “What kind of business would it be if doctors went around butting into each other’s cases? How would I like it if Dr. Humphrey came into one of mine, and told me I was doing the wrong thing, and took my patient away from me?”

“But in this case you’d be saving a life.”

“Well, some other doctor might think he was saving a life when he wasn’t,” her husband growled.

“But you know.”

“Some other doctor might think he knew. There has to be professional etiquette.”

“I think professional etiquette is terrible, Wally. And you told me that you would say ‘to hell with professional etiquette,’ if you had a chance to bring Myron and Ruth together.”

Dr. Parker tossed his hands high in the air and shook his head.

“My God!” he bellowed. “What has Ruth got to do with Myron Brown

dying of pneumonia? Will you tell me that?"

"I'll tell you," Molly Parker exclaimed, just as vigorously, if with less volume of sound. "I'll tell you."

She took one of his coat lapels in each hand, and shook herself on them.

"I'm sure Emma Putney guessed right, and that Ruth was the girl. Everything points to it. You said yourself that Myron was suffering from something besides bullet wounds."

"Well, what if she was the girl? As a matter of fact, one of the nurses—Mary Ryan—did tell me he had called for Ruth when he was delirious. But what of it?"

"Men are so stupid," Molly exclaimed.

"I'll admit I'm stupid," her husband asserted, "when it comes to following female ideas."

"All we've got to do is get Ruth here," Molly said. "Call Ruth on the telephone, and have her get here as quick as she can."

"And what could she do if she did come," her husband insisted, disgustedly. "Old Deacon Brown would fill her full of buckshot. She couldn't get within a mile of that house."

"She could sneak in," Molly said.

"Don't you go crazy, Woogie," Dr. Parker pleaded, taking his wife in his arms.

"But she could," Molly insisted. "She could get in there somehow, and if he loves her, as I'm sure he does, because it was no secret to anybody for years and years, it can't help but do him good."

Dr. Parker stopped pacing the floor, and stared at his wife.

"It's insane," he said.

"You've never insisted on regularity, Wally," Molly Parker exclaimed. "You're always trying things out. Why not give this a try?"

"But you don't know where Ruth Robbins is, and if you do find her, you don't know whether she'll do it or not; and if she came here, there might really be nothing but more trouble come out of it."

"Don't be a defeatist Wally. You can't be at this stage of the game."

"I'll always take a chance; you know that," Dr. Parker said. "But there must be some possibility of success," he added.

"Look here, Wally. You say this poor boy will die if affairs go on as they are now, don't you?"

"No doubt of that."

"And there is a chance for him to get well if something different is done?"

"I'd say so."

"Well, then, we can't get doctors for the Browns, or we can't tell them what to do, but I certainly can tell Ruth Robbins exactly what the situation is;

and she's the kind of girl to do something, if any one could."

"She's a girl of unusual character," Dr. Parker said. "But I don't see what she could do to help in this situation, even if you were able to find her in time."

"I think she could," Molly Parker announced.

She stamped a small foot desperately on the rug, clenched her fists, and beat them on her husband's big chest.

"And I've got to do something," she half-sobbed. "I can't just sit around like a bump on a log and let that sweet Myron Brown die just to please a bunch of soul-savers."

"It isn't pleasant," her husband agreed. "I'm all upset."

"Well, I'm going to do something," his wife exclaimed, reaching out her hand and snatching a telephone from its stand by her husband's big chair. "I'm going to get hold of Ruth Robbins."

"Go to it, Squeegee," said Dr. Wallace Parker, "and damn it, I'm with you!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

“That was some dinner tonight,” said George Walsh, the chauffeur.

“That was a very particular dinner, indeed,” agreed Honoré, Albert Hartman’s chef. “It was prepare to make passionate zose who ate.”

“The boss is one grand guy,” George said, “and some picker. For me, I hope he gets this dame. He’s been after her long enough. But what has the grub got to do with it?”

“It was mos’ carefully select for its aphrodesseeac qualities,” Honoré said, pinching the thumb and little finger of his left hand together, and making a graceful figure in the air.

“What’re them?” George asked.

“Zose are what makes pearsowns more lov-ing,” Honoré explained. “Zere was plenty cayenne in zis dinair. Zere was first, a lobster cocktail. Zee lobster, he is vairee good zat way.”

“I’ll have to take home a couple for the wiff,” George said.

“Zen, zere was zee green turtail zup, weeth zee Sherry. Zat is vairee, vairee good indeed.”

“It would be worth it if it works,” George observed. “Go on.”

“Nex’ zere was bellees of sof’ clams, in so reech sauce, bak’ed on rock salt. Zat ees vairee good also—zee sea food all is good zat way.

“Nex’, zere was pressed duck, weez blood sauce—vairee reech, an’ Burgundy, still an’ vairee old.”

“I guess the wiff’ll have to stay the way she is, Honoré,” George said. “Them ducks come too high.”

“Wiz zee Burgundy, eet is wondairful zee effect,” Honoré exclaimed, rolling his dark eyes.

“Did the lady drink any?” George said. “She always has ducked drinking anything with the governor, so far.”

“She took jus’ a leetle taste,” Honoré replied, making a diagram in the air with his facile fingers.

“Then what?”

“Zen, zere was Benedictine, and café noir. An’ zen zere was peeckle walnut. Zee Benedictine—she is vairee warrm indeed; zee café noir—she help mebbe a leetle. An’ zee peeckle walnut—Ah!”

Honoré blew a kiss, somewhat tainted with cigarette smoke, at the door which led into the living quarters of the house.

“Well,” George said. “Here’s hoping it works. But if it don’t, I’m here to tell you that Albert Hartman is the finest gent in these here United States.”

“Encore!” Honoré nodded vigorously. “Zat ees true, for a fac’.”

“An’ if there is any gent that can take the bad with the good, or who does any more good in the world than this same boss of ours, I’ve gotta be shown.”

Honoré nodded.

“He has chase zis ladee longair than any,” he observed, “but he is reemarkable gentleman. He mus’ win wiz zee brain, or he shrug his shoulder—pouf!—you could not tell.”

“Gwan with you!” George exclaimed. “Albert Hartman wouldn’t even say ‘Pouf!’ He can lose a million or a dame without battin’ an eye—that guy. An’ when he goes away! Say, the last time he went to Paris, he gave me a thousand bucks on the pier.”

“He is a vairee great gentlehomme,” Honoré said. “May zees dinair help heem to happee-ness.”

“Skoal! And Prosit!” exclaimed George.

CHAPTER XXXIX

“This is a beautiful place, and I have had such a wonderful time, Albert!” Ruth said. “Your chef must be priceless.”

Albert stood with her in the great living room of his home near Great Neck, Long Island. Magnificent furniture, rare rugs and paintings formed a background into which blended the beauty of the girl and the distinction of the man.

“You were made for this, Ruth,” he said, removing a cigarette from his mouth and making a slight gesture with it.

“That is what I always thought,” Ruth said, breathing deeply. “This is the sort of place of which I always dreamed.”

“Well,” Albert said slowly, his bright brown eyes keen upon hers, “there is no reason why you shouldn’t be mistress of this—and more. There is a villa at Palm Beach,” he added.

“It is very tempting,” Ruth smiled, a trifle nervously. “It would be tempting, even if the man who went with it were not so charming.”

Albert Hartman bowed with a grace and deference he owed to heritage and life-long habit.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I have never known just what is in your mind.”

“I haven’t known myself, I think,” Ruth said. “I wonder if I’ll have to make the discovery for myself that love after all, even among those who like to consider themselves intellectual, is a pure matter of the emotions?”

“Am I to construe that as meaning that my cause is hopeless?” Albert asked.

“Again my only answer is, I don’t know,” Ruth replied. “There is no good intellectual reason why I shouldn’t marry you. You have wealth, position, charm, good health, a wonderful sense of humor, tact, poise, understand all women in general, and me in particular——”

“Don’t, please,” Albert interrupted, raising a hand in protest. “You are wrong: I had just said that I don’t understand you.”

“But I differ with you. I think you understand me better than I understand myself. Will you answer a question—honestly?”

“I’ll do my best,” Albert said. “What is it?”

“What do you think is my state of mind?”

Albert sucked hard on his cigarette, frowning slightly. “I beg your pardon,” he said, and moved quickly to a great fireplace, into which he tossed the remains of the cigarette.

Ruth turned and followed him with her eyes: he took two steps, and was

back at her side again.

“That is a difficult question for me,” he exclaimed slowly.

“You promised.”

“Oh, I’ll keep my promise.”

He took a long breath.

“I think that your feelings are entirely with Myron,” he said. “It is clear from the fact that you accepted him as a lover at the same time that you surmised I was deeply interested in you, that he had a tremendous hold on your feelings.”

“I wonder,” Ruth said softly, her face still.

“You’d figured, and rightly, I think, that no considerable harm could come from a sort of trial marriage, but that, on the other hand, grave difficulties and serious, even tragic, problems might be avoided by knowing intimately a man before you entered into a marriage contract with him.”

“That’s true,” Ruth said.

“You found that while Myron answered all your physical needs, he left a deal to be desired in other qualities. He was boyish—even childish—in his insistence on having you all to himself. You looked upon as weakness his insistence on having you all to himself, his constant demands that you marry him. You considered his often expressed willingness to give up everything for you as something in the nature of—well—whining.”

Ruth’s eyes, dark and wide, remained fixed on Albert’s brown ones, so furiously alive and youthful.

“As I told you, you gave Myron only a fraction of your personality. He didn’t know what was the matter, but he reacted normally. He was still a boy. He had had a tempting taste of the jam—he wanted all of it. You wouldn’t give it: you kept it locked up in the dark closet of yourself.”

Ruth remained silent.

“Physical love—passion—means a great deal to you. You have this feeling only for Myron. This prevents you from going ahead with your brave theory of trial marriage, or marriages.”

“Oh, Albert Hartman,” Ruth exclaimed.

“The situation further is complicated for you,” Albert said, “by two factors which must be considered. One is your inherited, or acquired, father-mother conscience. That’s a hard-rock, New England conscience. The second is your baby.”

Ruth put both hands slowly to her breast, and dropped them again.

“I had never thought of it just that way,” she whispered. “I don’t know. I don’t know. It sounds as if it might be true.”

“I think it is true,” Albert continued, very seriously, as he absently proceeded with the selection, ignition, and first inhalation of a fresh cigarette.

“If it is true, what should I do, Albert? What do you think I should do?”

“That is an extremely delicate question,” Albert answered, making a motion with his hands as if to take hers, and then checking himself.

“But what? You know so much. What do you think?”

“The only person on earth who can answer the question is yourself, Ruth,” Albert asserted. “All I can say is what any one of mature experience might say, and that is that, generally speaking, it is wrong for an individual to enter into a marriage if it is clear that he, or she, can hope to share only a part of his, or her, personality with that individual.”

“Then you think it would be wrong for me to marry Myron?”

Albert dropped his high poised head for an instant, his eyes taking a path downward past his tidy, white bow tie, the pearls in his shirt front, the soft silken stuff of his white waistcoat, to his shining shoes, sunk in the dim glories of an historic rug.

“I’ll answer that indirectly,” he said, looking up suddenly. “I will say that marriages can’t be successful in my opinion if the entire attraction between the contracting parties is physical. One of the biggest points in the trial marriage theory for persons of character is that such a marriage lessens the danger of more serious problems later—it gives thinking persons an opportunity to know themselves and each other, and to avoid unpleasantnesses that arise from formal divorces, or tragedies, such as living without love on account of children, or even of dragging children through courts.”

“You don’t think that Myron and I could be happily married?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it,” Albert replied, smiling, but with more kindness than humor.

“Intellectually,” Ruth said, half to herself, “I don’t see how any woman could make you a second choice after any one.”

Albert’s shoulders straightened and his chest swelled slightly under his tenderly fitted evening shirt. A touch of added color in his cheeks, a new light in his brown eyes, gave him an added attractiveness. He was more than a handsome man, and one used to command, and the barest touch of deference with which he took Ruth’s right hand in his added to his magnetism.

“Ruth,” he said. “I hadn’t reached the most important part of my reply to your original question.”

“What is that?” Ruth asked, gazing at him, fascinated, her lips slightly parted.

He was very close to her. From him came a faint aroma of perfect masculine cleanliness and health, a smell of clean skin, and clean scalp, and clean breath, and freshly laundered linen, and lately pressed and aired clothing.

“You haven’t given your theory a fair trial,” he said in a low, suddenly pleading tone.

“How?” Ruth whispered.

“You have failed to try the passionate side of the man who satisfies you in all other ways,” he said.

Ruth swayed slightly closer to him. Her eyes were moist; in the soft illumination of the vast room her lips, still slightly parted, looked moist.

Albert put his hand on Ruth’s bare arm. She raised her face to him, her eyes heavy and dazed, as if she had been staring too long into the sun.

A servant entered the door.

“I beg your pardon, sir.”

Albert dropped his arm and wheeled.

“I am not to be disturbed,” he said sharply.

“The telephone, sir.”

“I told you I am not to be disturbed,” Albert Hartman said, a harsh undertone in his voice.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the servant insisted, pale but determined. “It’s a long distance call, sir, for Miss Robbins—a matter of life and death, sir. A matter of life—and death.”

CHAPTER XL

“There’s a man wants to see you, Mrs. Mellon.”

“Looks as if he had a five-pound box of candy with him, too.”

The girls of the night switchboard giggled, without interruption of their work, their trained fingers making and breaking connections to the accompaniment of trained voices.

“Mrs. Mellon’s voice has done it again.”

“If I had a voice like hers I certainly would see if I couldn’t cash in on it.”

“Well, she gets a couple tons of candy and a few cartloads of flowers every year, doesn’t she?”

Elvira Mellon, Southington’s night chief operator in charge of long distance, two hundred and fifty pounds of fat and good nature, looked up and smiled at a young man who stood in the open door, hat in one hand, and neatly wrapped package in the other.

He was comely in the manner of slim, adventurous youth; keen features, sleek dark hair, combed straight back, jolly, seeking blue eyes, white teeth, a ready smile, a blue suit with carnation in buttonhole, black shoes freshly polished.

“Well, what did you want?” Mrs. Mellon inquired crisply, but pleasantly, looking up at the stranger from her five feet, and not so much more, of rotundity.

“I am Jasper J. George, of the New York office of the Brant Paper Box Mill,” the young man said bowing. “I talked over the telephone the last two nights with my office, and I told the owner of the voice I talked with that I was going to call and see her, and here I am. She said her name was Mrs. Mellon. Is Mrs. Mellon here?”

A choked snicker sounded from the switchboard. Elvira Mellon’s cheeks grew a trifle more rosy, and her blue eyes under molasses-colored hair twinkled. Elvira’s face had the contours and coloring of a wax doll, her figure the dimensions of a baby hippopotamus.

“I am Mrs. Mellon, Mr. George,” she said musically. “It was awfully nice of you to call, but as I told you, it is against the rules. I hope you’ll understand.”

Jasper J. George’s jaw sagged a trifle, as his eyes focussed more closely upon Mrs. Mellon. He flushed. Then he straightened, and bowed.

“You know, Mrs. Mellon,” he said gallantly, “you have the most beautiful voice I ever heard over the telephone; and you made it a great pleasure for me to talk over long distance from this town.”

"I'm awfully glad," Mrs. Mellon replied, starting to close the door. "Thank you very much."

Behind her the two girls were continuing their routine with solemn faces. Obviously, they were being solemn only through tremendous effort.

"I brought this candy for you," Jasper exclaimed suddenly, handing over the package. "I never will forget your voice, Mrs. Mellon."

Jasper withdrew, and Mrs. Mellon closed the door after him.

"Mrs. Parker wants you Mrs. Mellon—urgent," Una Patchen, a slim brunette, called.

"There's a good sport—the doctor," Una said softly. "He followed a box of candy in to Elvira when he first hit this town—and he's sent many a box since."

Elvira got the connection.

"This is Elvira Mellon. How are you, Mrs. Parker?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I'll do it."

Elvira's ordinarily soft tones had become crisp and confident. She showed the girls a face, serious and purposeful.

"If any one ever breathes a word of this she'll answer to me," she asserted.

Then she put through a call for New York.

"I must find a Ruth Robbins in New York," she said. "A doctor's call—a matter of life or death."

The girls looked at each other behind her back. They talked softly to each other. Elvira was intent on her task—lost to her surroundings.

"A private number?" she said into the transmitter. "I must have Ruth Robbins, whether her number is private, special private, or what. This is a question of life or death."

When she reached Katherine Robbins perspiration dewed her forehead.

"Hello, Miss Robbins," she said in her lovely tones. "Isn't it remarkable that you knew my voice right away after all this time? I wanted to talk to Ruth."

"But I must get her tonight—at once."

"Yes, it is a matter of life or death."

"I don't know about that, but I am doing this for Dr. Parker."

"Yes."

"Yes. Oh, you must. You must tell me where I can find her."

"Dinner at Albert Hartman's on Long Island? That's the millionaire Hartman, isn't it?"

"All right, thank you."

"Yes, thank you. Good-by."

Elvira Mellon found the Hartman number was private and beat through that obstacle. She reached the Hartman home.

“I wish to speak to Miss Ruth Robbins, please.”

“Not to be disturbed, but this . . .”

The receiver had clicked in her ear. She got the number again. “A matter of life or death,” she said, her voice carrying a stern quality. “Dr. Wallace Parker in Southington, Mass., calling Miss Ruth Robbins.

“You carry that message to Miss Robbins—or you’ll regret it.”

CHAPTER LXI

“It’s Myron!” Ruth exclaimed, starting forward.

“A Dr. Parker calling from Southington, Massachusetts,” the servant said.

“Oh, Albert, it *is* Myron,” Ruth said. “Quick!” she added to the servant.

“There is an instrument right here,” Albert Hartman said, opening a cabinet at one end of a great sofa, and handing the telephone to her.

Ruth took the receiver-transmitter from Albert’s hand.

“I usually keep the bells cut off except on the main station in the pantry,” he said.

But Ruth did not hear him.

“Hello! Hello!”

“Yes, Mrs. Mellon. Hello, Mrs. Parker. Is it Myron?”

Ruth sat with the receiver pressed to her ear; no sound in the room except the snap of an occasional spark in the fireplace or the whine of a gale, rising from the northeast, in the chimney.

Albert, a cigarette smouldering unnoticed in his right hand, his left clenched so tightly that the knuckles showed white, stood motionless, watching her. The man servant, fascinated, and forgotten, stood, staring, in the doorway.

“But . . .” Ruth cried in a hoarse tone.

Again she sat still, listening, her cheeks white, except for the rouge patches, her breath coming and going unevenly.

“I’ll do it,” she sobbed. “All right. All right, Mrs. Parker. I’m leaving now.”

She turned a face, curiously hard, up to Albert.

“How long will it take me to get to Southington, tonight?” she asked. “It’s a hundred and sixty miles from Manhattan.”

“You can’t go by plane in this weather,” he said. “The quickest way is by auto.”

He looked at his watch.

“Ten-thirty. You’d better make it four-thirty at the earliest—and that’s driving like the devil.”

Ruth said into the receiver:

“I’m leaving now by auto—expect me between four and five at the latest. Yes. Yes. Good-by.”

She set the receiver back on its stand, and sat for a moment, limp and relaxed, looking like a tired little girl, overdue for bed. Albert gently took the telephone from her unresistant grasp. Straightening up, he said to the servant,

his voice quick and imperative.

“Get George around to the library door, and have him ready to leave in five minutes in the fastest car he’s got.”

“Yes, Mr. Hartman.”

Albert spoke in low tones into the telephone and waited. Ruth got quickly to her feet, and put her hand on his arm.

“Albert,” she said.

“Yes, Ruth.”

“There’s Ben.”

Albert nodded, the telephone still to his ear, and watched her curiously.

“Hello, Cohen,” Albert said.

Ruth pressed Albert’s arm.

“Wait a moment, Cohen,” he said, and looked at her questioningly.

“I’m going to the kitchen first,” Ruth said. “Have my things ready for me.”

Albert revealed no surprise as she ran from the room.

“Cohen, you have Otto in that new car at the Hotel Plaza in a half-hour, waiting for me. Coffee and sandwiches, cigarettes, ready to go.

“Yes. Fix it from here to the Plaza, and up the Post Road and through the College Highway. We’re going like hell.”

Ruth went into the dining room, where she met a maid servant.

“I’ve got to have a sterilized bottle,” she exclaimed.

The maid gazed at her blankly.

“Have you a bottle?” Ruth demanded. “A bottle—a big bottle?”

“I don’t know,” the maid replied. “A bottle?”

Ruth pushed by the maid into the pantry where she began to open cupboards, the maid watching with her mouth open.

“What do you want, Ruth?” Albert asked. “May be I can help.”

“I want a bottle—sterilized, if I can find it. Milk for Ben.”

“How about a vacuum bottle?” Albert asked.

“Any kind of bottle,” Ruth answered, half-hysterically. “Oh, hurry!”

“There are vacuum bottles in the car,” Albert explained. “And the car is waiting. We’re going to get a faster car in New York, and the fastest driver I know to go with it. We’re all ready.”

Ruth seized Albert’s coat sleeve with both hands.

“You are wonderful, Albert,” she said. “But I’ve got to leave milk for Ben. Can’t you see?”

“Your own, you mean?” Albert said quickly. “I don’t know how you’re going to go about it, if you’re to make time. I’ve heard of mother’s milk being sold. Can’t I leave an order for some? Cohen never failed me in anything.”

“Ben is never going to have any other milk but mine,” Ruth asserted wildly. “I always said it, and I mean it. I left some for him when I came here,

but not enough to last while I'm at Southington."

The maid offered a thermos bottle.

"This was scalded—we always do," she said. "Can you use that?"

Ruth took it, and slipped the strap of her evening dress from her left shoulder.

"I'll be with you as soon as I can," she said to Albert.

"I'll be just outside the door," he said, "with wraps, all set."

Albert went into the dining room, the door swinging shut behind him.

Ruth's nipple was wet with milk as she held it over the vacuum bottle. She drew her fingers over her breast, forcing out a trickle. The maid stared at her.

"I heard of that, but I never saw it done before," she said.

Knuckles sounded on the outside of the door.

"What is it?" Ruth called, her attention on her task.

"Don't forget to go to a bathroom before we start," Albert said. "The maid'll show you."

Ruth began to laugh hysterically, but her fingers continued the motions that meant food for her baby.

CHAPTER XLII

"It's sleeting," Ruth said.

"A wild night," Albert nodded. "You may expect anything when the wind is from the northeast."

"*March* is the worst month in the year," Ruth said, moving her head close to the window and looking out. "How fast are we going, Albert?"

Albert leaned forward and looked at the illuminated dash.

"About sixty—sixty-five," he replied.

"It doesn't seem fast," Ruth said. "It's so solid and comfortable in here."

Two minutes passed. Ruth started.

"What is that?" she cried. "That shrieking noise?"

"A siren," Albert said.

Their limousine pulled over close to the right-hand edge of the road and a motorcycle roared past.

"I was wondering where they were," Albert said.

"They—who?"

"Police," Albert explained. "The invaluable Cohen again. A tribute to money—and influence. We will have them all the way now."

"Power is wonderful, Albert," Ruth breathed, her eyes shining in the dimness.

"This is nothing," Albert asserted, lighting a cigarette with a patent lighter. "In New York we have a car waiting—and Otto. That is a car a friend of mine with a mania for speed had made for him abroad; and when the time came for delivery he was crippled for life as a result of his worship of speed, and his fortune was depleted by stock market losses. So I took over this car and his chauffeur—Otto."

"Was the friend Charley Deffbaugh?" Ruth asked.

"That's right," Albert assented. "Poor Charley spends his time on a water bed now, with a fractured vertebra."

"And we are going to Southington in this other car?" Ruth said.

"Otto always has wanted to drive it," Albert said. "And I thought we would give him his chance tonight."

The limousine slowed perceptibly. Albert glanced out.

"An accident," he explained, as they shot ahead again.

"Are you going to make the trip with me, Albert?"

"I have wondered," Albert said.

"There is one thing I am worrying about, Albert, and that is what to do about Ben. I have his milk here. I thought if Aunt Katherine could get him up

to Springfield by tomorrow afternoon, that I could plan my next step after that.”

“How are you going to explain Ben to Southington?”

“I’m not even thinking that far ahead.”

“I will see that she and Ben reach Springfield tomorrow, if you wish, but I have a suggestion.”

“What is it?”

“Leave Aunt Katherine and Ben where they are for a day or two, and send Ben’s milk down to him.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, Albert. You’re wonderful. You haven’t even asked me why I am rushing home like this.”

“It was pretty obvious that Myron is very ill, and that he is asking for you.”

“He has pneumonia, and his father and mother and the minister and the other relatives are praying him to death. And one of my best friends in the world—Dr. Parker—thinks his only chance is for me to go to him and give him something to live for.”

“I see,” Albert said gravely.

“It is Mrs. Parker’s idea. She says Myron had stopped wanting to live—and he was calling for me when he was delirious.”

Albert pushed a cigarette end into the receiver at his side and lighted a fresh cigarette.

“I’ve got to go,” Ruth said simply.

“I can understand,” Albert said.

A few minutes passed.

“The bridge,” Albert said.

“Listen, Albert,” Ruth said. “You don’t have to make this trip with me. If you will have this thermos bottle delivered to Aunt Katherine, with the message that I was called to Southington, and that if I am not back by tomorrow she will get instructions as to what to do . . .”

“I’ll have that looked after,” Albert agreed. “That is simple. Cohen will be waiting at the Plaza. I will have him see your Aunt Katherine himself. But I am going through with you.”

Ruth’s eyes, shining in the gloom, looked up to his. She pressed his hand.

CHAPTER XLIII

They were shooting north in the East Drive in Central Park, two motorcycle policemen ahead.

"I never felt such a sense of power before," Ruth said. "And the car is nowhere near as large as I thought it would be."

"It's built for speed," Albert replied.

Otto, short, broad-shouldered, face scarred, jaw jutting forward, was not separated from them by a partition. Blonde hair showed under his military style cap.

"Otto was an ace in the war, but on the wrong side," Albert continued. "All he cares about is speed."

He raised his voice a little.

"How fast do you think she'll go, Otto?"

"I don't know, Mr. Hartman," Otto said, "but we'll find out."

Ruth moved closer to Albert.

"It's dangerous, isn't it?"

"I should say it was," Albert said simply.

"But why do you do it?"

Albert exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"I never traveled more than sixty or seventy miles an hour in an automobile because I never had a reason. Now we are told that a life is at stake. That should be reason enough to quiet my conscience. And I think I enjoy the thrill."

They were on the Post Road—two tiny red lights on police motorcycles shining ahead.

"Eighty," Albert said, his eyes on the dial.

A pulse-stirring roar suddenly beat upon the night.

"There goes the super-charger and two hundred and fifty wild horses," Albert cried.

"Ninety," he called.

"Ninety-five."

His cheeks were flushed, his eyes glowing.

"A hundred! And there goes our motorcycle outriders."

"A hundred and fifteen miles an hour," he whispered hoarsely in Ruth's ear.

The body and frame work of the automobile were vibrating as if built of taut strings. Albert, motionless over the wheel, was staring out into the long white lane stabbed into the howling night by a super-searchlight on the running

board.

A sudden red glow in the sky on the right was torn away and left behind.

“What was that?” Ruth asked.

“The Boston Express, I guess,” Albert said.

For uncounted heart beats the roaring rush held. Then, without warning, the motor was silent. The car kept on smoothly. “Why have we slowed down?” Ruth asked, her voice sounding unwontedly loud.

“Down to seventy—through a town,” Albert explained.

“Seventy?” Ruth asked. “Why, it seems as if we are hardly moving.”

The motor suddenly hammered the air with its prodigious clamor. Ruth and Albert sat back, silent, two tiny human mites, catapulting through the gray night in a metal comet.

Came a sharp explosion, like the bang of a gun. The car lurched to the right. The world rocked about them. Metal screamed on metal. Otto’s right hand swung to the emergency, and returned to the wheel, jumping and yanking with demonic power to free itself from human control.

They went off the road, and swerved to a stop.

Ruth was clutching Albert’s hand, her nails dug into his flesh.

“All right, sir?” Otto asked, twisting in his seat.

“All right, Otto,” Albert replied. “You handled it well.”

“I wouldn’t drive that way with anybody but me behind the wheel, sir,” Otto volunteered respectfully. “Two minutes, and we’re off.”

“A blow-out,” Albert explained to Ruth.

They were bellowing through the night again when the two minutes had elapsed.

“This is all Otto lives for,” Albert said.

“We might have been killed,” Ruth said, “but I didn’t have time to think of it.”

CHAPTER XLIV

“Here we are,” Ruth said. “Take your next right, Otto, and then left.

“Now, turn the next corner. Stop at the third house. They’re up,” turning to Albert. “See the light in the library.”

“Three-thirty, sir,” Otto said. “Except for the blow-out, and that one wrong turning, I would have done better.”

The windshield was coated thick with ice, the twin wipers cemented firmly down. Otto’s face was rimmed with frost, his eyes red and sore. He had driven the last fifty miles with his head stuck out the lowered window, unable to see through the windshield.

Albert helped Ruth from the car. Dr. Parker, Molly beside him, opened the front door. Molly stepped forward.

“Ruth Robbins,” she said. “I never could live through another night like this.”

Ruth took Molly’s outstretched hands.

“I got here, didn’t I, Mrs. Parker? Hello, Dr. Parker.”

She turned her head.

“Albert! Mr. Hartman, this is Mrs. Parker, and Dr. Parker.”

Albert bowed to Molly, who put out her hand, which he took. Then he shook hands with the doctor.

“I don’t know what these females are going to do, Mr. Hartman,” Dr. Parker volunteered in his warm bass, “but it’s something in which I hope I don’t have to figure.”

Albert smiled.

“I entertain hopes of remaining anonymous also,” he said.

“That’s a fine way to talk, you big cowards,” Molly Parker cried, with a pitying look at her husband. “And, as for you, Wally Parker, you are more upset than I am over the possibility of this splendid young fellow dying when there is no need for it.”

They stepped into the front hall of the house.

“You ought to see Wally, Ruth,” Molly continued. “He couldn’t eat any dinner, and he has been walking the floor all night. Isn’t it just like a man?”

“Well, what are you going to do?” Dr. Parker asked.

His wife dropped her arms, and looked at Ruth, who, as they walked into the living room, had loosened the collar of a big man’s coonskin coat in which she had been riding.

Ruth stopped just inside the door, and looked at them.

“I know just what I’m going to try to do,” she said. “I know what Dr.

Parker means. It doesn't matter what happens; he can't afford to be mixed up in this."

"But Ruth . . ." Molly Parker began excitedly.

Ruth swung to face her.

"Or you, Mrs. Parker, or Albert," she insisted. "It wouldn't look very well for Dr. Parker, or any member of his family, to be mixed up in this. And I certainly wouldn't dream of having Albert involved. I've got to do this alone."

"I don't agree with you, Ruth," Molly Parker exclaimed. "There is a life at stake, and it isn't any time to let professional etiquette, or reputations, count for much. What are words against life?"

Ruth took Mrs. Parker's little hands in her own large firm ones, and shook her gently.

"I don't care what you think about it, Mrs. Parker. You've got to stay home."

She looked at Dr. Parker.

"Make her see I am right," she begged.

Dr. Parker raised his big hands helplessly.

"I've been trying to tell her to be sensible," he said, "but I can't make her. And, after all, my sympathies are with her. Isn't she the fire-eater, though?"

"Well," Ruth announced in a tone of finality, "I'm not going to stand for any nonsense. I think Mrs. Parker is wonderful, and I always have known you are a brick, Dr. Parker. You are two bricks. And Albert here is a brick."

She paused a moment, and took a deep breath.

"There's only one way I can try to do anything, and that is alone. I just wanted to stop here to tell you what I am going to do, and to thank you both with everything that's in me."

"No need of that," Dr. Parker deprecated.

"Don't interrupt now," Ruth said. "Albert will let me out on the back road by McCloud's barn. I know where the Browns keep the key on the window sill at the pantry window near the back door."

She turned to Dr. Parker. "He's in his own old room in the southwest corner, isn't he?"

"That's right, Ruth."

"Well, I can just slip up the back stairs, then," she continued.

"What if the key isn't there?" Dr. Parker asked.

"There's a ladder in the McCloud's barn; I'll get that."

"Just a moment, if you will," Albert interposed. "Let me make a suggestion. I will drop Ruth where she tells me to. I will wait ten minutes. If she doesn't return by then, I will go on to Springfield and get some sleep."

"I think I should go—I insist on going," Molly Parker said.

"Well, you can't," Ruth replied.

She rested her right hand gently on Mrs. Parker's wrist.

"Can't you see I couldn't do it, if it was going to make trouble for any one?" she asked. "If it was necessary it would be different. But it's my job, and I can do it alone."

Tears gathered in Ruth's eyes. Her mouth strained with effort; a sob caught in her throat.

"All right, Ruth," Dr. Parker boomed huskily. "It's all right. Molly certainly is going to be a good soldier and do as she's asked. And you're right, every way from the ace. Now, do you want to run upstairs with Molly for a minute?"

"No," Ruth replied. "I don't. I'm wound up, and I've got to go. I'm afraid to wait any longer. Come on, Albert."

Ruth started for the door.

"What are you going to do, Ruth?" Molly Parker cried. "Have you any plan?"

Ruth stopped and looked up at the doctor.

"Can anything I do hurt Myron? Will noise have a bad effect?"

He shook his head.

"I'd say that you couldn't do him anything but good, Ruthy," he advised.

"Well, good-by for now," Ruth called, walking rapidly down the hall.

"But you haven't talked over any plan. What are you going to do?" Molly called after her.

Dr. Parker put his arm around her.

"You've done all you could," he said. "I guess now it's a case of leave it to Ruth."

In the auto, Albert said:

"I'd suggest you have a little coffee and a sandwich before you go."

"I couldn't, Albert."

"A little coffee anyhow," he insisted.

He poured a cup of coffee, steaming, and held it for her. She took it, hesitated for a moment, and then drank. He took the cup from her and refilled it, and held it to her again. She drained it again, absent mindedly.

"Two left turns, Otto," she directed.

She was looking out the open window through which cold, sleet-ridden air drove violently.

"Now stop!"

Albert opened the door and got out, assisting her to alight. A house loomed up, like a ghost of a house, behind trees and bushes. He took off his hat, baring his head to the storm.

"Well, good luck, Ruth," he said. "I'll wait ten minutes down the road a bit, and then go. I'll sleep at the Kimball in Springfield. You may get me there

if you need me.”

“You’re a brick, Albert,” Ruth said. “I never knew such a man. You’ll hear from me.”

Still with hat in his hand, Albert Hartman watched her as she walked to the bushes. She did not even turn to wave but disappeared through them. Albert replaced his hat and got back into the automobile.

Otto sat in the driver’s seat as still as the unseeing statue of a man. Albert smoked three cigarettes. There was no sign of Ruth. There was no sound from the house, white behind the white trees and white bushes.

“Springfield, Otto,” Albert said.

“Yes, sir.”

The car slid away as daintily as a cat through the storm, its wheels swishing a trail through the icy carpet on the road. And new crystals came in their myriads out of the north to repair the damage until, fifteen minutes later, a witch and her broomstick might as well have been the means of transportation which dropped a strange visitor at Deacon Brown’s home.

CHAPTER XLV

Ruth found the key and opened the back door. She knocked over a broom which had stood in the corner, just inside. She waited with the door partly open, listening. Then she pushed it shut slowly.

She was in a vestibule, covered with linoleum. She opened the next door and a rush of warm air, faintly spiced and smelling strongly of coffee, came to her. The top of the firebox in the coal range was cherry red. Indications were of some one about.

Without hesitation Ruth took off first one and then the other slipper, and walked softly to a door on the left. A board creaked. She opened a third door and advanced cautiously into the dark. Her right foot hit the first tread of the steep rear stairs.

Heavy footfalls sounded in the kitchen. Tin clattered. Iron clanged on iron. A rattle of pouring coal followed.

Ruth went slowly and silently up the stairs. When she reached the top, the door to the cook's room was to her right. The door to Myron's room was directly opposite. It was ajar; there was a faint light showing through the crack.

Ruth crossed the hall in two steps, looking neither to the right nor left, pushed the door sufficiently wide enough to admit her body, and entered. A dim white expanse of bed from which came tortured breathing, the smell of medicines, a night light burning faintly, a bottle, an oxygen tank, a figure on a couch between two windows to the south, summed up the sick room.

Without looking around Ruth closed the door, tight, and turned the key in the lock. As the warders fell in the lock, the figure on the couch started up.

"Who is it?" a voice whispered, the voice of Miss Ryan, the night nurse.

"Ssh!" Ruth whispered in return, holding up her hand in a gesture for silence.

Miss Ryan began unrolling herself from blankets and straightening her tousled hair. She yawned.

"Don't make any noise, Miss Ryan," Ruth whispered, approaching closer. "You remember me, don't you?"

Miss Ryan suddenly sat up straight, hands dropping from hair and blankets falling from her sturdy frame.

"Holy Mother! It's Ruth Robbins."

"Ssh! Miss Ryan," Ruth said, taking Miss Ryan's hand.

"Don't worry," Miss Ryan said crisply, but softly. "But what are you doing here, anyhow?"

"They told me Myron was very sick, and that it might help if I came to see

him.”

“He calls for you,” Miss Ryan said, nodding her head. “But the Saints preserve us! What’s this family going to do if they know you’re here?”

“I don’t care much,” Ruth said.

“And neither do I,” Miss Ryan announced feelingly, tossing her head. “They’re praying over that poor boy from morning to night, and if he lives with that going on I’ll be surprised. It’s a shame, that’s what it is!”

Ruth turned and went to the bed. Myron’s face was flushed and he was moaning. His hair was ruffled and his cheeks and chin were covered with a straggling beard. Ruth dropped to her knees and took his hand.

“Myron,” she called softly. “Myron darling!”

Miss Ryan touched Ruth gently on the shoulder.

“I wouldn’t get any nearer him than necessary,” she warned. “Pneumonia is awfully catching. And keep your head turned away as much as possible.”

Ruth turned her face back and up and gazed at Miss Ryan; and then she arose from her knees and bent over the bed. She took Myron in her arms and kissed him.

“Myron,” she repeated. “Myron, it’s Ruth!”

“Ruth,” Myron said hoarsely, his eyes opening as if he half-comprehended. “Ruth.”

Tears were running down Ruth’s cheeks. She put her lips close to his ear. “You are going to get well,” she said, slowly and distinctly. “You are going to get well, and marry Ruth.”

Myron’s thin hot hand clutched hers, and he suddenly was quiet. She leaned closer. Her voice vibrated with a terrible earnestness. Her words were missiles slung at his numbed consciousness.

“This is Ruth,” she said. “This is Ruth. Ruth loves you. You are going to get well and marry Ruth.”

Myron lay quiet, a look of peace on his gaunt, flushed, bearded face. He relaxed, his hand in hers. She continued to stand in a strained posture over him, the tears shining in her eyes and on her cheeks.

Miss Ryan had bent over a table on which were bottles and glasses. Now she turned and went to the bedside. She laid her hand on Myron’s forehead; she felt his pulse, looking at her small gold watch.

“I’m no doctor, Miss Robbins,” she said, tucking the watch into her waistband. “But I think the poor boy heard you. He is resting more quietly than I’ve ever seen him, and his forehead is moist. Just feel.”

Ruth’s natural voice, a trifle subdued but far from a whisper, sounded like a vibrant violin string, a deep, nerve-stirring contralto. It filled the quiet room with the effect of a sudden, unexpected peal from an organ—the call of a soul to a soul.

“NOW I AM HERE, MYRON WILL GET WELL.”

The words startled the before-dawn silences. The room, the house, seemed trembling with them. For a breathless moment Miss Ryan stood as one listening. She took Ruth’s arm.

“Look, Miss Robbins, he heard you, he’s smiling.”

Ruth, still in the fur coat, gazed at the nurse with a far look in her eyes.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, the door knob turned softly. Then it turned more vigorously. A knuckle tapped the panel. Deacon Brown’s voice, in a hoarse whisper, called:

“Miss Ryan.”

Miss Ryan hesitated an instant, took hold of Ruth’s arm, and moved her towards a closet. The knob rattled again. The knocking grew louder. The Deacon’s voice increased in volume.

“Miss Ryan!”

“Get in the closet,” Miss Ryan whispered.

Ruth held back.

“I’ll face him,” she said. “I’m not afraid.”

“For me,” Miss Ryan whispered.

“For nobody,” Ruth said.

Miss Ryan stared at her for a moment.

“Well,” she said, her eyes brave, “there are other places besides Southington where I can nurse.”

With that she went to the door, twisted the key, and opened it.

CHAPTER XLVI

Deacon Brown walked in. He was dressed, but unshaved. Dark circles showed under his eyes, red from emotion and lack of sleep. His thin hands, on which veins stood out, were trembling. His head agitated with an almost imperceptible tremor. The Deacon had high blood pressure and a bad heart.

“Sleeping, Miss Ryan?” he asked. “How is my boy?”

“He is resting better than he ever has, Deacon Brown,” Miss Ryan replied.

“Oh, thank God,” the Deacon said. “Thank God!”

He clasped his hands and bent over the bed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Ruth went behind Miss Ryan, locked the door again, and put the key in her pocket. Her face was drawn and determined.

“You may thank God, Deacon Brown,” she said. “But I guess I helped, too.”

The old man didn’t start. He turned slowly, as one who, worn by deep and constant suffering, fails to react in ordinary ways to a sudden shock.

“Ruth Robbins!” he said. “How did you get here? Who let you in?”

Ruth straightened.

“You’d say it was God,” she said in her deep voice.

The Deacon’s head shook slightly from side to side, not because he wished to express disbelief, but because of his physical condition.

“The Lord would choose a strange messenger if he chose you, Ruth,” he exclaimed.

He continued to regard her, as if dazed. Ruth spoke rapidly.

“Myron has been calling for me when he was delirious. I came. Miss Ryan will tell you that he became quiet right after I spoke to him.”

The Deacon’s eyes were clearing. A look of suspicion came into his face; a look of fear and then of hate followed.

“I don’t care how you entered this stricken house,” he said, “but you’ll have to go.”

He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Get out!” he screamed. “You get out of here.”

“I’m not going to get out,” Ruth announced coldly. “You might just as well know everything. Myron and I have a baby, who was born last December, and we are going to be married as soon as he gets well.”

Deacon Brown’s long thin body sagged. He put out a bony hand, caught the brass rail at the head of the bed with it, and leaned heavily on it.

“You’re lying, Ruth Robbins,” he said. “You’re lying. You get out of here.”

You get out of here. I'll have you arrested. I'll have you tarred and feathered.”
The Deacon was gasping and shaking. Miss Ryan put her arms under his elbow. He shook her off. “Leave me be,” he cried hoarsely. “You're in it too. Both of you get out!”

“Neither of us is going to get out, Deacon Brown,” Ruth said. “This is a showdown. If you want a scandal you can have it. If you don't want a scandal you can have your son alive and well.”

Color was flying high again in Ruth's cheeks Her head was up, dark blue eyes flaming.

“My son!” the Deacon gasped. “You—you—blackmailer.”

“Look, Deacon Brown,” Ruth said, the power of courage and the glory of ripe womanhood in her rich voice. “Look yourself over before you talk about me. Did you cheat Myron and me in the hospital in New York, when Myron was speaking to me over the telephone?”

The Deacon still faced her, head shaking, body trembling, but his red eyes wavered.

“You know you cheated, Deacon Brown. And that's not the only time you cheated in your life, either.”

The Deacon, voiceless, suddenly went to the door and tried to open it.

“Where's the key? I'll throw you out. I'll see who's boss here!”

“I've the key,” Ruth said

The Deacon suddenly changed his tone.

“This'll kill my son,” he said.

“No, it won't,” Ruth said, conviction in her voice. “You and your wife and Dr. Prescott have been trying to kill him, coming in here and telling him he is all ready for Jesus, and Jesus is all ready for him. But he isn't going to Jesus for a long, long time.”

Deacon Brown merely stared at her, breathing hard.

“I'll tear you wide open,” Ruth said, her voice like steel. “I'll give you and your family all the hell you want right here on earth if you try to murder your son any more with your prayers.”

The Deacon continued silent.

“For God's sake,” Ruth cried, her voice rising, “didn't you ever think of praying for him to get well, instead of praying for him to go to heaven?”

A sound at the door drew the three pairs of eyes.

“What's the matter? Let me in. Who is there?”

Deacon Brown moved his arms futilely and turned to Ruth. She went to the door, inserted the key in the lock, and *opened* it, revealing Mrs. Brown. Hetty's mouth gaped. She looked from Ruth to her husband, and back to Ruth again.

“Ruth!” she exclaimed. “Ruth Robbins!”

“I was just speaking to your husband, Mrs. Brown,” Ruth said quickly and calmly.

The Deacon remained silent.

“I told him that Myron was going to get well, which he is, and that we are going to be married.”

Hetty’s mouth opened wider; she gasped, and her hand clutched at her heart.

“Also, I told him,” Ruth continued calmly, “that there is going to be no more praying for Myron to go to heaven—not around him any way. Pray for him to get well somewhere else.”

“What right . . .” Hetty began.

“I’ll tell you what right I have,” Ruth flamed. “The right of love a woman has for a man, and that a mother has for the father of her baby.”

Hetty looked at her husband, but without any outward results.

“Baby?” she said.

“I have a baby, and Myron is his father,” Ruth said. “And unless you want the town to have some fresh scandal to talk about, I’d suggest you be sensible.”

“Myron and you are not married,” Hetty exclaimed.

“Let’s go in another room and talk this over,” Ruth said. “Come on, Deacon Brown. Come on, Mrs. Brown.”

She reached for Deacon Brown’s hand, but he pulled it away. He followed, however.

Ruth stopped them on the threshold.

“You tell them how much better Myron seems to you, Miss Ryan,” she commanded.

“Indeed,” Miss Ryan said quietly, “he seems much better to me; and I think the doctor will tell you the same.”

In the hall Deacon Brown walked stumblingly. Hetty took his arm and petted it. Her eyes were wet.

“Deacon Brown is a very sick man himself, Ruth,” she said softly. “I wish you would try to be nice to him.”

“I am sorry,” Ruth said.

“And before we talk or anything,” Hetty continued, “don’t you think it would be a good plan if we all had breakfast?”

“I have on a dinner dress,” Ruth confessed, opening the fur coat a trifle.

“I guess Sally has something you could wear,” Hetty said. “I will call her.”

Deacon Brown made a half-violent movement with the arm which Hetty held.

“She can’t stay here,” he said. “Ruth Robbins can’t stay in this house.”

“I guess she can,” Hetty said soothingly. “I certainly wouldn’t feel very

Christ-like if I turned an old neighbor out in the cold. And, after all, Ruth is a Robbins—and blood tells.”

She stopped down the hall at the last door on the left, and rapped.

“Sally loves to sleep,” she explained, rapping again. “I was wondering,” she said slowly. “I was wondering. I heard what you said about praying. Dr. Parker said the same thing.”

“I just think it would be better not to get Myron so willing to go to heaven,” Ruth said earnestly. “You know, Mrs. Brown, Myron isn’t really a sinner. He is one of the sweetest and dearest boys that it is possible to imagine.”

“You know,” Hetty said, “I think I agree with you.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“I never really believed he was such a sinner,” she said. “I guess I was kind of hysterical. Perhaps we all were. And after breakfast we all will have a good talk. You wouldn’t mind if Dr. Prescott is with us? He is such a good man.”

“Of course I wouldn’t, Mrs. Brown.”

Hetty’s face worked, and tears began to fall before she could find a handkerchief.

“You really believe Myron is going to get well—that he isn’t going to die?”

“I feel sure of it,” Ruth said.

Hetty sobbed for a minute. Finally she controlled herself. “You are the first mortal soul that told me that,” she said. “And, you know,” she smiled through her tears, “I snum! I believe it myself.”

“Well,” Ruth said, “I was the first person to tell Myron he was going to get well, too. And I’m sure he believes it.”

CHAPTER XLVII

Albert Hartman was on the sidewalk smoking a fat cigarette during the first entire act. He was immaculate and shining, as usual, and bowed courteously to Richman Peters.

“Albert,” said Mr. Peters, “when is that beautiful girl coming to sit in the seat you always have ready for her?”

Albert smiled.

“There is no definite time set,” he replied. “But I am patient.”

When Albert took his seat for the next act, the seat beside him, as always, was unoccupied.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Impatient Virgin* by Donald Henderson Clarke]