

"Gardenias
IN HER HAIR"



A NEW NOVEL BY *Martha Ostenso*
AUTHOR OF "WILD GESE"

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

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

Title: Gardenias in her hair

Date of first publication: 1937

Author: Martha Ostenso (1900-1963)

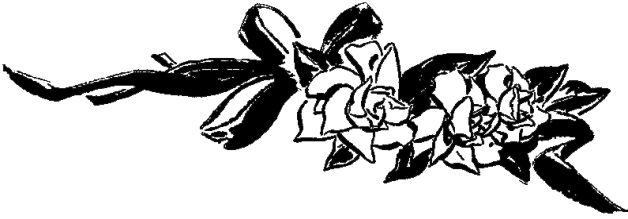
Date first posted: Dec. 30, 2019

Date last updated: Dec. 30, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20191259

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

Gardenias in her hair



By Martha Ostenso

CHAPTER ONE

SUSAN sat cross-legged on the attic floor, Grandmother Prescott's old hump-backed trunk open beside her. June sunlight streamed through the dormer window, and from the back yard below came the dauntless singing of Josie Fink, innocently off key: *When the moon comes over the mountain . . .*

Susan laughed and then reflected that Josie had little to be gay about. But Josie, with her four small fatherless children to provide for, had something of the quality Grandmother Prescott must have had sixty years ago, when she had come, a bride, in a covered wagon up here to a Michigan wilderness from a gentler life in Pennsylvania.

The contents of this old trunk—redolent of moth balls, lavender, and the nostalgic smell of yellowing, crumbling journals and letters and recipes—were all that remained materially of a character that had left the stamp of her spirit both on the lives of the pioneers in a raw and somber land, and on those who had followed to enjoy the fruits of their struggles.

It had not been Susan's intention to open the trunk this morning. She had come to the attic to look for a lampshade she had stored away last year. But the old green trunk had a lure which she could not resist, even as a small girl in her father's mansion on the hill.

On November 16, 1878, the young Susannah Prescott had written in her journal: "Rendered lard today, the butchering over and done, for which thank God, the squealing and screaming being such as still haunted my ears last night even under the moaning of the pines and the baying of the wolves in the timber. Then in the afternoon it snowed a good bit more, and Jensine Stormo came over

in the cutter and away we went to the quilting bee at Reiters'. They all admired my remnants so much. I stitched my name and the date on a piece for one corner of the quilt, and I wonder if anybody will read it when I'm laid away. Now I've got to stop writing, because Martin is coming in with the milk. It's been a long day, up at five by candle-light."

Susan gently closed the brass clasp that held the marbled covers of the little book together. In the trunk, folded carefully in a sheet, was the patchwork quilt with the tiny lettering barely decipherable now in the corner. The soft silver spoons and forks, with Grandmother and Grandfather Prescott's names and the date of their marriage, a hair-line engraving, would be downstairs in the sideboard if Edith and Kit had their way. Why, her sisters demanded, have lovely old things and not use them?

Susan had been firm about it. "You two are so careless you might as easily as not throw a spoon into the garbage can and never know it. Anyhow, Grandma gave me her trunk—with everything in it—for my hope chest."

She closed the trunk and turned the rusty key in its lock. With the parchment shade under her arm she went down the narrow attic stairs and into Kit's room, where everything was crisp and clean and shining for her return from Vassar. She took the old shade off the bridge lamp. The amber shade would look newer. The delphinium spires in the white china vase on the window seat were lovely, the olive-and-blue chintz curtains alert and fresh. Kit would be delighted. Susan whistled happily, and glanced carelessly in the mirror.

“WELL, really, Sue,” she observed, nodding gravely at her reflection, “you *are* good-looking! Your mahogany-colored hair tendrils dearly about your noble and alabaster brow, which is unfortunately tanned from gardening. Your wide-set eyes are the night-blue of swallows’ wings, even if the pupils are a trifle large from the slight nearsightedness. Your nose is not aquiline, but neither does it offend. Your skin is slick as an onion—and what are two or three freckles? But it’s your red mouth that was made for laughter and _____”

She stared at herself. Love? But where—and when? She was suddenly serious. In another month she would be twenty-three. Would love come to her in East Searle, where for three years now she had devoted her time and energy to making a home for her brother and two sisters? She laughed again, abruptly. One had to laugh, or—well, one just had to!

“Yes, indeed,” she added, “even with a smudge on your nose and a cobweb in your hair, you have your points, Sue Prescott. You ought to use yourself as heroine in a story.”

She puffed out her cheeks, crossed her eyes, set the discarded lampshade on her head, and waltzed out of the room. On the landing, she jerked the lampshade from her head—too late, however, to avoid discovery by Edith, who came hurrying up from the hall below.

Her older sister halted abruptly, midway on the stairs. “What on earth are you doing!”

Sue laughed and set the shade back on her head. “I’ve just discovered that I haven’t anyone to love me because I’m too hard on the eyes.”

Edith flurried past her. “For heaven’s sake don’t go downstairs like that. Forbes is waiting for me in his car. We’re going to play golf. Edwina Vale arranged a foursome——”

Sue took the shade from her head, winced as it caught in a hair, and went on downstairs. There was work still to be done before Kit’s arrival on the evening train.

SUSAN looked out through the kitchen window and beyond the steeped hollyhocks to the nice length of grassy yard where Josie Fink stood angrily hanging fine, wet linen sheets on the clothes line.

Yes, after years the sheets were still good, because they were of pure linen. In the big house on the hill, where the Prescotts had once lived, no one would have dreamed of having anything else. Grandmother Prescott had railed against that big house her son Theodore had built out of the profits from his lumber business. There was mention of it in her journal under May 20, 1915. “Had another set-to with Teddy today over the new house he’s building on the hill. It would be better for his children if they were raised in a log cabin, as he was, instead of setting them up like young princelings in a mansion where they can look down on the rest of the town. I told him so, and he said a man had a right to ruin his own family if he felt like it—just the kind of thing his father would say when he wanted to have done with an argument.”

Well, the big house had been built and lived in and had finally ceased to play any part in the history of the Prescott family when old man Updyke had bargained shrewdly for it three years ago, a few weeks after the death of Theodore Prescott.

But Susan wasn’t thinking now of the big house on the hill, nor of linen sheets. She was thinking that Josie would soon come indoors to take up her indignant eloquence where she had left off. One should not really permit such liberties in a servant, Susan reflected, but who on earth could regard Josie as a servant?

She wet her finger, tested the iron, and spread Edith's handmade nightgown, with its webby top, out upon the board. Kit had sent a package of her soiled underthings from Vassar last week, pleading that she didn't like to pack them with her other clothing when she returned home after graduation, and that it would be much cheaper for Josie to do them anyhow. Kit didn't know that Susan had always washed and ironed the underthings herself, leaving her brother Nugent's garments and the heavier laundry to Josie.

Susan guided the iron carefully over the narrow isthmus that joined breast to back on Edith's nightgown. She couldn't help wishing that Edith had not gone golfing with Edwina Vale and whoever else was with her to make up the foursome with Forbes Updyke. Forbes was all right in his way—it was Forbes' father who now owned the white-columned Prescott mansion on the hill. But whatever he was, Edith seemed to be madly in love with him. Or was she madly in love with the idea that, with Forbes for a husband, she would one day get back into the old Prescott mansion, this time as its mistress? Susan wasn't sure. At any rate, things seemed to be shaping up nicely for Edith.

Susan's younger sister was different. Kit had set her heart upon Susan's being present at the graduation exercises at Vassar. But Susan had written a letter full of excuses which Kit would never see through. The truth was simple enough: there wasn't enough money to meet the bills at the end of each month now, let alone take a journey to Poughkeepsie.

WELL, that was a thing of the past. Kit was coming home. She had spent last night with her roommate, Mona Rankin, in Lansing, but had promised to be home on this afternoon's train. Edith would be in from the golf course before train time, surely. And Nugent would be home for dinner, after his day's work in the Cruikshank Mills. They would all be together again!

Josie Fink cluttered in, the clothes basket before her. Without stooping, she dropped the basket just inside the door.

“So! You're at it again, I see!” she exclaimed, her pink-lidded eyes glaring above her freckled cheeks. “After polishin' the staircase an' riddin' up the whole house, from cellar to garret, I'd think you'd sit long enough to draw a natural breath. I s'pose Edith couldn't lend a hand—she'll be that tired when she gets back from chasin' the little white ball all over the country.”

Susan shook out one of Kit's chiffon step-ins and spread it on the ironing board. “What difference does it make, Josie? I'd rather do this than golf. Anyhow, what's the use of——”

“That's you all over! ‘What's the use?’ Well, I'd make it some use if I had a say in it. I remember when you Prescotts were the quality in East Searle, before

your father went an' lost everything. An' now you're workin' your head off so your two sisters an' brother can pretend they're still in the money. What's money, anyhow?"

There was no sense in taking a lofty attitude to Josie Fink. She was too much a part of Susan's own workaday life for that.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it," Susan replied. "I love this little house, even if it is only rented. I love working in it, I love digging in the garden, and I really love doing things for the girls and Nugent. And I *have* lots of time to myself."

Josie was talking again. "It ain't fair, that's what! As Mrs. Riddell was sayin' just the other day, you'd be the prettiest one in the family if you'd only give yourself half a chance."

Susan laughed again, but a little impatiently this time. "Of course, Josie! I have my moments. But for goodness' sake, make us some iced tea while I finish these things!"

CHAPTER II

BEFORE the ironing was done and the house finally prepared for Kit's homecoming, it was mid-afternoon.

Susan seated herself before the Sheraton desk in the living room, one of the few precious things that had been saved out of the treasures of the big house on the hill. From a drawer she took out a sheaf of clipped bills—the butcher's, the baker's, everybody's but the candle-stick maker's, she observed wearily, wishing that his were there instead of the one from the East Searle Electric Company. To cut down that monthly item, she would have to tag after Nuge and Edith every minute they were in the house.

Susan looked thoughtfully at the bills. She sincerely hoped Edith would "land" Forbes Updyke. Not that Susan herself might conceivably profit by the landing. She knew her sister too well to hope for anything like that. Edith was a little country bounded on the north, south, east, and west by Edith.

She glanced at the small balance in her bank book, added the bills, and observed the yawning discrepancy between. The rent, moreover, had not been paid for three months. Their landlord—Jonathan Gilfeather, in New York—had been very decent about the letter of apology she had sent him. Perhaps forty-five dollars a month didn't mean much to Mr. Gilfeather.

No matter how Susan had juggled expenses over the past three years, the proceeds from the sale of the furniture, as well as one of the cars, the station wagon, and the horses, had failed somehow to cover the necessary time and space. Even the twenty dollars a week which Nugent had given her out of his fifty had not, latterly, seemed the handsome contribution he considered it. It usually disappeared into the maw of debts long before Susan received it from him.

For one thing, at least, she was thankful. She had managed to hold off old Archibald Noonan, the dealer in antiques, who had long been interested in certain valuable pieces that had been saved from the Prescott debacle. Of course, she thought with a lift of spirit, Kit would be ready now to take some sort of job. Anything would help. Vassar had been expensive, but Kit had been set on it—not particularly because of any love of learning, but because two or three of her best friends had gone. Susan herself had taken her diploma at Michigan State. She would never have gone to college at all had she known how things really were. She had been in her senior year when the big house had been sold to satisfy her father's creditors after his death.

Would it have been better, she wondered, if she had gone to work in Chicago or New York three years ago, instead of struggling to keep the family together? She had spoken of it, but there had been loud, incredulous outcries from Edith, from Nugent and Katherine. What on earth would they do without Sue! Especially at a time when Nugent had taken that miserable job in the employment department of the Cruikshank Mills at twenty-five a week, immediately after his graduation from Ann Arbor? And when Kit was a sophomore at Vassar and in all decency ought to have some sort of home to come to for her vacations? And when Edith, who had declined college but had behind her the best of finishing schools—and neither aptitude nor training for making a living for herself—should have a home in which to entertain matrimonial prospects? The arguments had not been put to Susan so baldly, but shorn of their sentiment, there they were.

She rested her head in her hands. The three years had not been ungratifying. Nugent had been promoted until he was now assistant to the manager of the Raw Materials Purchasing Department, and his salary had been doubled. He was more cheerful, now that he had grown used to his work. Kit, aware in her flighty way that sacrifices were being made for her, had applied herself surprisingly and had actually got through college. In the meantime, poor, lovely Edith had not been set adrift. All in all, and in spite of everything, they had been happy—and they had been together.

There had been another compensation, and Susan was not disposed to minimize it. In the silence of this house, after her day's work, she had been able to sit down to her typewriter and devote herself to what she passionately hoped might be her profession. In the past year and a half she had managed to finish a number of stories. A few of them she had submitted to magazines. They had been returned, but that was no more than she expected. She was, after all, a beginner.

Yes, Susan thought, she had much to be thankful for. The Prescotts were still respected in the town her grandfather had practically built. Somehow, these bills on the desk before her would be paid.

She turned to glance at the clock on the mantel over the cobblestone fireplace. The postman should have come by, an hour ago. She went out and found a letter.

“MY dear Miss Prescott,” Jonathan Gilfeather had written, “I’m about to ask a favor of you. If it embarrasses you, please consider it unasked. There is, or used to be, an old, ramshackle log cabin on the property my uncle left me—a little distance back of the house you are living in. When I was a boy and visited Doctor Gilfeather, I used to play in the cabin, with

imaginary Indians surrounding it. Later, in my teens, I slept in it when I went to spend a summer with my uncle. I recall that it had a good deal of charm, although it was very scantily furnished. Of course, the cabin may have disappeared since then, but if it is still there and if you are not using it, I should like very much to spend the summer in it. Its inviolable atmosphere of a time long gone would be ideal for my work. All I should need in the way of furniture is a cot, a table, and a chair. I should be able to pick up these things without any trouble in East Searle. I am in Chicago at present, staying at the Hotel Devonshire. Will you be good enough to wire me, collect, if you have no objection to my taking it over for the summer? I should like to come out at once, otherwise I shall have to change my plans. I promise to be no nuisance to you. There is a path, as I remember it, leading north from the cabin, out through the woods, so you need not see me coming or going. Thanking you in anticipation of a favorable reply, I am, Sincerely yours——”

Susan looked at the name scrawled at the bottom of the page and then stared distractedly into the glossy heart of a rhododendron bush. If he had only said, “in return for the back rent,” but no—this person Gilfeather was too well-mannered to write anything like that. He preferred to let her read between the lines and choose her own degree of humiliation.

She remembered a stringy, tow-headed boy, with a nose like a small potato, who used to ride a bicycle to and from Doctor Gilfeather’s place in the summers, when she and her sisters were out sedately riding in the dog cart. He had glanced with contempt at the dog cart. It was this scurrilous individual who had later become kindly Doctor Gilfeather’s sole heir. Susan had not set eyes on him since he was sixteen and she twelve, but her recollection of him, together with this letter and its patronizing tone, made her furious. “Its inviolable atmosphere of a time long gone,” indeed! He had gone to Yale, she had heard, and was probably doing some research work—she had a vague impression that he was attached to an obscure historical society and wanted to invest his activities with a mellow glow.

Suddenly, in dismay, Susan caught her smooth underlip between her teeth. What was wrong with her, anyhow? The letter had been courteous. There was certainly nothing unreasonable in his request. Besides, they had never used the old cabin for anything except storage.

She would wire Jonathan Gilfeather—what a name, she had always thought!—immediately, and assure him that the place would be ready for him at once. And she would pay for the wire herself.

IT was after she had sent the wire, over the telephone, that the distressing thought struck Susan. For the past three years the cabin had been used not

only as a storehouse for old furniture that would one day be disposed of, but also for coal and wood. The cabin was a mess. It would require a full day's work to make it fit for anyone to live in.

Well, after dinner they would all pitch in and start cleaning it. It would be a kind of lark, on Kit's first evening home. Then, if necessary, they could get up at dawn tomorrow and put in a couple of good hours before Nugent would have to go to work. By tomorrow night, with any kind of luck, they would have it ready. Jonathan Gilfeather could then move in whenever he chose. There was an old couch, a chair or two, and probably some kind of table in that litter out there that could be used to furnish the cabin for the pedantic Jonathan, to whom they were indebted to the tune of one hundred and thirty-five dollars. That ought to mollify him a little.

Susan was startled out of her reverie by Edith's laughter and by the sound of a golf bag being deposited on the hall floor.

"Forbes, you're a regular Shylock, darn you!" Edith was saying gayly. "I *warned* you I couldn't afford to play for a quarter a hole."

She was standing in the doorway, her lovely blond hair frothing about her head, Forbes Updyke, large and handsomely brown, behind her.

"Hello, Sue!" they greeted her together and came into the living room.

Edith was smiling as she sank with graceful fatigue into a chair, but the smile was a glaze beneath which there was vexed disapproval. Susan, however, did not see that. She had not yet quite emerged from her preoccupation.

"You should have come out with us, Sue!" Edith declared glibly. "It was a perfect day for golf—not a breath of wind—and the course was simply lovely too! But this wretch took a dollar and a half from me."

"Yes," Forbes agreed heartily. "Too bad you weren't out with us, Sue."

"I'll be out one of these days," Susan said. "I had a few things to do today."

Forbes Updyke turned away. "Well, I'll pick you up at nine, then, Edith. And wear that slick white thing I like so much. You're a knockout in that dress!"

Edith laughed deprecatingly. "It's a thousand years old, darling! I haven't worn anything else since last New Year's Eve—I'll simply have to get some clothes."

When he had gone, Susan said, "Where are you going tonight, Edie?"

"Oh—Marian Doak cooked up a party on the spur of the moment last night, after the bridge game. I think she felt guilty because she won so much."

"How much did *you* lose?"

“Me? Why, I broke even, though I didn’t hold a card all night. Sue, why on earth did you have to have those horrible glasses on when we came in? They make you look five years older, at least!”

Susan took off her glasses. “But why shouldn’t I wear——”

“Forbes knows you are four years younger than I am,” Edith said, a little sharply. “Those glasses make you look thirty!”

Susan laughed. “I wouldn’t waste my time on a man if a pair of glasses——”

“I don’t consider it a waste of time. It’s the only chance I have at present to—to——”

“To get back into the money.”

“I think you’re simply horrid!” Edith pouted. “I’m really fond of Forbes, whatever the rest of you may think of him.”

“I don’t mean to be horrid,” Susan said. “And I have nothing against Forbes. I think he’s stingy, and he eats too much, and he’s a little thick above the collar, but——”

“I’d like to see the man you’ll pick, when the time comes,” Edith said.

“I’d like to see him now! By the way, I was rather counting on your staying home tonight. I’m going to need a little help.”

EDITH looked at her with the helpless and reproachful expression she could turn on at will, like a light.

Susan told her then about Jonathan Gilfeather and the need of all hands for the clearing out of the cabin.

Edith’s impatience broke in a storm of protest. “I think it’s simply an outrage! Why does he have to come along now? People will think we’re keeping a boarder. Marian Doak will pounce on the idea at once. And Edwina Vale——”

“Let them pounce!” said Susan dryly. “Marian Doak means very little in my young life. And if Edwina Vale has an ounce of respect for me, it’s more than I have for her.”

Edith was angry. “I won’t have you talk like that about my friends!”

Susan’s smile was straight. “Look here, Edie,” she said calmly, “we owe Jonathan Gilfeather one hundred and thirty-five dollars—in back rent—and we owe Marian Doak and Edwina Vale precisely nothing. And while we’re on the subject, that dollar and a half was too much for you to lose this afternoon. Forbes Updyke didn’t need it, and the milkman does.”

Tears magnified Edith's eyes, made them a more limpid blue. "Well, I'm hoping you won't have me as a burden very much longer. I get so tired of pinching every penny."

"Let's not be silly," Susan said. "No one thinks of you as a burden. And it isn't our fault exactly if we have to pinch pennies."

Edith brushed the tears from the corners of her eyes. "If Forbes would only make up his mind——"

Susan laughed. "Josie says a watched pot never boils. But for heaven's sake, don't cry about it. Kit's coming home and we all want to be happy. I've got to get the chicken into the oven. It's past four. I wish you'd scrape a few carrots for me. It would help."

"Sue," Edith said mournfully, "I'll do anything but scrape carrots! I have the worst blister on my palms—my golf gloves don't fit right."

AT FIVE o'clock, Susan had everything ready for what was to be a gala dinner in celebration of Kit's return. She had taken her typewriter down to the back porch, where she could step into the kitchen now and then and glance at the chicken and baste it.

The chief character in her current story, who had started out innocently enough as a bookkeeper, now seemed to want to take the shape of a mature and even more odious Jonathan Gilfeather. Susan was relieved when she heard Nugent plunging in through the front door. She went into the house to meet him.

He was jubilant, swept her up into his long arms and kissed her eyebrows. "Guess what?" he demanded.

"The raise?" Susan was breathless.

"Five bucks! And say—guess again!"

"I don't dare!"

"Violet Cruikshank is going to the country club with me tonight to dance! The old man's daughter! I've been trying to get her eye for four months, kid—and did I get it! Well, what in the heck's the matter?"

"Oh, Nuge—I'm glad about the raise—and about Violet. You know I am. But I did so want to have you stay home tonight. We have to clean out the log cabin."

Nugent looked blank. "The log cabin? Are you going nuts all of a sudden?"

Patently Susan explained again about Jonathan Gilfeather.

“Well, of all the blasted nerve!” Nugent exploded. “He’s taking advantage of us, just because we owe him a couple of months’ rent.”

“Maybe, but——”

“Don’t worry about it, kid.” Nugent put his arms about her shoulders. “I can’t get out of this tonight, but we’ll get to work on it early in the morning. We can tear the inside out of that place in a couple of hours if we go after it.”

Susan knew better, but Nugent couldn’t discuss it just now. He thundered upstairs to take a shower. Susan could hear him alternately whistling and cursing with cheerful gusto. Nugent was twenty-five, over a year older than herself, but in most respects he was far from grown up.

CHAPTER III

AT a few minutes past six, Nugent returned from the station with Kit and her smart striped luggage. Susan had barely had time to wash her hot face in cold water, powder her nose, and change to her best crisp linen dress.

“Darling!” Kit, small and vivaciously dark, bounded up the porch steps and flung her arms about Susan. “Oh—you look good enough to eat!”

“Don’t spoil your dinner,” Nugent put in, “we’re going to have chicken.”

Susan laughed and held her sister at arm’s length. “You look pretty good yourself, Kit.”

“Skinny as a herring!” Nugent observed.

Kit jerked the little hat from her head and shook out her curls. “Of course, the last month or so has taken me down a bit. I simply had to slave to make the grade. You know how dumb I am, darling! Where’s Ede?”

“Hullo, Kit!” Edith’s voice came muffled from upstairs. “I’ll be right down.”

“Ede’s tired,” Susan explained in a conciliatory tone. “She didn’t get to bed till three this morning, and she played golf with Forbes Updyke today.”

“Is Forbes still in the picture?” Kit asked.

“Very much!”

“Sap!” Nugent said under his breath.

But Kit was too excited to pay any attention to her brother. As they came to the top landing, she gave Susan a happy squeeze. “Oh, I’ve got so much to tell you!”

Susan felt a deep thrill of gratitude. Oh, it did pay, the anxiety and the strain!

WHILE the two girls dressed in Edith’s room, Susan sat and watched them with fond delight in their contrasting beauty.

“I suppose Nuge told you about his new raise?”

“The minute we got into the car. Isn’t it slick! And he’s taking Violet Cruikshank out. With Forbes chasing Ede, maybe the Prescott fortunes are on the way up again. Isn’t it a wonderful world? Almost anything can happen.”

“And does!” Edith added morosely. “Has Sue told you who is coming to board with us?”

Kit whipped about from the mirror, lipstick poised. “To board?”

“She’s being silly,” Susan remonstrated. “Jonathan Gilfeather wants to take over the cabin for a few weeks. But he’s *not* coming to board with us.”

“He might just as well,” Edith said. “No one in East Searle will believe anything else.”

Kit turned back to the mirror. “Well, I suppose it’s his place, after all. And he may be all right. Anyhow, what people believe and think doesn’t interest me much, Ede. When does our landlord get here, Sue?”

“In a day or two, from what he said in his letter. But let’s not talk about it. You wrote me something about Mona Rankin wanting to come up for a visit.”

“She’ll be here in two days. Her mother’s going to Reno for her divorce, and Mona doesn’t want to hang around Lansing with all the talk. We’ll have to be nice to her—she’s been simply swell to me.”

“We haven’t much to offer her,” Susan reminded her.

“She’s not expecting anything. I’ve told her all about us. Besides, there’ll be plenty to do. You remember that Bernie Crawford I wrote you about, Sue? That I met at the prom?”

“You mean Phil Crawford’s cousin?”

“Uh-huh. He came up on the train with me. He’s going to spend a month out at Phil’s country place. Phil’s an onion, but I suppose I can put up with him for Bernie’s sake. Bernie’s about the smoothest article on legs.”

Susan’s heart sank with a sense of foreboding. Kit was so attractive, and so willful at times.

“It isn’t serious, then,” Edith observed absently.

“Who said anything about being serious?” Kit replied. “I’m not the serious type, darling. I can have fun without going off the deep end every time a male looks at me. Phil is giving a house party for Bernie in July, and I’m to help decorate the swimming pool and what not. Mona has been asked, too. It has all worked out marvelously.”

Edith, slapping her nails with the buffer, said, “Well, that sounds grand, Kit. Heavens, I should have had a manicure today! My nails are a sight!”

“And how goes the writing, Sue?” Kit asked suddenly.

“I’m in the middle of a story. I’m in love with the hero, and if I’d had another hour at it today I’d have killed off the other woman. As it is, she has another night to live.”

Nugent was calling from downstairs. “Get a move on, you females, if you’re expecting me to eat with you. I’ve got a heavy date.”

Susan got up. “I’ll put the things on the table. Hurry down, won’t you?”

“We’ll be down pronto, darling,” Kit promised. “And—Sue, I hope you won’t mind awfully if I breeze out with Bernie for a little while tonight. He simply *wouldn’t* take no. He’s calling for me at eight.”

Perhaps she had been unreasonable, Susan admitted to herself, in thinking that Kit might pitch in this evening and help clear out the cabin.

“That’s all right, Kit,” she said as she left the room.

And it *was* all right, she told herself. When the girls and Nugent were gone, she would tackle the job herself. Or maybe she’d go back to her typewriter and kill off that other woman.

CHAPTER IV

ON the afternoon of the next day, one of baleful, gray heat, Susan stood islanded in a sea of suds in the middle of the cabin floor. Her gingham house dress stuck to her like a moist, clammy peel. She stepped to the doorway before which the leaves of an old elm barely moved in a shift of breeze. She was frankly tired, and it was only two o'clock.

Nugent, Edith, and Kit had meant well enough; but when not one of them had got home before two in the morning you couldn't drag them out of bed at six. Nugent had got up in time to lug out most of the old furniture and the wood, but Edith and Kit had sleepily protested that if this Jonathan Gilfeather wanted to occupy the place, he could certainly clear it out for himself.

At eleven o'clock they had for an hour helped to sweep down cobwebs and hang scrim curtains. But they had luncheon engagements, and Susan felt a definite sense of relief when they were gone.

She rested her arms on the mop handle and stared back at the ancient, wavy floor. There was a kind of satisfaction in the way it was beginning to look after the scrubbing—stout and oaky despite its worn shallows.

The girls would have to marry, that was all there was to it. They would have to have their chance. Susan herself had never met anyone—well, scarcely anyone, although George Fuller wasn't bad—whom she'd be bothered with.

There had never been anything very exciting about George. He was the boy in school who had helped all the others with their problems in geometry and algebra. He had conceived a passion for figures that was eccentric—almost indecent. Susan had told him once, and George had acknowledged the quip with a wide grin. When he had emerged from the University with a record that any serious man might envy, he had become an accountant in the East Searle branch of the Interstate Finance and Investment Corporation, a thriving concern with offices in a dozen cities and with radiant futures for just such young men as George Fuller. He was now, at thirty, the local manager. He would one day be a wealthy man, without a doubt; and his wife—

Susan had often wondered what sort of woman would eventually rise to the dignified eminence of a life partnership with George Fuller. He was of medium build, spare and active—he could play an excellent, uninspired game of tennis—good-looking, if one didn't demand too much dash, with straight brown hair above serious gray eyes set in a face that was a trifle long and narrow—the face, almost, of an ascetic.

It would probably be wrong to suppose that George Fuller had never known an unruly impulse. But it probably wouldn't be far wrong. When he had proposed to Susan last year, for example, he had declared that she was the living embodiment, the gratifying incarnation, in fact, of those very attributes combined in exact and pleasing proportions which he sought in the woman he would want for his wife.

The proposal lacked something, perhaps, of the reckless abandon of blind love, but it had been of the very stuff of sincerity. And Susan had considered it—seriously. She had considered it for the better part of a year. She had not, in fact, altogether dismissed it from her mind even yet, in spite of George's cooling ardor. A woman might do worse than marry George Fuller.

By one of those odd accidents upon which the more credulous build their dearest superstitions, she looked up at the sound of a man's voice and saw George, in the flesh, coming toward her across the lawn.

"Believe it or not," she said when he stood before her, "but I was just this moment thinking of you."

"That is not incredible," George replied. "As a matter of fact, I am frequently guilty of thinking of you. I find it a not altogether unpleasant diversion."

Susan brushed a damp tress back from her brow. "I thought you were above flattery, George."

"On the contrary. . . . I should never attempt it with you, however. You are much too discerning."

"George, you're a darling. Lift the other end of that couch and help me put it out of the way. Nugent left it right in front of the door. . . . There! Thank you."

George glanced through the doorway, into the cabin. "May I be so bold as to ask what you are doing?"

Susan sighed and explained.

"Jonathan Gilfeather?" said George. "I haven't seen him for—it must be ten years. You mean Jonathan is actually coming to live here—in this cabin?"

"He may change his mind when he sees it. The place belongs to him, you know."

"Yes, I understand. But as I remember Jonathan, he used to spend his uncle's money rather freely. The point is that he might be willing to spend a few dollars and get someone to make the place habitable, instead of——"

"He might, but he didn't say anything about that when he wrote."

"In fact, I should think he might do the work himself."

“That didn’t occur to me,” Susan said simply.

FOR a moment he stood and looked down at her, his gray eyes calm and steady. “There seem to be a number of things that don’t occur to you, Sue,” he said finally.

“For example?”

“I think it would be better to discuss that at a later date, if at all. For one thing, I’m at a loss, since the work has to be done, to understand why Edith and Katherine aren’t with you.”

He was smiling at her, but Susan was suddenly angry—or almost so. It was impossible to lose one’s temper completely with George Fuller. “Is that what brought you up here in the middle of the day? To tell me——”

“That, in the nature of the case, is quite impossible, Sue. As a matter of fact, I happen to have a small business engagement over Greenville way and had thought of your going along with me—for the outing.”

Susan looked out across the hills shimmering under the June sun. “I’d love to go, George. I’d like the drive, but——”

“I have anticipated at least one of your objections,” he interrupted. “You must be home in time to prepare dinner for the family, of course.”

“Well, I——”

“We could be back before six, if necessary.”

“But I simply *must* have this place ready.”

“That, I may say, is precisely what moved me to speak as I did about Edith and Katherine. Profanity has never appealed to me as being either necessary or in good taste, but on this occasion, I am bound to say, the situation is—is damnable!”

Susan laughed aloud. “Oh, George—if you could only learn to swear, I believe I could love you!”

“I fail to see the connection,” George said. “On the other hand——” He paused and turned abruptly away. “I’m sorry you find it impossible to come along, Sue. I should like to drop in some evening soon, if I may.”

“Of course, George. We’re always glad to see you. Kit was asking about you last night.”

“Well——”

He waved a hand, and Susan watched him go with brisk hurrying strides across the yard.

CHAPTER V

AN unpleasant, prickling sensation came over Susan suddenly. She glanced up and saw the cause standing just outside the open door.

Jonathan Gilfeather didn't appear surprised at the scene before him. He said, stooping to poke his shock of burnt-grass hair into the doorway, "There was nobody in the house or around the garden."

"I'm alone," Susan said—"and quite defenseless." Her manner was provocative.

He regarded her with amusement. "You can't tell me you aren't Susan Prescott, because you still look like the girl I used to see riding around in the dog cart, though you're twelve years older than the last time I saw you. You've got the same round, flat face, with the same nasty look on it!"

"Thanks," Susan snapped. "I recall you vividly as one of the most unpromising-looking kids I ever saw. You have lived up admirably to that lack of promise."

Jonathan bowed gravely. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

"I'm sorry I can't return the compliment. I wasn't expecting you before tomorrow."

"A day earlier or a day later—what does it matter? If you'll just step out of there, now, I'll wring the mop out for you. I have the strongest pair of hands outside of Russia."

"Why Russia?"

"Why not? I happened to think of Russia first."

She laughed unwillingly, then remembered with a start what she must look like. She blushed and stood up straight. Jonathan Gilfeather had eyes as sharp and blue as razors—no, sapphires. She felt flurried. A man didn't have eyes like sapphires. And razors weren't necessarily blue.

"All right," she said, not too kindly. "I'll go in and mix you a cold drink, in case you faint in the middle of the floor. Then we can move in some furniture for you. You probably noticed the secondhand shop just outside the door?"

"I practically fell over it." He turned and glanced at the pile of old furniture that Nugent had set out before going to work. "There are some very nice pieces here. And so convenient, too."

Jonathan took off his coat and came into the room. He towered above her as she passed him on the way to the door. An oblique upward glance showed her that he had an unyielding jaw and a really nice mouth full of bold white teeth. His nose was as unclassical as ever.

“Will you have lemonade or iced tea?” she asked from the threshold.

“Either one, if you have nothing better.”

“We can’t afford anything better,” Susan smiled sweetly.

In the house she took her own time, as much to catch her breath as to cool off in the bath tub and change her clothing. He was nice, darn it—that’s what he was!

When she came out with a tray on which were two tall glasses of lemonade, the cabin had been transformed. The floor was not yet quite dry, but the plush couch that had been in one of the maid’s rooms in the big house stood against the far wall, a wrought-iron table occupied the space beneath one of the windows, and three spuriously antique chairs nodded to one another across centuries they had never known. But the thing that touched Susan most was the cracked hawthorn vase on the mantel, which held a bouquet of larkspur out of the Prescott garden.

JONATHAN took the tray from her hands and beckoned her hospitably to a chair. “You were lovely with a dirty face—but now you’re ravishing!” He waved a hand toward the room at large. “What do you think of it?” he demanded proudly. “The early American interior is slightly Louis Quinze, but otherwise——”

“Why——” She struggled to laugh. “It’s surprising. You have worked awfully fast.”

“There’s a fast streak in the Gilfeather family,” he told her, handing her a glass of lemonade. Then he leaned back. “I helped myself to water from the garden hose, by the way. What I need now is a kitchen chair and a packing box or something to serve as a washstand. And of course a water pitcher and a basin.”

“Don’t be foolish!” Susan replied. “There’s a perfectly good bathroom, shower and all, in the house—second floor, back. The kitchen door is never locked. We shall expect you to use it, naturally.”

“That was not in the bond. When I wrote you——”

“You were churlish to write me as if you thought we should expect you to stay out of the way. Especially since we owe you the rent for the past three months.”

“I see. You insist upon being nasty. It might have been better if I had just flatly told you that I wanted to use this old cabin for the summer and let it go at that. I——”

“Please don’t try to explain. It was nice of you to be so polite.”

“But I wasn’t being polite! Don’t you understand? It wasn’t the rent money that made me write the way I did. I—look here, I have a feeling about this place. I’ve never been able to think about it without wanting to write an ode, or something. You know, your grandmother——”

“What do you know about my grandmother?”

“I know she used to come to see my uncle when he lived in the house there. And I know they used to come out here together and sit in this room and talk—tell old stories, live the old days again here under this roof, with no one else around. I used to sit outside and listen. I’ve been wanting to come back to it, to—to recapture, that’s the word—to recapture something of their old feeling. And when my play was bought this spring——”

“Your *what?*” Susan stared.

“My first play,” Jonathan said. “Don’t let that get under your hide, now. It’s a darned good play, if I do say it myself. I got five hundred dollars for an option on it—and gave up my job. You see, another grand idea hit me—plagued me to come up here and do it. So I took the bull by the horns and wrote you. I haven’t any money, but I thought if you’d let me stay here for a while, we could call it square—that three months’ rent you’re talking about. Now, there’s the whole story. What do you think of it?”

SUSAN stared fixedly down at her hands. She must be getting softening of the brain, or something! For never had she met anyone so boyishly appealing, so brahshly attractive as this Jonathan Gilfeather! Perhaps it was the heat, the work, the worry——

“But I wouldn’t think of forgetting the rent,” she told him. “You’ve been very nice about it, and we’ll pay it just as soon as we can scrape it together. As for your living in the cabin, you know how welcome you are to that. Please believe me!”

“You’ve done enough scraping,” he said, and glanced about him at the floor and walls. “And of course I’m welcome. I’d stay even if I weren’t. The Gilfeathers have a reputation for getting their own way.”

“It must be pleasant to get even that, Mr. Gilfeather.”

“That depends. And by the way, you can call me either Gil or Jon. It’ll save a lot of fuss. Girls ordinarily call me Jon.”

“Didn’t anyone ever call you Jonny?”

He gave her a swift, startled glance, over a cigarette he was lighting. “My mother did,” he said quietly. “Nobody else. I was always too big—and too gawky.”

Susan bit her lip. “Have you another cigarette?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!”

While he lighted it for her, she saw that her hand was trembling.

He sat down again and said abruptly: “You have a couple of sisters and a brother, haven’t you? Are they able-bodied?”

Susan stiffened. “Quite. And they *did* help, if that’s what you have in mind. My brother took out this junk this morning before he went to work. And my sisters hung those curtains.”

Jonathan’s expression of surprise might have been merely feigned. “Please forgive me. I was in error. You see, my uncle used to be your family doctor and he told me once that, except for you, every one of the Prescott brood had been thoroughly spoiled. Too much money.”

“They’ve had time to recover from that,” Susan reminded him. “Much can happen in three years.”

“I know it. That’s probably the reason I spoke out of turn. I hate to see anyone as nice as you taking it on the chin. Your sisters are a couple of selfish brats!”

Susan stood up, flaring. “I have not asked you for your opinion of my sisters, Mr. Gilfeather. I’m sure it will be better for all of us if we continue to deal with each other on a strictly business basis. I’ll arrange to pay you your back rent at once. After that, we shall get along much better, I think, if we respect each other’s privacy.”

She marched out, slamming the screen door.

FROM the house, Susan telephoned to Archibald Noonan, Dealer in Antiques. “The Sheraton desk,” she told him coolly—“you can have that. And the two Queen Anne chairs. Dad’s Nuremberg clock, too. A couple of Victorian Staffordshire dogs, and those scatter rugs. I want at least five hundred dollars for the lot. And I mean at *least*! By the time you get out here I may want six hundred.”

As briefly as that the bargain was made. “I’ll be out in half an hour, Miss Prescott. *With* the check! For five hundred.”

“Thank you.”

When Archibald Noonan had come and gone, Susan stood in the middle of the floor, the check in her hands. She had had no idea the place would look so shockingly naked. She wanted to cry. Instead, she took her check book into the kitchen and seated herself defiantly at the table. She wrote half a dozen checks, among them one for a hundred and thirty-five dollars, payable to Jonathan Gilfeather. As soon as the bank opened tomorrow she would deposit Mr. Noonan’s check to cover everything.

She went out of the house, through the garden, through the old elms, and along the path to the cabin. Jonathan Gilfeather had said her sisters were a couple of selfish brats; and he had meant it. She closed her fist tightly. Her knock on the door was brisk and peremptory.

Jonathan opened the door. “Oh, it’s you! I was settling down to a nap. Driving through the heat today——”

She thrust the check toward him. He took it and looked at it with a puzzled frown. “What’s this?”

“That’s your rent,” Susan told him.

Jonathan caught her by the wrist. “Look here, Susan Prescott, don’t be a little fool! You and I started out to be friends. If my remarks about your sisters offended you, let me apologize, won’t you? And I’ll promise never to——”

“Please, Mr. Gilfeather!” she interrupted and drew away.

He looked down at her and tore the check twice before he crumpled it into a ball and tossed it toward the fireplace.

“Okay!” he said and was about to close the door as she started away along the path. When she had gone only a few steps he thrust his head from the doorway. “By the way, I should like to take advantage of your generous offer of the conveniences of your bathroom. I shall be there in an hour, complete with my own towels and soap.”

She did not reply. She heard the cabin door close and, a moment later, she was sure she heard Jonathan Gilfeather’s laugh.

WHILE Susan savagely fried liver and bacon for the evening meal, she could hear Jonathan caroling with impudent cheer in the bathroom above the kitchen. He had marched straight through the house, towels and clothing over his arm. Susan had seen him coming along the path and had slipped into the living room to avoid a meeting.

He was in the midst of his ablutions when Kit and Edith returned together. Susan heard them come into the hall, chattering noisily as they set their hats and jackets aside, and waited fearfully until Kit's voice rose in alarm from the entrance to the living room.

"Ede, come here!"

Edith's sharp heels beat a rapid tattoo across the hall. There followed a heavy, awed silence, broken only by the sound of running water in the bath tub upstairs. Then came a hasty rush toward the stairway.

Susan flung open the door from the kitchen to the hall. "Don't go up there!" she warned them quickly. "I'm out here."

Almost at the same moment, Jonathan Gilfeather lifted his hearty baritone and resumed his singing. The girls, with frightened faces, picked their way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Susan closed the door behind them.

"Who's in the——" Edith began.

But Kit had already guessed. "Is that—is *he* here? Is that his car out front?"

Edith sat down weakly on a kitchen chair. "But—is he going to use the bathroom?"

"Keep quiet, Ede!" Kit ordered and turned to Susan. "Did you have to give him all the furniture to——"

"I sold it to Archibald Noonan," Susan said, her eyes upon the pan on the stove.

Kit and Edith exchanged perplexed glances. It was Edith who spoke up finally. "Are you losing your senses?"

"But Sue!" Kit gasped. "It's just too awful! Whatever possessed you?"

Carefully then she told them all that had passed between her and Jonathan Gilfeather.

"The pig!" Kit said between her small teeth. "Nuge will be furious when he hears about it."

But Edith was more concerned over the presence of their landlord in the bathroom than she was over the disappearance of the furniture from the living room. "How long do you suppose he's going to stay up there?" she groaned. "Forbes is calling for me at eight. Oh, lord! Do you think he intends doing this every day? That's what comes of having a house with only one bathroom."

It developed that Kit had also been invited out for the evening. Bernie Crawford was taking her to Iden Lodge to dance.

Susan listened but said nothing. When Nugent came in a few minutes later and heard the story, he regarded Susan intently for a moment, then tramped out through the kitchen and into the back yard, where he tossed his coat aside and went to work with the lawn mower.

Susan was setting the table on the back porch when Jonathan Gilfeather, a starched length in white ducks and white shirt, emerged from the house. Edith and Kit were chatting on the porch swing and Nugent was setting the hose in position beside a bed of flowers.

Jonathan paused and Susan primly offered the introductions. After all, there was nothing to be gained by being churlish.

“And that’s Nugent out there watering the peonies,” she added finally with a small gleam of satisfaction. It was certainly a stroke of luck that he had taken it into his head to do the watering while he waited for dinner, she thought.

Jonathan nodded to Edith and Kit, who eyed him warily and with no attempt at being affable.

Susan saw her brother’s face light up with spontaneous pleasure as he talked with Jonathan. A simple soul, Nugent! In a few moments, Jonathan strolled on along the path to his cabin, and presumably from there to whatever meal he would get in some restaurant in East Searle.

CHAPTER VI

ON the following evening Nugent really spoke his mind. The girls were spending the evening at home, the first since Kit's return from college.

"I've been thinking," Nugent began.

The girls looked at him. Susan knew there had been something on his mind ever since he had come home from the office a few minutes past five. She had wondered if Violet Cruikshank had been temperamental the night before. She waited for him to go on.

But Kit filled the pause brightly. "Isn't that unusual, Nuge?"

He stared straight before him. "It's about time we were talking things over."

"Oh, dear," Edith put in plaintively, "are we going to have one of those family-conference things?"

"We've got to take our heads out of the sand," Nugent interrupted her. "Sue has had to sell some of the furniture to pay the rent. The little money we had is gone. If we're going to go on living here, we've got to find some way of making enough money to pay the rent and meet the bills at the end of the month. I'm doing all I can, and I'm not kicking, but I'm not going to be able to keep it up forever. I've got to begin making my own plans before long."

Edith drew her kimono more closely about her shoulders. "Well, I must say, the coming of Mr. Gilfeather has certainly not put *you* into a pleasant mood!"

"Gilfeather has nothing to do with it," Nugent retorted. "You've been on this house ever since you quit school—and you haven't earned a dollar."

"Perhaps you could tell me just what I could get to do in East Searle," Edith suggested.

"Others are getting it—in stores and offices."

The tears were already welling in Edith's eyes. "It's all right to—to talk about girls working in stores and offices. Those girls are used to it. But where would I go to—to——"

EDITH found it impossible to say any more. In spite of herself, Susan felt sorry for her. After all, she was the eldest in the family and had been pampered by both her father and mother. Susan herself had pampered her. But then, Edith was so beautiful!

"My God, do you have to cry over everything!" Nugent burst out suddenly.

“Perhaps it was a mistake for me to finish school,” Kit said quietly, “but now that I *am* through, there ought to be something I can do to help a little.”

Nugent cleared his throat roughly. “I don’t want you to get any cockeyed opinion of this. There’s more to it than meeting the bills at the end of the month. For one thing, we’ve been letting Sue carry the load. She’s had to do all the worrying. She counts the pennies and stretches the dollars. And she does everything that’s done around the house. It isn’t fair to her. She’d like to go on with her writing, but how the devil *can* she when her head is full of all this stuff? What would we do if she dropped out of the picture? If anything happened to Sue, we’d be sunk!”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” Susan assured him.

“No? Of course not. You’re just going on being an old plug for the rest of your days. You’ll be the old-maid sister, the nice old Aunt Susan who comes to tea on Fridays and stays with the children when their mothers go off on a vacation. Is that what you want?”

“I haven’t been lying awake nights thinking about what I want,” Susan said. “I give that time to ironing the kinks out of my plots. You have no idea how characters behave once the lights are out.”

It was only natural, when George Fuller and his sister dropped in later, that the talk should come around eventually to what Kit was going to do now that her college career had come to an end. Caroline Fuller, taller than her brother and at least five years older, was the head librarian in the East Searle Public Library. There was an opening, she said, on the library staff for just such a bright young person as Katherine. Of course, there wouldn’t be much money in it at first, but it was pleasant employment. She would like to make a recommendation to the board at the next meeting.

Kit was delighted. It was not until George and his sister left that she reminded Susan and Nugent of Mona Rankin’s projected visit. Edith had already gone to bed with one of her splitting headaches.

“I can’t possibly leave Mona to look after herself, after the perfectly gorgeous way she treated me,” Kit argued, quite plausibly. “If Caroline wants me to start in at once——”

“When is Mona coming?” Nugent asked.

“She’ll be here on Monday.”

“For how long?”

“Well, Nuge, I can’t just tell her to get out. She said something about two or three weeks.”

“Can’t you call the whole thing off?”

“But, Nuge!”

Susan didn’t want another scene. The fact that Kit was willing to go to work was enough—for the time being, at least. They could manage for a month or so. “I feel that Kit owes Mona something, Nuge,” she suggested. “Besides, it has all been arranged.”

Nugent got up from his chair. “Okay! Go ahead on your own steam. I’ve said my say.” He looked at his watch. “I’m going to bed. I wish Ede would marry that sap, Updyke, and get it over with. She’ll never be any good for anything else.”

SUSAN had thought at first that the dignified way to treat Jonathan Gilfeather would be simply to ignore him, but you might as well try to ignore an amiable giraffe that had chosen your home for its domicile. And within a week—that trying week after Mona Rankin’s arrival—Susan realized that she had no desire to ignore Jonathan. She began to look forward to his appearing on the back porch, his sleeves rolled up, a cigarette in his fingers or a pipe between his teeth, his head thrust forward inquiringly as if he were constantly looking for someone.

He would amble into the house at any hour, and whether she was scouring the sink or cleaning rhubarb, he would sit on the kitchen table, swing his long legs, light his pipe again and again, and talk.

Their first battle had come on the morning after Mona Rankin arrived from Lansing. He was telling her something about the new play on which he had already begun to work and which he was calling *Two Blocks East*.

“The trouble with my woman is that I find her turning logical every now and then. I keep forgetting that women aren’t logical. They depend entirely on——”

“Why, you’re simply idiotic!” Susan flared at once, and that was the beginning of that set-to.

On a second occasion he declared that women were without any well-defined sense of honor or fair play. Susan waxed furious at that and finally threatened to lock the doors against his coming again. What annoyed her most was the fact that she was never quite sure whether he was serious in his declarations or simply provoking her to argument. She steered their talks after that toward books and plays, the theatre in New York, the studios in Hollywood. She listened for a whole hour one forenoon while he told her of Nina Brandon, the glamorous young woman who had been cast for the leading rôle in his first play, *Velvet Spurs*. Susan had heard of her, of course, but Jonathan’s description carried a personal flavor that was exciting.

They discussed everything that came into their minds, in fact—everything except the situation in the Prescott household. Toward that problem Jonathan remained, outwardly at least, blandly indifferent. He managed to stay out of sight when Edith or Kit was around and spoke to Nugent only when he found him in the garden or invited him into the cabin for a smoke or a highball before dinner.

It alarmed Susan when she had to admit to herself finally that Jonathan Gilfeather occupied her thoughts even when he was not around. She was beginning to lie awake at night, exhilarated and fearful. It would never do, she told herself repeatedly. She simply could not permit him to mean anything more to her than an amusing, stimulating friend. She had decided at the outset to tell him nothing about her own efforts at writing. She had warned Nugent and the girls against betrayal, and she had even abandoned her typewriter and resorted to longhand, lest Jonathan should hear her at work and guess the truth. Her motive in this had been at first obscure, but now she realized that she needed at least that wall of reserve between herself and Jon.

MONA RANKIN, as a house guest, had proven even more difficult than Susan had feared. She couldn't eat anything but broiled lamb chops and chicken and alligator pears. She used a bath towel once and left it on the floor, a soggy heap. She slept till noon, reached for a cigarette the moment she opened her eyes, and complained of a nervous headache until she had her coffee. And in everything she did she was abetted by an adoring Kit who never permitted her to leave her sight.

Besides, there had been the *imperative* new evening dresses and sports outfits that Kit and Edith had bought out of the money received from Archibald Noonan. What a fool she had been to let them know the amount! In two weeks, she had scarcely seen either of them except on the wing to or from parties in town or on the lake, or at nicely prepared meals which they barely tasted. Nugent, meanwhile, squiring Violet Cruikshank, had moved in a sort of beatific coma.

It was amazing, Susan reflected, how quickly and how easily they had all recovered from the effects of that family council over the dinner table.

Then there had been the merry raids upon the icebox, at all hours of the night—and in the morning, unwashed cups and forks and spoons, crumbs upon the table and the floor, a frying pan filled with blisters of scrambled egg under water, cigarette butts on the window sills, a broken glass pushed aside and forgotten.

It was really too much! George Fuller had said the situation was damnable; Jonathan Gilfeather had said her two sisters were brats. In her heart, Susan admitted they were both right. It was only in moments like this that she secretly

admitted herself unequal to the demands that were being made upon her, casually and as a matter of course.

She saw now, for the first time, how wonderful it would be to have Jonathan Gilfeather's freedom to do what she wanted to do, even if she flirted with starvation while she did it. Suppose she took that freedom, followed the reckless impulse to get out and lose herself somewhere and let the family shift for themselves. She had read of people doing that very thing—running away and never coming back. Nugent had asked them what they would do if she dropped out of the picture. For one gratifying moment they had caught a glimpse of what it would mean—and had forgotten it promptly before another day had gone.

She leaned back in her chair and looked out at the beech trees sunning themselves and rustling softly in the late afternoon. Farther away, the hills beyond town rose powder-blue against the sky. It was a day to throw everything aside, close one's heart to responsibilities, take a fling at reckless living, and let conscience go hang!

A handful of pebbles struck the window screen beside her. She edged over in her chair and looked out.

"Hi, there!" Jonathan called up sternly. "Knock off! I've finished my first act and we're going places."

"Going where?"

"Whether you like it or not, you're coming with me in my horseless carriage to Squaw Point. It's a picnic. We'll make sandwiches and I'll get a watermelon. How about it?"

"But I've got to get supper." It wasn't at all what she meant. Or was it?

"I've got the answer to that."

"Well?"

"It's very simple—the deuce with it!"

Susan laughed. "I agree, but——"

"I'm not listening. You've finished it, haven't you?"

Susan caught her breath "Finished what?"

"That story you're working on." She stared down at his compassionate grin. "It must have been close to the end yesterday morning," he went on, "because Cecile was kissing Ronald. Nice style, I thought. You and I could do a play together. Only you ought to use a typewriter. It was damned hard reading."

Her astonishment resolved itself into a tonic wrath. "So you sneaked in here on your way to the bathroom," she accused him. "I didn't think you'd stoop to

that, quite. But I might have known.”

“A woman’s reasoning—so-called,” he replied. “I did not sneak in on my way to the bathroom, or at any other time. That page blew out into the hall. Now, take those unsightly horn-rims off you and come on down or I’ll go up and carry you down.”

“But——”

“I *said!*”

Susan withdrew from the window. She wanted definitely to cry, but from giddy happiness. The wretch! The lovable, homely, handsome, exasperating scoundrel!

CHAPTER VII

IT all seemed to happen in a strange, rarefied air, an unearthly light, that late afternoon drive to Squaw Point on the lake, and the picnic under the big rock while the sun went down. The lake, changing from rose to indigo, the darkening, soft trees, the quiet sky waiting for stars—these were enchantment.

Susan had made the sandwiches herself while Jonathan had gone down to one of the stores for the watermelon without which, he declared, a picnic was not a picnic at all. And while he waited, she had hurriedly scribbled a note and left it on the kitchen table. “To Whom It May Concern: I am going with Jonathan to Squaw Point. May not be back till late. Cold chicken and the makings of a salad in the icebox. Help yourselves.”

Now, sitting under the great rock, the picnic supper eaten, she told herself that she had done the right thing in coming away as she did. It wasn’t quite fair, not letting them know till the last moment. Well, it *was* fair, darn it! She hadn’t known about it herself till the last moment.

Jonathan was stretched full length upon the sand, the thin smoke curling from his briar. Neither had spoken for minutes. She wondered if he was falling asleep. His eyes were closed and his pipe was going out.

Suddenly he turned his head and his direct, penetrating eyes met hers. “What’s on your mind, Sue?”

“If I told you you’d know.”

“Just a test question. I was curious to know how you’d answer.” He looked steadily up at her for a moment. “You ought to have red hair, instead of nice, soft, curly brown.”

“But I wouldn’t like to have red hair.”

“That has nothing to do with it. If you had red hair, you might have the spunk to tell them you’d eat the loaf, since you’d done everything else.”

Susan caught her underlip between her white teeth. “I thought we had—tacitly—closed the door on that subject,” she said coolly.

Jonathan chuckled. “You *slammed* the door, as I recall it. But it was only a screen door. And a screen door has always been a temptation to me. I want to peek inside.”

She didn’t reply. Jonathan put out one hand and made a neat little pleat of the linen hem of her skirt. Finally he sat up beside her, flushed deeply, and held her fingers hard in his own. “Listen to me, Sue! Two weeks ago I swore I’d never

bring the subject of your family up again. It was none of my business—and I was just showing off a little that first day. But day before yesterday I had a letter from my agent in New York. He has an offer from Hollywood for my play. The producers want to hold off till it has had a run. But I'll get something out of it. Besides, on the strength of that, he has sold me, body and soul, on a Hollywood contract for ten times more than I can possibly be worth to anyone. I'm going out there in September. But I'm not going to take the whole Prescott family with me, understand? Sue, I'm taking you with me, if you'll go."

SHE hadn't known it would be like this—a sensation of sweet, smothering fullness in her breast and throat, and a new, strange rush of some force deep within her. Her mouth quivered but would not smile. Jon had drawn himself up close to her, and suddenly she was in his arms. He kissed her with a possessive vehemence that left her breathless.

"Jon—Jon!" she whispered at last, and pushed him away.

"My God, girl, I'm proposing to you! Don't you understand? This may not be your idea of how it should be done. But I love you, Sue. Don't you sort of like me?"

She laughed and cried and clung to him. "But we can't, Jon!"

He kissed her again, and Susan felt faint.

"Are you telling me that you can't love me—that you won't marry me?"

"I—don't know!" she cried in confusion. She straightened back and looked at him wildly. "How can I tell you how I really feel toward you, Jon? I've only known you for a little more than two weeks. Your life is so different from mine. How do I know I'd ever fit into it?"

He laughed, deep in his throat, and with one arm about her lifted her chin in his palm. "Sue, you can't lie to me. There's only one thing holding you back, and you know what that is. It isn't you—and it isn't me. It's the damned family again."

She looked at him distractedly, and then quickly away. She got to her feet.

He stood up and took her hands impatiently. "I'll give you ten seconds to think things out. That ought to be long enough for anyone."

"But—I want to be fair, Jon. If you had two sisters like Edith and Kit, you wouldn't leave them to sink or swim, would you?"

In the twilight, Jonathan's face was a study in controlled violence. "Darling," he said, his lips hard drawn, "if I had two sisters like them, drowning would be too good for them! What would your grandmother have thought of them?"

“Let’s go back to town,” Susan said abruptly. “It’s getting dark.”

“No,” he said firmly. “We’re not going back to town until we’ve settled this. We’re going somewhere to dance. I’m going to have this night, anyhow.”

“All right.”

“But first you’re going to kiss me.”

THERE was a quiet little inn a mile or so up the lake, frequented not by the smart summer crowd but by people who really sought rest on their vacations. There was soft music from an orchestra in the dimly lit grill room, and small tables set about the dance floor.

When they had returned to their places after their first dance together, Jon leaned toward Sue across the table.

“You’re lovely!”

A sense of delicious irresponsibility swept over her. The soft lights, the music, the dancing, the gay talk and the laughter all about her—and a man’s deep voice telling her she was lovely!

“Tell me more,” she urged, laughing at him. “I like it.”

He reached across the table and put his hands firmly over hers. “Sue, I want to make a proposition. Let’s forget we’re in love. Let’s——”

“Aren’t you taking a little too much for granted? I haven’t admitted *we’re* in love.”

“Is there anyone else?”

“No.”

“Then don’t interrupt me. This marriage business is a damned practical proposition. The trouble is, we go into it without thinking. I’m a human being, Sue. If you don’t marry me, I’m going to get excited some night over a beautiful figure or a pretty face, or a soft pair of shoulders. I’m going to lose my head and propose to her—and marry her eventually. That’s the way it usually happens. And that’s why I’m going to make you a cold-blooded proposition.”

He looked at his watch. “It’s only nine-thirty. Let’s get into that old clunk of mine and hop down to Chicago. We can be married tomorrow morning and get back to East Searle in time for dinner.”

Susan’s eyes widened in almost speechless amazement. “You—you call that—practical?”

“I admit it has everything else in it—romance and all the rest of it. But it’s the most practical thing I’ve ever thought out to myself. I’ve got you away from the family now. I may not be able to do that again.”

Susan had been too preoccupied with her own tumultuous emotions to notice that George Fuller was standing at the opposite end of the room, looking over the patrons with anxious, questing eyes. She did not see him until he came, embarrassed and uneasy, and stood beside their table. He apologized for his intrusion.

“I’m very sorry to spoil your little outing, but—I took a chance on finding you here. Something has happened, though I hate to——”

Susan got up, clutching her handbag. “What is it, for heaven’s sake?”

“Let’s go into the lobby,” Jonathan said.

“There’s no cause for alarm,” George Fuller said when they were out of the crowded room. “Your sister, Katherine, attended a cocktail party this afternoon on Sam Jennings’ motor boat.”

Mortified tears sprang into Susan’s eyes. “Jennings! She promised me she wouldn’t have anything to do with those people.”

“She went, I understand, with that young friend of hers, Miss Rankin, and a couple of young men. They had rather too much to drink, I should say. Mrs. Jennings wagered five dollars that Katherine couldn’t swim from the boat to Leech Island—a matter of four or five hundred yards. Katherine couldn’t have realized what she was doing. She dove in, with her clothes on, and—they had to put off in a small boat and pick her up. They got to her in the nick of time, apparently. They had to give her first aid to revive her. When they took her back to town, there was no one in the house, so they telephoned me. Caroline and I went out at once, and my sister took charge. As soon as I was sure there was no danger, I came to look for you. Your note on the kitchen table——”

“Take me back,” Susan said unsteadily and Jonathan placed a firm hand on her arm.

“Come along,” he said gently. “And pull yourself together, now. Everything is all right.” He led her out to the car.

CHAPTER VIII

JONATHAN said nothing as he drove off onto the highway toward town, George Fuller coming along behind them. Susan clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. Her hands, gripping her white linen bag, were clammy and cold. For the first few minutes, she felt too stunned really to grasp what had happened. It wasn't possible for Kit to do such a thing—it couldn't be true! But George Fuller certainly was not one to exaggerate; and that Caroline, George's prim sister, should have been left to look after Kit was too humiliating!

But then, Kit might have been drowned. Such things *did* happen in the lake country, almost every year. If that had happened to Kit, Susan would never have forgiven herself—Kit drowning while *she* sat and listened to Jonathan Gilfeather making love to her. She could not hold back the sob that rose in her throat.

“Go ahead!” Jonathan said between his teeth. “Cry your head off now—when you ought to be laughing.”

She did not answer, neither did she cry. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her like that. He was heartless.

The street lights in East Searle winked straight ahead of them, three miles away.

“This ought to be a good lesson for that young smart-aleck,” Jonathan said after long silence.

“It has taught me something, too,” Susan flared bitterly. “If I had been at home this wouldn't have happened.”

“I don't get the connection. But it *should* have happened! Something like this was bound to come sooner or later. All she got out of it was a wet hide and a bad scare. That crowd she's trucking with—I know the kind. Anything can happen; and it often does. Have you ever noticed how many innocent people are dragged into a murder?”

“You're brutal!” Susan said furiously.

“I hadn't thought of that,” Jonathan replied equably.

They drove along in silence until presently he turned the car into the lane beside the house, stopped, and opened the door for her. “I don't suppose there's anything I can do?”

“There couldn't possibly be anything,” Susan told him swiftly. Her voice sounded strangely high and taut.

And while she walked up to the lighted house, she had a sense of groping through a bewildering unreality. She could never be happy with Jonathan—his barefaced, unjust scorn of her sisters was something she could not endure. And yet, now that he was no longer beside her, she was filled with a bleak feeling of loss. He had been harsh, unimaginative, at a moment when she needed gentleness and reassurance and understanding. She dashed the tears from her eyes and ran blindly up the steps and into the hall.

Nugent and Caroline Fuller were sitting in the living room. Nugent glanced up sourly as Susan entered. Kit must be all right again, she thought quickly, or he wouldn't be wearing that baleful expression. Besides, Caroline Fuller's smile was reassuring as she got up from her chair.

Susan threw her hat and purse on the davenport. "How is Kit?" she asked breathlessly.

"She's quite all right, my dear," Caroline said. "George found you?"

"Yes. He followed us into town. There he is now." A car had drawn up to the curb in front of the house. "Is she asleep?"

"Doctor Trueman gave her something to quiet her, and she has been sleeping soundly ever since. The doctor promises she'll be completely well by morning."

"It was good of you to come," Susan said then, and breathed a sigh of relief as she turned to Nugent. "Is Edith in yet?"

"No. She's with Forbes somewhere. She probably hasn't heard anything about it. I was out at the country club when I heard Kit was drowned. That's the story they had going around town."

Caroline's dry laugh was short and deprecating. "You've been saved *that*, fortunately."

George Fuller had come into the hall and was standing in the living-room doorway. "Everything's all right?" he asked in a subdued voice.

"Quite, dear," Caroline told him. "If you're ready, perhaps Susan won't mind if we go along. There's really nothing left to do."

"Please go—if you must," Susan begged. "It was too bad to have you come out like this. I should have been here."

Caroline murmured a word of protest as George offered his hand to Susan.

"Good night, Sue. This has been no trouble to us, none at all. We mustn't be too severe with Katherine. She's young. She might do better with a restraining hand now and then, perhaps, but—she'll do very well, I'm sure. Good night."

HE patted her affectionately on the shoulder, and Susan had difficulty in restraining her tears as the Fullers left. She followed George and his sister to the door and stood until she saw the car drive away. Then she went back to the living room.

“Did Mona come home?” she asked Nugent.

He sprang from his chair. “She’s in bed—sound asleep! She was dead to the world when I came in. She’s a stupid——”

“Do you know exactly what happened?”

“I know what they’re saying around town. They had one of their drunken parties on Jennings’ boat and Kit jumped in with her clothes on, on a bet. It’s a swell mess, any way you look at it. When this story gets to old man Cruikshank——” He threw up his hands and strode to the other side of the room.

“What of it?” Susan asked tartly. “Is it any worse than Violet herself might do?”

He turned savagely. “The Cruikshanks can get away with it!” he barked. “But the Prescotts——”

Susan stared at him for a moment, incredulous, then left the room and tiptoed quickly up the stairs. The blue night light was on beside Kit’s bed. Under the warm, ivory satin coverlet—symbol of an ampler day—Kit’s body looked small, apologetic.

Susan smiled tenderly, then stooped and lightly lifted back a strand of fine, silky dark hair. She laid two fingers gently on her wrist and counted the steady, even pulse. Then she tucked the cover snugly about Kit’s white shoulders and stole softly out of the room.

In the kitchen she paused for a moment before the window that looked out upon the garden. A glimmer of light shone from Jonathan’s window. A pang of rebellious doubt smote her all at once, together with a vehement longing to be in his arms again as she had been only a few hours before. But when she closed her eyes in momentary faintness, the small, white face of Kit came before her in vivid appeal.

AT ten o’clock the next morning, Susan sat on her heels before Grandmother Prescott’s trunk in the attic. Nugent had eaten his breakfast, a dour expression on his face; and, it being Sunday, he had been puttering about the garden ever since. Mona Rankin had hurriedly dressed and gone out to breakfast with Bernie Crawford. Edith and Kit were still sleeping.

Susan could not have told what had led her to climb the attic stairs after looking in to see whether Kit had awakened. She had planned to make a clean

copy of her story. But the desire for some intimate touch with the past, some renewal of a waning faith in herself, had made her think of the yellowing journal in the hump-backed trunk.

Under Sunday, January 18, 1885, Grandmother Prescott had written: "Heard the visiting preacher on the ten commandments, a rather large order for one discourse, I thought. Jensine Stormo came home to dinner with us, her husband having gone to the lake. I had venison steaks and a bottle of my last year's blackberry wine, which was very good. Martin said the ten commandments were a bit old-fashioned and he'd like to have the job of writing them over to suit the times. Jensine said she thought they were good enough as they are, if we'd only live up to them. He and Jensine had quite an argument over the point, but I said nothing until Martin asked me whether I didn't think I could improve on Moses. And I said it wouldn't have been amiss if we had been commanded to love more and hate less, and especially to love one's own kin a little more than they deserved sometimes. At that, Martin got up from his place and came to the end of the table and kissed me. I hope my next batch of blackberry wine will turn out as good."

Susan laughed softly to herself and laid the journal away. Then she stole downstairs and prepared a breakfast for Kit, which she arranged on a tray with painstaking care.

She set the tray on Kit's bed table, then pulled up the blinds. Kit stirred, frowned, opened her eyes to the light. The perfume of Susan's garden—the roses, the petunias, the clove pink and the mignonette—stepped brave and sweet over the window sill.

Susan wanted to laugh. "Isn't it time you were coming to life?" she asked.

Kit gazed across the pillows. "Oh, Sue! How darling! I don't deserve this."

"How do you feel?"

Kit sat up and stretched her arms. "I ought to feel rotten, but I must have a good body. I feel simply swell. Is Mona up?"

"Bernie Crawford dragged her out to breakfast a good hour ago. Go and brush your teeth and I'll straighten up your bed. You must have slept pretty soundly."

"Like a log!" Kit grinned, sliding her pink toes into her mules. "Drowning must be a purge for the spirit."

When she returned from the bathroom, she said, "I suppose Nuge was nasty about it? And Ede?"

Susan placed the tray before her. "Nugent was sour, naturally. Edith isn't up yet. I haven't talked to her."

Kit broke a piece of toast. “They’ll both say plenty, I’ll bet. I don’t know what—ever made me do——”

“The less said about it the better, for the present. George told me how it happened.”

“George was simply too sweet!” Kit exclaimed. “Why don’t you marry him, Sue?”

“It isn’t too late yet,” Susan evaded.

“He carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and—I thought he was really going to kiss me. He looked so worried!”

“We were all worried.”

“I don’t know how I’ll face Nuge. Talk to him, won’t you, Sue? I don’t care so much about what Ede says.”

“Look, Kit, you and I have to be serious. I’d rather not talk about what happened yesterday. That doesn’t mean that I think it was funny. You scared me half to death. It was cheap exhibitionism. You’ve got to go to work, Kit.”

A bird in a tree near the open window wheeled a clear note across the silence while Kit Prescott looked down at her slim fingertips.

“Well, of course, I mean to,” she said at last in a hurt tone. “But there’s Mona—and the Crawford’s house party.”

Susan refused to give way to anger. “They’re not in our budget, Kit. We’ve got to act now—tomorrow.”

Kit turned upon her with dark, startled eyes. “Something has come over you, Sue. Was what I did so unforgivable?”

Impatiently, Susan picked the tray up from the bed, set it on the table. “I don’t know what to do about Edith. But you and I have to get jobs. I’m going to pay Jonathan Gilfeather four months’ rent, and then we’ll have less than a hundred dollars in the bank.”

“But, Sue!” Kit looked incredulous. “We had five hundred dollars!”

“I’ve paid bills. You and Edith bought clothes. In another month we’ll all be down to our last dollar. We’ve got to *do* something—at once.”

LEAVING KIT to dress, Sue carried the tray down to the kitchen. She had launched her campaign, at least, and was determined to carry it through. By way of making any retreat impossible, she sat down at once and wrote a check for four months’ rent and took it out to Nugent.

“Give this to Jonathan,” she said simply, “and see that he takes it. Tell him if he tears this one up I’ll go on writing checks till he gets one good enough to keep.”

Late that afternoon she went out into the garden to tie up a grapevine that had slipped from its trellis. While she was at work, Jonathan strolled out of the cabin and came down the path toward her. It was really possible, she knew now, to have a stifling heart-beat. He loomed above her, his hands carelessly stowed in tweed pockets.

“About that check, Sue,” he began easily, and took out an ugly-looking pipe which he began to fill from a leather pouch. “I accept it, of course. It’ll come in handy. Nugent explained about the extra month. He didn’t say anything about why you sent the check out this afternoon. He probably didn’t know. But I understood perfectly. And I accept that, too.”

Susan glanced swiftly up at his guileless, bright blue eyes. She bit her lip. “I sent it because I owe you the money,” she told him.

“Yes, of course. What I wanted to say—I’m driving over to Lake Michigan. I want to get a little local color. There’s an old fisherman up there on the peninsula—or he used to be. I want to hang around with him for a few days—a little character stuff. I’ll be gone for a week.”

Susan looked from his eyes to his mouth. It was terrible to want to kiss him when she knew she must not want to. “You didn’t say anything about this last night.”

“I didn’t know about it then. I decided this afternoon. I’m leaving in an hour. I want you to use the cabin for your writing while I’m away—if you care to. And I’m leaving the check there on the table. A fishing boat is no place for a check. The lake is inclined to be temperamental.”

“Well—I wish you luck,” Susan said.

“Thanks.” He looked at her steadily for a moment. His eyes had a grave wistfulness. “A man should never kiss a pretty girl,” he said finally. “It makes him want to do it again.”

She turned hurriedly away toward the house and saw the tall hollyhocks through a blur of tears. When she started to run through the garden, his voice followed her, solemnly. “You’ve got beautiful legs, Sue!”

CHAPTER IX

EARLY that evening, after Jonathan had driven away, Susan walked across town to the wooded hill, the select residential district, where the Prescotts once had lived. Nugent and Edith were at home with Kit. Edith had taken an icily aloof, uncommunicative attitude toward her younger sister's departure from her own idea of decorum. She had not stooped to chide. Well, Susan thought gratefully, that was something, at least. Nugent, moreover, had seen Violet during the afternoon and had come home in a much pleasanter frame of mind. Violet, it seemed, had laughed over the whole affair and had assured her father that it had been an accident, no matter *what* people were saying about it. There had been telephone calls, of course, but Kit herself had answered them in her bright, reassuring way and Susan had begun to hope that Kit's escapade would soon be forgotten.

It was in answer to a telephone call from George Fuller that Susan asked if she might walk over after supper and visit for a few minutes. The Fullers, George, Caroline, and their invalid father—lived in a white Cape Cod cottage at the foot of the hill, a tidy box hedge inclosing it.

Caroline met Susan at the door and led her into the living room where George was sitting, a book on his knees. It was evident at once that Caroline had guessed the purpose of the visit. Her manner was, if anything, too cordial. Susan was therefore not greatly dashed when Caroline told her, with regret, that the library position they had spoken of two weeks ago would never do for Katherine. "There are so many school children, for one thing—. But, my dear," Caroline cried with an inspired smile, "why don't *you* take the library position yourself? The work is not heavy. Three hours in the afternoon—one to four—and three in the evening, from seven to ten. Of course, it's only ten dollars a week, but if you—ah—it *is* ten dollars a week, after all, Susan!"

Susan got up hastily. "Well—thanks, Caroline. I'll think it over. I believe I'd like the work. I'd still be able to look after the house and cook the meals. I'll let you know tomorrow, or the day after."

"Shall I drive you home, Sue?" George asked.

"Thank you, it's only a step and I really prefer to walk."

He went with her as far as the box hedge. "This has been a disappointing visit, I'm afraid," he said as soon as they were out of Caroline's hearing.

"Not really," Susan told him. "I hadn't hoped for anything—after last night."

“Sue, take the position yourself. As for Katherine—I have given considerable thought to her today. There may be something a little later—in my own office. Not immediately, but in the fall, perhaps. I’m thinking of——”

“I have told Kit that she must go to work at once,” Susan said.

“Quite so. I think you are wise in that. I refuse to believe that Katherine is hopeless. I have seen her when she was quite serious. Breeding counts in the long run. I should like to see her put to the test.”

“But how, George?”

“Perhaps the suggestion will not meet with your approval, but—all else failing—there are shops in East Searle where large numbers of girls are employed.”

Susan smiled her approval. “I have already thought of that.”

IT was Kit’s idea that she should go to see Benjamin Scarth, publisher and editor of the *Eagle*, East Searle’s one and only daily. Mr. Scarth was the benign father of Lois and Ben Scarth, prominent members of the town’s younger set. At Vassar Lois and Kit had been inseparable. Lois, in fact, had been on the Jennings’ party with Kit and Mona Rankin and the Crawford boys, Saturday night.

Mona Rankin heard the suggestion and was completely bewildered at Kit’s sudden decision to go to work. She had practically never heard of such a thing, at least not in vacation time! Why, it was quixotic, if not suicidal! Susan listened to her and experienced a diverting impulse to throttle her. But Kit was equal to the emergency. She declared it was her own idea, and it was going to be fun!

With the exalted look of one doing penance and confident that absolution was near, Kit sallied forth on Monday morning, at the grimly early hour of nine, to interview Mr. Benjamin Scarth. She returned at ten, having had a malted milk on the way home. Benjamin Scarth had been really precious. And *so* regretful! But if Kit wanted to look in, say around late fall, there might be something on the *Eagle* for a bright, willing girl like her.

Susan heard the report—and came back to the attack. “Well, we can’t wait till fall, Kit. After lunch we’ll go down together and have a talk with Dora Burchard.”

Mrs. Dora Burchard, of the Women’s Exchange, looked through her pince-nez at a vanishing point somewhere outside the bay window near her desk. She would like so much to take Kit on—Grandmother Prescott had done everything for the Exchange in her day, had, in fact, established it—but, really, they would not be justified in adding another to the staff at the present time.

Kit was not downcast. “Well,” she said, “we’ve at least tried! I don’t see how I could ever work with that old battle-ax anyhow.”

“Listen, Kit. I’m going to take that library job with Caroline. I can easily pick up the system, the hours are good, and I’ll have plenty of time to look after the house. Besides, I’ll have my mornings free to write, if I feel like it.”

“What do you intend to do with your spare time?”

“Please don’t be facetious, Kit; I’m not in the mood. Come along—we’re going down to Hampden’s. They haven’t anyone as pretty as you behind their counters.”

“Hampden’s!” Kit groaned. “Oh, Sue, I’ll simply die. Hampden’s—after spending all that money sending me to Vassar!”

“Vassar shouldn’t be any handicap.”

“But putting it to no use—a salesgirl——”

AT HAMPDEN’S, MISS CRAMNER, of the employment department, smiled across a hedge of gold teeth. In years past, she had seen the Prescott girls come into the store and had witnessed their distress: What, no handmade lingerie! No inside-out hose! It was not hard to read the meaning now in Miss Cramner’s smile.

“Well, now—yes, Miss Prescott,” she said smoothly, “we could use an extra girl in the cotton goods. We’re busy there, right now. We usually pay twelve a week, but I’m sure we could pay a little more after a short time. You’ve known just about everybody in East Searle—the better people, that is. That would be in your favor, naturally. Could you start at once? In the morning, I mean?”

“Certainly, Miss Cramner,” Susan answered for Kit.

“You might divide your time between the cotton goods and the corsets. That way you could work gradually into something more—more permanent. Selling corsets is really a science.”

Susan had to look hastily away from Kit’s stricken face. She wanted to laugh, and yet deep in her heart she wept.

Kit found her voice. “At what time in the morning——”

“Eight-thirty, Miss Prescott. If you come to me—here in my office—I’ll be glad to introduce you to the head of the cotton goods and help you get started right.”

In the street, Kit was silent, on the verge of tears. Susan couldn’t trust herself. “Run along home, Kit,” she said suddenly. “I’ll drop around and tell

Caroline Fuller that I'll take the job in the library. I may as well start in tomorrow."

MONA RANKIN'S opposition was not important, but Fate was her ally. Kit's first day at work turned out to be sweltering. Susan scarcely dared to think of her, behind the counter at Hampden's.

But Edith, with a perverse and lugubrious curiosity that pained Susan, dressed coolly in organdie and a wide leghorn hat, and went downtown to have a glimpse of what she called "the worst." She was back before noon, not a little frightened by what she had seen.

"But, Sue—it's really too dreadful!" she said with a shudder. "The poor kid is red as a beet and keeps standing first on one foot and then on the other. The child can't bear it, I tell you! They're having a sale in the cotton goods. The whole place is like a madhouse."

"It isn't Vassar, of course," Susan said stonily. "I have to get ready to go to the library now. By the way, would you mind putting on some potatoes to boil, after you've had your lunch. I want them to be cold for potato salad tonight. Or maybe you won't have time, if you have to go to the Vales' to play bridge?"

"Is there a subtle dig in that remark?" Edith asked petulantly. "Of course I'll put the potatoes on. I suppose you'd like *me* to go to work in Hampden's."

"I haven't said so."

"You might as well say it as think it."

"Edith, you're positively incredible! You might at least be grateful to the rest of us."

Edith had the unexpected grace to color. "That isn't fair. I've told you time and again that as soon as Forbes sees his way clear——"

"Why don't you have him consult an eye specialist?" Susan asked. "There's no sense in our beating about the bush, Edith. We've all got to do something. If getting married is the only thing you can do——"

"If you must know the truth," Edith interrupted, "the only reason Forbes is waiting is that his mother wants him to marry a Milwaukee girl, her best friend's daughter—an impossible creature. But they're filthy rich. I could have told you that long ago, but there are some things we don't talk about, after all."

Susan's skin rippled coldly. So that was it!

All at once the situation became intolerably funny. She sat down and rocked with laughter. Edith stood and stared at her.

“I must say your sense of humor is baffling, at least,” she observed stiffly. “Is it any wonder I don’t tell you anything?”

“But Ede——” Susan looked helplessly up at her. “You must see how quaint and old-fashioned it is. The beautiful and penniless Edith Prescott angling for a husband—and Mamma standing in the way. In these days, darling! No one but you could possibly be serious about it.”

Edith turned her back and sailed out of the room in high dudgeon.

Yet it *was* serious, Susan reflected a moment later. Edith was no doubt in love with Forbes—as much as she would ever be with anyone besides herself. If Forbes had a grain of gumption! Or if Edith had any self-respect! In disgust, Susan hurried upstairs to dress for the library.

THE library was quiet and comparatively cool, in spite of the broiling afternoon sun. Susan, as she took her place behind the desk, felt a pang of guilt as she thought of Kit down at Hampden’s. Once they had thought it a hardship even to go shopping there when the weather was like today’s.

This work in the library was going to be amusing, she learned within the first hour. People she had known all her life showed new facets of their characters.

“No, Sue. I know it’s a best-seller, but the print is too small. Too many pages, anyhow. I’d never have the patience to read it through. I read the reviews. Have you a good mystery story? I’d like that better!” That was Mrs. Wilcox, president of the East Searle Study Club.

“I’m returning this book, Susan. It’s simply awful. I don’t think they should be allowed to print such stuff. Maybe people do live like that in the South, but certainly not the people I’ve known. I don’t care to read about it. Not that I’m prudish, my dear, but after all! Have you got that one—you know—the inside of Hollywood——?” And that was Mrs. Andrew Griffin, the wife of Judge Griffin.

There was really not enough to do to keep her mind from turning repeatedly to Jonathan Gilfeather. Where was he, and what was he doing at this precise moment? Had there been any storms on that treacherous lake? Would he really be back at the end of the week? Well, what difference would it make to her? He might stay at the cabin for another two weeks, maybe three, and then he would be off again to his own brilliant world—gifted, beautiful women, and clever, interesting men. In a short while he would forget that he had had a brief and unsatisfactory summer romance with a girl in a small Michigan town. He might even talk about it, amused as he thought back upon it. But, no! That would not be like him.

At home again, shortly after four, Susan found the house deserted. Edith had gone to Edwina Vale's, of course. At a quarter past five, Kit staggered in, threw her hat on the floor, and flopped down on a chair. She covered her face with her hands and gave a shrill howl.

Susan glanced at her compassionately. "Was it really as bad as that, Kit? Of course, it has been terribly hot—and the first day——"

"It was simply gruesome! There was a sale. It was abominable!" Kit gasped. "I'll never get the smell of percale out of my nostrils as long as I live. Twelve cents a yard—blue dots and red dashes! My feet are sizzling lead. I can't do it, Sue—I can *not!*"

Susan went over to her. "Come along. Let me help you to the bathroom. There's a whole tankful of hot water. Take a good soaking and finish off with a cold shower. You'll feel much better. I'll give you an alcohol rub afterward."

Kit gave a grunt of anguish as she got up from the chair. "Oh, my feet! They're raw, I know they are. They're on fire, Sue, I swear it!"

If it had not been so heartless, Susan would have laughed. "Just pretend you've been dancing all night," she advised comfortingly while Kit, leaning on her arm, limped into the hall.

Kit was content to remain at home that night. All Mona Rankin's coaxing was to no avail. That, at least, was an achievement, Susan thought to herself.

KIT did not come home alone the next evening. George Fuller, who was driving from his office and had seen her limping unsteadily along the sidewalk, had picked her up.

At a quarter past five, it was still ninety in the shade, and Kit was close to hysterics. From the front porch, Edith and Mona Rankin saw George half carrying Kit, white-faced and limp, up the walk toward the house. Edith called out anxiously to Susan, who came from the dining room.

George Fuller's face was very red as he helped Kit to a porch chair, his undistinguished eyes strangely excited. Kit flew away from Susan to the davenport in the living room, flung herself face down. Edith and Mona followed her helplessly. Susan was left alone on the porch with George Fuller.

He patted his forehead with his damp handkerchief. "It may be an interesting experiment, but the results are not all I had hoped for, I confess. I believe in firmness, yes. On the other hand, there are limitations peculiar to the case—they exist in every case, I find——"

"Are you turning human suddenly, George?"

He looked at her with a grave expression behind which lurked the ghost of a smile. "I suspect there are qualities in my nature, Sue, which you have not yet discovered," he said, and went off to his car.

Susan knelt beside the davenport and put her arms about Kit's quivering body. Perhaps she had been too exacting, after all. "Kit, darling! What is it? Did anything happen to you?"

"I almost fainted in the cotton goods," Kit panted. "Then they put me in the corset department. Who do you suppose had to come in? Mrs. Updyke, lorgnette and everything! When she saw me she looked as if—as if she was seeing things!"

Edith said bitterly, "The old porpoise! I know just what she'll say to Forbes after that."

But Kit had more to tell them. "I tried to be nice to her. I told her that I was doing this to—oh, Susan! I told her I was getting material for a story for you. Then——"

"Kit!"

"And she said, 'How interesting, my dear! And how very generous!' Then she stuck her nose in the air and asked if Miss Edwards was in. She wanted to be fitted for a girdle. Miss Edwards was home for the day. Her mother was sick. So Mrs. Updyke walked out. She wouldn't let *me* take her measurements. She—she just wouldn't let me know how big she is! And then the floorwalker blamed me—said I must have been rude to her. He told me my manner wasn't proper for a salesperson and I had most likely lost a good customer. Lord!"

In spite of Kit's wretched face, Susan smiled. She could see the imposing Mrs. Updyke, buttressed to her three chins in black satin. . . .

"Go and have your bath," she said quickly.

Kit sat upright, her eyes hard and shining. "I'm not going back to the store, Sue. I'm *not*! Let Edith go and try it! I'd rather starve!"

Susan tactfully got her upstairs, away from Edith and Mona. "Perhaps if you took tomorrow off——"

"But I'm *not* going back. I can't stand it, Sue," Kit declared. "It will kill me."

No amount of remonstrance or pleading would reconcile her.

The dinner Susan prepared so enthusiastically was a depressing failure. Kit did not even appear at the table. Mona was silent and embarrassed, feeling herself no doubt in the way in these domestic difficulties. Too brightly, she said that after the Crawfords' house party this week-end she *must* really go home, to Lansing, although she would just *adore* staying all summer. Susan drew a breath

of relief at that. But Nugent's cynical outspokenness regarding Kit's venture into the working world, and Edith's gloomy prediction that now Mrs. Updyke would be more impossible than ever, settled like a dead weight on Susan's spirit. She went back to the library after dinner with a feeling of sick futility.

She tried to excuse Kit on the ground that she was nervously and physically exhausted—that she had made an honest effort, but that she was too high-strung, too sensitively organized, for the drudgery of a department store. Perhaps if she had started during cooler weather, and grown used to the routine—well, perhaps George Fuller was right about it all. Perhaps, Susan admitted to herself grudgingly, she had allowed Jonathan Gilfeather's attitude to influence her. Well, she had done her best.

After she had put Kit to bed with an ice pack at her head, Susan sat in the dark at her open window and stared blankly out at the humid, low-hanging stars. The velvety summer night beyond the slumbrous trees was a mockery to her bewildered, stricken heart. She wanted Jonathan—the bluff, warm, unsentimental, clear-eyed assurance of him. She wanted his arms about her, the tender, deep touch of his mouth. She wanted him terribly, overwhelmingly. If he were here now she would go—she would go with him anywhere, without an instant's doubt or misgiving. But he wasn't here. She was so desolately alone. She buried her head in her arms, but her eyes were too hot and weary for tears.

CHAPTER X

SUSAN had not admitted defeat. Her campaign had suffered a lull, she realized, but that was all. She was doing well in the library. Kit would go back to work in a day or so, despite her protests. Nugent offered no problem. And Edith's position was at least no worse than it had been. Time was the important factor there.

Besides, both Edith and Kit plunged into the house chores with a zeal that was astonishing. By the time Jonathan returned from the lake, Susan would be able to point with pride to the advances that had been made in one short week.

It was a little disconcerting, of course, that Kit had said nothing about returning to Hampden's after her Thursday's rest. She still limped perceptibly when she went about the house and she refused to go with Mona and her crowd to Iden Lodge on Thursday night. On Friday morning, she got up briskly and set to work helping Susan with the breakfast. That was all right, even if it wasn't altogether reassuring. But on Friday afternoon the series of reverses set in overwhelmingly and in such quick succession as to leave Susan helplessly and ignominiously frustrated.

WHEN she came back from the library, she found Edith already away with Forbes Updyke. They were to have dinner and spend the evening together, Kit said. The Crawford boys, moreover, had come for Mona and Kit. The long-awaited house party was to be ostensibly a week-end affair, but a few select guests would stay over until Tuesday and it was a foregone conclusion that Kit and Mona would be among those few. Susan listened while Kit wrestled briefly with her conscience and then hurriedly packed her striped linen traveling case with clothing she had had in readiness since the day before.

Kit kissed Susan good-by with a contrite little turned-down smile, whispered quickly, "This is my last fling, darling—positively! And I simply wouldn't go, only I can't let Mona down. You understand—just this once?" She was off then in the long, knavish, black roadster that looked, Susan thought, like the self-assured Bernie Crawford, who drove it. Well, Susan argued with herself, she could afford to wait. Another two or three days couldn't matter, even though she had hoped Jonathan would come back to find Kit at work. Mona had said that next week she would go back to Lansing. They could make a fresh beginning. If only Edith would bring Forbes to a decision . . .

Late that evening, Edith came to Susan's room, red-eyed from a quarrel with the tranquil Forbes Updyke.

“A quarrel with Forbes? But I can’t believe it!”

“It’s true!” Edith wailed. “His mother has invited that girl to come up from Milwaukee for the week-end, and now Forbes will have to trot her around for three days. I won’t even see him.”

“Well, the rest ought to do you good,” Susan said.

“I’m not going to stay around!” Edith burst forth. “I have a little pride, if nothing else.”

“And what does the gallant Forbes think of it?”

“He hates it as much as I do. But he won’t admit it. He thinks I’m unreasonable.”

“Well—you *may* be a little possessive.”

“You would say that! Those were his very words. And I won’t be called possessive. I’ll go away and——”

“It might be a good idea,” Susan said thoughtfully. “But where will you go?”

“You’ll have to let me have enough for bus fare down to Grand Rapids. Aunt Ada has been asking me to come down to see her ever since Easter. I’ll stay away a whole week and see how he likes that. If he doesn’t miss me, I’ll know it’s all over.”

Edith left the next morning.

SATURDAY dawned with a fine spun, blue-gray rain that continued through until twilight, when it deepened to brooding, soft purple. It was the kind of day Susan loved, a day that locked you snugly in an individual world of slow, half-defined dreams. The webbed, mysterious trees, the grass slanting with a whiteness upon it, became part of you, and you of them.

Home from the library in the afternoon, Susan went to Jonathan’s cabin. Nugent was dining at the Cruikshanks’. She would have a couple of hours to herself, reading, jotting down notes, planning a story—or simply loafing. Jonathan had left the place shipshape, the hearth neatly swept, kindling in the woodbox. The rain had brought a damp chill into the old house. She kindled a small fire and when the flames were licking up into the black maw of the fireplace she sat down at Jonathan’s table and took the cover from the typewriter. The plot of a story had been prowling about in the back of her head for days. She let her hands move over the keys, aimlessly, experimentally—where *his* hands had moved busily, thoughtfully. How wonderful it would be to work with Jonathan, in the same house—in the next room, maybe—to talk over characters yet unborn, themes undreamed of, ideas unimagined! To build up and tear down,

to fight and make up, to fail and succeed—to struggle against insecurity and disappointment, to share the defeat as well as the glory, and to take both in stride!

When the fire began to die down, she got up and walked about the room, flushed and warm all through with the deep sense of Jonathan's presence. Why had she let him go without telling him that she would leave everything, follow him wherever he might lead? Why had she not told Nugent and Edith and Kit that she was going away with Jonathan as soon as he was ready to leave? And suddenly she made her decision. She *would* tell him, as soon as he came back. And she would tell the others.

The old velvet cushion on the couch still had a hollow in it where Jonathan's head had lain. She sat down and pressed her cheek upon it, and closed her eyes against a quick rush of tremulous tears.

SUNDAY morning. When Nugent clattered downstairs and came to the breakfast table with that radiant, shy and exultant look in his eyes, Susan's heart shook. He had no need to tell her his great news. She read it in his nervous, faintly defiant grin.

"Well, kid—guess what?" he burst out as he took his place noisily at the table.

"Have your orange juice first," said Susan, and steadied her hand as she measured the coffee she was putting into the percolator. "It's Violet, of course. When is it going to be?"

"Heck!" He looked abashed. "You might have *acted* surprised, anyhow. Am I a fast worker, or am I a fast worker? I ask you. Just a little over three weeks!"

Susan took her chair and rallied her features into a smile. "I had an idea it wouldn't take much time. Aren't you the best-looking young hopeful in town? And doesn't Violet work fast when she gets started? I've watched her before."

"But she's serious this time, Sue. Honest, she is!"

"Probably. Daddy Cruikshank thinks you're going places, for one thing. And having no sons of his own——"

"Darn it all, you take the joy out of everything."

"Not a bit of it. I think it's simply grand." She swallowed her orange juice without tasting it.

"Well, you know, kid"—he helped himself hugely to scrambled eggs and flushed self-consciously—"I was a little surprised, myself. It all happened like—that! It was really Violet. She came right out and said we could get along on

what I'm making because it wouldn't be long before I was making more. She says her old man thinks a lot——” He broke off in commendable confusion, then went on with dogged honesty. “Well, darn it, I've done a good job in the office and I know it. Why shouldn't he think a lot of me?”

“Why, indeed? But eat your breakfast before it gets cold. When—when is the big event to come off?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about that, kid.” Nugent frowned. “Vi thinks, about the middle of August. I told her all about our problem here, but she thinks Kit and Edith ought to be able to get started at something by that time. Anyhow”—his jaw settled in a new, obstinate line—“I've been hauling them long enough. I don't see why I should go on forever.”

“I don't either,” Susan said gently. The crisp bacon on her plate looked curiously far away. Suddenly she became almost angry. “Don't let *anything* interfere with your plans. If you do, you may be sorry for the rest of your life. I mean it.”

“That's the way I see it, kid. This is my big chance. It isn't as if I were going to splurge. Vi is darned sensible. She says she was looking at a three-room apartment on Amlie Street, for forty a month. She's willing to get along with a maid coming in by the day for a while. Anyhow, we've talked it all over and I know it will work out okay. If you're married to the right person, Sue, what the heck matters?”

“Nothing—not a single thing!” Susan replied, gazing out at a brilliant ride of sunshine along the broad-leafed branch of a catalpa tree. The rain—yesterday's sweet, intimate rain—had let up in the early morning.

It would have been so easy to let herself go—to tell Nugent in a rebellious outburst that she, too, wanted to be free to love Jonathan Gilfeather. But this was scarcely the time. This was Nugent's great moment. Susan must wait.

She would have told him that afternoon, when they were alone together in the house, but Violet Cruikshank came rushing in from her car and Nugent caught her up in the hall and swung her almost over his shoulder in what, according to college and motion-picture standards, was the approved modern technique of lovemaking. The two had veered off into Violet's car, a model some notches above Nugent's old wreck, and Susan found herself alone in the house and oddly glad that she had not burdened her brother with her own problem.

CHAPTER XI

MONDAY morning, after Nugent had gone to the office, Susan swept, dusted, and aired the cabin thoroughly, not only because she wanted it fresh for Jon's return, but because she needed physical activity for her own peace of mind.

The problem, she thought severely as she ran a dust cloth over the mantel, was *hers*. She had made it her own and she was being left to face it alone. She was harvesting now the bitter fruits of her own tenderness, her affection for Edith and Kit.

She was so harassed by the cross currents of her thinking that she gave an indifferent response to the sharp knock on the screen door. A woman stepped into the cabin, dressed in an unbelievably sleek costume on a day that was again smotheringly hot. Susan, glancing from the fireplace, had the quick impression of a figure in cool violet-gray, the gown tailored and yet infinitely light about the body. The small hat the stranger carried in her hand was only a tangled wreath of net and flowers, and her hair in the slide of sunlight was a purer sunlight, a brighter gold.

“OH!” the woman said, her voice a low, indolent bell. “I—he isn't here?”
Susan tossed the dust cloth on a chair. “Are you looking for Mr. Gilfeather?”

“Of course!” The woman threw her hands out in an eloquent gesture. “Who else? They told me in the village that I should find him here.”

“He has been away for a week,” Susan told her. “He should be back today.”

“Then he didn't get my telegram. I sent him a message from Chicago on Friday, and told him I was driving up. I intended to get here last night, but the heat was execrable! I stayed at some little place along the way—a frightful place, but I was utterly limp.”

Susan brushed a lock of damp hair from her brow and looked with tumbled comprehension and embarrassment and young awe at the person who stood before her. Rotogravures—theatrical sections in the magazines and the Sunday papers——

“You must be Nina Brandon,” Susan said, trying to be calm. “Jonathan has told me about you; and of course I had heard about you before.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Nina Brandon said with absent complacency, and glanced about the room. “It’s so curious of Jonathan to come here. . . . But you evidently take good care of him.”

She sat down on one of the two dishonest antique chairs, crossed exquisitely silken ankles. From the narrow foot, shod in the same gauzy material as her dove-colored gown, to the gold-leaf crest of her head, she was the most suavely constructed human Susan had ever beheld. If she *was* human. Her face had the pellucid look of rare china, the kind that would appear clean even though it was never washed. Her mouth was long, red, and sad, even when she smiled—and her lashes swept straight and dark over eyes that were the silvery gray color of young cottonwood leaves, extraordinarily light eyes, luminous and wandering. Yet she had driven up here alone.

“Oh, dear, I *do* think Jonathan might have been here.” Nina shrugged her shoulders and smiled ruefully. “I suppose I shall have to go to a stuffy hotel and wait for him.”

Susan’s heart contracted with uneasiness. “You may wait here, if you wish to. I’ve finished my work. Won’t you let me bring you some iced tea? Oh”—she blushed—“I’m Susan Prescott. I live in the white house, out front. My two sisters and my brother and I.”

“Ah! I had thought—” Nina stopped in pretty confusion. “But of course. How stupid of me!” Her eyes drifted in an explanatory and yet apologetic manner over Susan’s apron.

Susan’s lips wanted to shake into laughter. Why shouldn’t Miss Brandon assume that she was the cleaning woman?

“If you’ll just give me a minute,” she said cordially, “I’ll get some tea. Or maybe you’d rather have iced coffee?”

“Coffee wouldn’t be too much trouble?” Nina Brandon could be deliciously plaintive, as well. Rather like Edith, Susan thought, though far more expert, of course.

“None whatever,” said Susan.

Presently, over tall, cool glasses and vanilla wafers, Nina Brandon and Susan Prescott were chatting—or rather Nina was chatting and being very homy and delightful about everything.

“Jonathan,” she was saying, “was so absurd, my dear. He’s so dreadfully serious. We quarreled over the play—I mean he didn’t agree with my interpretation of the part, you know—and he marched off without so much as ringing me up before he left New York! I’ve been stopping for a fortnight with my sister in Chicago, so I thought I’d come out and beard the lion, you know.”

“Ringing her up,” Susan thought—and “stopping for a fortnight” with her sister. Very English. Middletown, Indiana, more likely.

“I’m positively pursuing him,” Nina went on musingly. “I’m being quite shameless. But rehearsals start next month, and our director is so hopelessly pig-headed about everything. So”—again that lovely, rueful gesture of the hands—“in a worthy cause, I have come all the way to East Searle, which is in Michigan!”

You’re darn right it is, Susan thought feelingly. But Nina Brandon’s next dream-dim remark, made with half-closed, leaf-colored eyes, caught Susan suffocatingly by the heart.

“Why does a man run away when he is afraid?” she asked. “And why should Jonathan be afraid of me? He’s a genius, my dear—but he’s a child. I know I can help him—in so many ways. After all, I *have* been in the theatre for a number of years, and I *have* made a place for myself. Why shouldn’t he let me help him? He’s afraid of what he calls my success. Can you think of anything so deliciously naïve?”

Susan stared at her through an obscuring mist. “I’m sorry, Miss Brandon,” she said suddenly, “but I have to go in and change my clothes. I work at the library. If you’d care to stay here—perhaps Jonathan will be back this afternoon.”

“I think I shall. There are books——” Nina glanced at the table, then smiled gratefully at Susan. “And thank you, so very much, for the coffee!”

BUT JONATHAN did not return until some time that evening, while Susan was at the library. When she came through the gate in the darkness she saw his car standing in the lane. Nina Brandon’s big roadster was at the curb and a light gleamed in the cabin window beyond the trees.

Nugent was in the living room, reading. Susan tried to keep her voice steady as she spoke.

“You home?”

“Vi had to go with her mother to visit an aunt. Family stuff!”

“I see Jonathan is back.”

“And how!” He sprawled full length on the davenport. “Lady Brandon is with him at the moment.”

“I saw her car in front.” Susan had told Nugent at dinner about Nina Brandon’s call earlier in the day.

“I happened to be on the back porch and witnessed the arrival. What a gal! From the back porch, at least!”

With swift pain, Susan calculated the hours that Nina Brandon had already spent with Jonathan in the cabin. Nugent went on with his extravagant talk, but Susan scarcely listened. She went upstairs and prepared for bed. She did not turn on the light. She knelt in front of the window looking out across the garden and the trees to the lambent patch in the darkness beyond. This was the cheapest sort of spying, but she did not care. She could not care, while this dreadful feeling possessed her body—this feeling that from the throat up she was on fire and from there down, bloodless ice.

Her bewilderment and pain became almost insupportable as the minutes relentlessly passed and Jonathan’s light still shone, and there was still no sound of Nina’s car starting in the street. Why, oh, why couldn’t Jonathan have confided in her that his relationship with Nina Brandon had been something more than that of playwright and star? Time stretched out into agonizing black space, with no meaning. It was neither minutes nor hours. She heard the silly electric clock in the kitchen whir up to eleven, and had the bizarre sense of counting the strokes backward. Nugent would be coming upstairs any minute. She crept into bed, and hot as it was she pulled the covers over her head.

It was after one o’clock when the throb of Nina Brandon’s motor sounded across the breathless silence. It was at least an hour later when Susan, in utter exhaustion, fell asleep against a pillow that was hot and wet.

CHAPTER XII

TUESDAY was pewter-colored, sultry, menacing. It seemed the sluggish heat must fall of its own weight out of the sinister glare of the sky, away from the fevered ball of the sun. The stillness was oppressive; poplar leaves, in the infrequent stirring of air, hopefully turned, but no rain cloud appeared on the stricken, hazy horizon.

At breakfast Nugent was irritable. He hadn't slept a wink, he declared. His room, on the south side of the house, had taken the sun all day and had been like an oven all night.

The telephone rang and Susan went to answer it. It was Forbes Updyke. He wanted to know if Edith would be back today. Susan told him she didn't know anything about it. He asked then for Edith's address and telephone number in Grand Rapids. She gave him the information and hung up abruptly.

She had barely sat down when the telephone rang again. Nugent was already on his feet, tossing his napkin aside.

"Answer that, will you?" Susan said.

"I haven't time. I'm late now."

Susan sipped her coffee. "Let it ring, then."

Nugent glowered, and went to the telephone. "Who? Oh. . . . Why—yes, certainly, Miss Brandon! No trouble at all. I'll go and tell him. . . . No, really—I'll be very glad to."

Susan placed her cup carefully on its saucer. Nugent's face in the doorway was alight and cloudless. "She wants me to get Jonathan out of bed. He promised to call for her at nine and take her into the country for the day."

"Go and call him, then."

Nugent grinned briefly. "She says she knows how he likes to sleep in—in the mornings. Sounds kind of clubby, what?" When Susan didn't reply, he started away, then came back. "I was thinking I'd throw a party here on Wednesday night—just a small one, to celebrate our engagement. Mrs. Cruikshank is planning a real affair for some time in——"

"I don't care much what you do," Susan said shortly.

"What the devil is wrong with *you* this morning?"

A moment later he was gone through the back door toward the cabin. She heard his car presently and sat then, tracing with her fork the outline of a yellow

daisy on the white linen breakfast cloth. She could imagine Jonathan dressing hastily, shaving at the makeshift wash stand before the little mirror on the wall, running a comb through his hair, making a hodgepodge of his dresser drawer in his search for a clean handkerchief. And all for Nina Brandon, the beautiful, the glamorous, the important!

She stood up at last and began to stack the dishes. Kit would probably be home from the Crawfords' house party today. There would be the business of seeing Mona Rankin safely away. On Wednesday, there would be Nugent's party. But after that the household would settle down to something like sanity, surely. Edith's return would mean very little one way or another. Susan had lost hope of ever doing anything there.

WHILE she was swirling the mop to make suds in the dishpan, Jonathan's step sounded on the back porch.

"Susan!"

"Good morning."

He came in, stopped suddenly, and looked at her. His face was a deeper tan after his week on the lake.

"Sorry I didn't have time to get in and say hello last night," he apologized.

"I didn't expect you," Susan replied. "You had a guest, didn't you?"

Jonathan's grin was boyish. "How do you like her? I understand the two of you had a visit yesterday."

"Yes. She's charming, of course, and very beautiful."

"Well, that's something—coming from a woman." His mouth straightened. "How's everything?"

Susan put the mop aside. "I've taken a job at the library. And Kit started work at Hampden's." There was no point in telling him any more about that, she decided.

"What!"

"Is that so incredible?"

He laughed. "Well, it's sudden, at least." He looked at her, a slow flush creeping up over his cheek bones. "So now you have two jobs instead of one."

Susan, in the muggy heat, felt all at once clammily cold. She stiffened her chin and said, "I like them both."

His mouth tightened crookedly across his teeth. His eyes burned ironically. "That leaves everybody happy, I suppose." He turned away. "I'll drop in again—when you're in a pleasanter mood, eh?"

With a rather awkward swing of his shapeless felt hat, he was gone. She hadn't asked him about his trip to the lake. And he hadn't offered to tell her about it. Well, he had undoubtedly told Nina Brandon all there was to tell—and that was as it should be.

IT SEEMED that the afternoon hours at the library would never end. When she finally came home, she heard Edith singing with rapturous abandon in the bathroom. She went upstairs and found her sister scattering half a bottle of bath salts into the tub.

"When did you get back?" Susan asked her.

"Oh—hullo, darling!" Edith reached down guiltily and turned off the water. "I came on the two o'clock. Forbes phoned this morning and offered to drive down for me. But I said no—and I refused to say when I'd be back. But after he hung up I thought it over and——"

"You didn't walk home from the depot?"

"I had my bags—and the heat was simply cruel. I—I took a taxi home. I just wasn't going to give Forbes the satisfaction of calling him up and asking him to come for me." She slipped out of her kimono, eased herself into the fragrant tub, and changed the subject. "But isn't Nina Brandon's being here the most romantic thing you ever heard of? To think that our Jonathan——"

"Who told you she was here?"

Lengthening herself sensuously, Edith began to cream her face and throat. "Edwina called me just before you came in. She was all a-dither! She ran across Jonathan and Miss Brandon having lunch at the Blue Horse. And what do you think? She's giving a bridge tomorrow afternoon for the Dramatic Club, with Nina Brandon as the guest of honor, no less. And all the winnings are to go to the club. Isn't that just like Edwina? She thinks fast."

"And you're going, of course?"

"Well, naturally."

"What will you use for money?"

"I never lose, darling," Edith laughed confidently, "when the winnings go to charity. Edwina wanted to know if you couldn't come, too."

"What did you tell her?"

“I said I’d ask you. I think you ought to come, even if you don’t like Edwina. You could slip in around five, for cocktails.”

“I’m not interested,” Susan broke in. “What kind of time did you have with Aunt Ada?”

“Oh—you know. But it was restful. We played bridge last night but I simply didn’t hold a card. I’ve been having the worst luck lately. Oh—Kit phoned and said she wouldn’t be back till tomorrow night.”

Susan was vexed. “I expected her home today. Didn’t you tell her?”

“My heavens, Sue, *I* can’t give Kit orders! She’s old enough now to know when she ought to come home.”

Susan was closing the bathroom door when Edith suddenly remembered something. “There is a letter for you on the dining-room table. From some magazine, I think. I went out and looked before I came up to bathe.”

THE letter made her head spin. In spite of the fact that changes would have to be made in the manuscript, the editor felt that “These Young Leaves” was worth buying. He said there was sensitive writing, a colorful setting, a pleasant theme. . . .

Susan felt herself blushing. The check for two hundred dollars would follow shortly. She bit her lip as she thought of that important detail. She hurried back upstairs and found Edith already putting her hair up in metal curlers.

“Honestly, Sue, this is a bore! If I don’t have a permanent soon——”

“Are you going out?” Susan asked.

“I forgot to tell you. Forbes phoned me. I *know* he must have tried to get me again at Grand Rapids. Anyhow, he was so sweet, and I told him he could take me out to dinner if he really wanted to. Poor Forbes! He could hardly talk. Anything good about your story?”

Susan was suddenly perverse. She had come upstairs especially to tell Edith the news. But why tell her anything? Far better let Edith and Kit stagger along for a few days, at least, thinking there would be no cash left in the family coffers by the end of the month.

“Oh—the usual thing,” Susan replied without too much compunction. “A couple of editorial suggestions for doing it over.”

Edith snapped a curler into place. “Edwina was so cute,” she said with a smile. “She says that Nina Brandon and Jonathan are quite definitely that way about each other. Would you have suspected that of our Jonathan?”

“Why not? By the way, I didn’t tell you about Nugent.”

“Nugent? What——” Edith winced as she caught a single hair in the hinge of a curler.

“He’s going to be married in August.”

Edith swung about, her arms arrested over her head, the curler in her fingers. “Married! For heaven’s sake! And you didn’t tell me!”

“What chance have I had to tell you?”

“You might have phoned me.”

“That would have cost eighty cents.”

“But Sue, honestly! Our one and only brother, and you didn’t——”

Susan gave a laconic shrug. “Well, you know it now.”

“But—in August!” Edith’s astonishment gave place to a look of lofty indignation. “I do think he might have given us a little time to—to adjust ourselves. That will mean his leaving us, I suppose.”

“Very thoughtless of him,” Susan agreed, a little twist of irony to her lips.

“I wonder what Kit will think when she hears it.”

Susan turned away with a sardonic smile. “I don’t know, I’m sure. You’d better look your best for your dinner with your future husband,” she said and went downstairs again.

As she made supper for herself and Nugent, she couldn’t help wondering if Jonathan would be back early. He evidently hadn’t gone into the country this morning or Edwina Vale would not have seen him and Nina Brandon at the Blue Horse. Nina had probably changed her mind. She had probably changed Jonathan’s mind too—about a number of things!

She thought of the two hundred dollars that would be hers. Of the small balance in the bank that would be enough to run Edith and Kit along for the next three weeks or for a month. Why shouldn’t she leave now—simply disappear—let them all know about it after she had got away.

But this was mad thinking! It wasn’t thinking at all. Grandmother Prescott would never have . . .

She went to the ice box for a head of crisp lettuce.

CHAPTER XIII

COMPARED with that of Wednesday, the heat of Tuesday had been as balm. When she left the library at four o'clock, Susan began to feel morbidly that there was an evil sympathy between the weather and her own suspended mood.

There was no one in the house when she reached home. She bathed and went to her room. She lay down and pulled a corner of the bedspread over her. In a few minutes she was sound asleep from sheer exhaustion.

She did not know what awakened her, but she sat up suddenly and looked at the little clock on the table beside her bed. It was nearly seven. She was sure she had heard someone in the house. Her first thought was that Kit had come home. A little fearfully, she stole out into the hall and listened. A sound came from the floor above. The door to the narrow stairway was open. She was on the point of calling out; then, without waiting, she climbed the stairs to the attic. Near the top she halted, puzzled. Edith was on the floor beside the old hump-backed trunk.

“What in the world——”

Edith sat up quickly. “Oh—you startled me!”

“What do you think you did to me? I woke up hearing someone prowling
_____”

“I tried not to make any noise. I saw you were sleeping when I came in.”

“But I thought you were at the Vales’.”

Edith got to her feet, averting her face. “It was too unbearably hot! I felt completely done up, so I left before the others.”

“You’ve certainly chosen a cool place here.”

“I was looking for Grandmother’s old lace shawl,” Edith’s trailing voice responded. “She used to let me wear it.”

Susan mounted the last two steps and stood beside her. The carbon-wrapped package of old silverware lay on the floor, half-covered by one of the piece quilts. It hadn’t been there before. Susan remembered distinctly having packed it away. A queer, icy feeling closed about her breast.

“The shawl is in that tissue paper in the top tray,” she said, pointing to it.

Edith lifted the shawl out of the tray and held it before her. Susan did not look at her face. But she did not have to be told that it was not the shawl that Edith had come to look at. She felt rather sick as she went back down the stairs.

In her room again, she dressed hurriedly. She did not want to face Edith again—tonight, at least. She fled to the kitchen, drank a glass of cold milk, and left the house.

For more than an hour she walked aimlessly through the deep woods that reached northward beyond the cabin, fringing the town. The trees and the earth in the declining red sun threw off an ominous, humid smell. There was an unnatural, waiting glare over everything.

It could not matter to her now, of course, whether what she feared concerning Edith was true or not. Nothing mattered very much. Jonathan had been with Nina Brandon—he had probably come to his senses by now—decided he had been a fool to run away from the one woman who could do most for him. He would probably come and tell Susan. He would be embarrassed and a little unhappy about it all—about his error with Susan. And Susan would laugh and make light of the whole thing. . . .

SUSAN did not go to the library. She had come to a decision all by herself there under the trees. The library, Caroline Fuller, even the family had no place in that decision. A sooty darkness filled the sky when she finally started to pick her way out from among the trees. It must have been at least ten o'clock, she guessed.

Against the black sky, the house was a blaze of light. The radio was going full blast, she could tell while she was still a block away. In the house, Nugent's party was in full swing. The young Scarths were there; Toby Almayer and his girl from Chicago, a redhead with a penchant for draping her shapely legs over the arm of a chair; Alice Nelson, Heck and Luly Green, newly married. Susan knew them all without having to look in. She stole quietly into the hall and up the stairs.

She knew, too, what the house would be like. It was probably a shambles already—after the charge of the light-minded brigade, she reflected grimly—powder and cigarette ash littered over her dresser and on the floor, hair clips strewn out of the box, bottles lying on their sides, wraps thrown anywhere.

UPSTAIRS she undressed, took a quick cold shower, shut her ears against the noise from below, carefully combed her hair and lightly made up her face.

The radio gave an experimental bleat, then a sound as of tearing canvas, and finally produced the smart lunacy of a "swing" tune. Somebody was banging on the door of the ice box in the kitchen. Another car stopped with a squeal of brakes in front of the house. Forbes and Edith this time. Susan was familiar with the flourish of their arrival.

But she was not familiar with the expression on Edith's face when she came pale and shaken into Susan's room and sat down on the edge of the bed. She fumbled in her handbag for her lipstick, but she was trembling so that she could scarcely use it.

"Well, what's the matter with *you*?" Susan asked woodenly.

Edith looked at her with welling eyes. "Where—where *have* you been? Where did you go?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Forbes and I have been looking all over town for you. We went to the library—and they said you hadn't come back."

"So—I'm supposed to stay put. Has anything happened?"

Edith caught her breath in a dry sob. "Just about everything that *could* happen. Oh, Sue!"

"What is it?"

"George Fuller phoned over an hour ago. I answered the phone and he asked for you. I told him you were at the library, but he'd been trying to get you there. Then he told me. It—it was Kit, Sue!"

"Kit? What do you mean? Has anything——"

"She called George to go out and get her at some little grocery store a mile from the Crawford place. She was in some awful trouble, I know, from the way George spoke. Besides, there must be some reason why she didn't phone here. And why didn't she come home? George ought to be back any minute now—and then we'll know."

Susan thought deeply for a moment. Then she sighed with something like relief. She was used to Edith's hysterical fits over trifles. "We'll wait, then. If she's with George Fuller, she's in good hands. She probably had a quarrel with Bernie Crawford. Is there anything else?"

"Forbes has proposed!" Edith announced bluntly.

Susan set her teeth. "Not really! Is that anything to throw a fit over? I thought he had done as much before."

"But I mean—we're really going to be married."

"People do that," Susan observed. Then abruptly, "What were you doing in the attic this evening? I want to know."

Edith's head nodded as if she were trying to speak but couldn't. "That's what—that's what I wanted to tell you. Don't—don't glare at me like that. I'm so

miserable I could die. I lost twenty-seven dollars at bridge this afternoon. I was so desperate when I came home that I—I——”

“You were going to take that hand-stamped silver down to Archibald Noonan, weren’t you?”

Edith’s head nodded again. “I didn’t dare tell Forbes. I told Edwina I’d give her the money tomorrow. Oh, Susan, forgive me! What shall I do?”

“For one thing—shut up!” She took her check book from the drawer of her dressing table. Edith watched her with frantic, hopeful eyes.

“There,” Susan said at last. “Pay Edwina Vale.”

Edith wept and Susan sat regarding her own expressionless face in the mirror.

“You’d better go down to Forbes now,” she said finally.

Edith got up slowly, folded the check and put it away, then powdered her nose and rubbed a streak of mascara from beneath her eye.

“I don’t know what to say, Sue. I——”

“I’d rather not hear any more about it,” Susan put in coldly. “Forbes is waiting for you.”

When Edith was ready to leave the room, she paused at the door. “When we were out looking for you, we saw Jonathan and Nina Brandon at the club. She looked gorgeous in a flame-colored dress, and gardenias in her hair. Perrin’s must have ordered them especially for——”

“Get out!”

When Edith had gone, Susan’s taut nerves were struck by two widely divergent sounds. One, coming from a dangerously poised, hot darkness outside, was a high, thin, whine—wind, with electric venom behind it, thunder chuckling, crackling, growling, but still at a distance. The other sound came from the hall downstairs. It was the sound of George Fuller bringing Kit home.

Susan dragged her suitcase out of the closet. The moment had come for her to carry out her decision made in the darkness under the trees. She threw some underwear, stockings, a knitted silk dress, and her toilet articles into the suitcase. Then she put on her olive tweed suit, with the tailored white silk blouse, and a green swagger hat two years old. She picked up her handbag and her check book, and looked at herself in the mirror. Two spots of cardinal blazed in her cheeks. Her eyes were brilliantly alive.

“Gardenias in her hair,” she said calmly to her reflection, “I think I’ll have some in mine.”

Suitcase in hand, she walked out into the hall, her stride long and free. Lightning split across the dark hall window. The immediate thunder was like a great fist smashing into crystal. Susan felt triumphant, released and vivid. She went composedly down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIV

IN the den, across from the living room, Kit was the center of a small, excited group who listened while she talked. George Fuller stood solicitously at her side. Edith and Forbes sat together on the small sofa. Two of Nugent's guests occupied chairs.

“ . . . but when we got down to the old Anderson homestead and I saw there wasn't anyone there, I knew I was on a spot. He tried to get hold of me as soon as we got inside the old house. I ran out and down the lane to the road. He ran after me, but I told him I'd hail a car if he didn't cut it out, so then he went back and followed me in his car. I walked and ran all the way down to Garton's store at the corner—almost a mile—with Bernie coming along in his car. But I wouldn't ride with him. I called George and stayed in the store till he came out. Honestly, you should have been there! George was wonderful. Bernie was still waiting outside and when I went to get into George's car, what did the sap do but come up to George and try to get me away from him. And then—just like that!—it happened so fast I couldn't realize it. George hit him and he went down like a bag. Bernie must have been having something to drink, out there in his car. But anyhow, it—well, it was simply too slick! The next thing I knew I was sitting beside George, and we were driving home together. And then the rain——”

Susan had set her suitcase on the floor, her purse on top of it, and was leaning idly against the side of the den door, her hands in her pockets. All at once, Kit looked away from the others, her face white and disheveled.

“Sue! I've had an awful experience——”

But the storm, descending in full fury, with a deafening report of thunder and an avalanche of rain, cut her words short. Edith crouched against Forbes, who solemnly put his arm about her. Kit looked in alarm at George Fuller, and George grasped her hand reassuringly. Susan laughed out loud.

Nugent came running into the hall. “Shut the windows and the doors!” he shouted.

He was up the stairs three at a time, while George Fuller and Forbes Updyke hurried about the lower rooms. But Susan did not move from her indolent position in the doorway. Kit and Edith stared at her in growing perturbation. Ordinarily, Susan would have been the first to rush about making everything secure against a storm.

“It would be just like this house to blow away,” she said and laughed at Edith, whose eyelids blinked in the nervous habit she had never quite outgrown.

Kit stared at Susan for a moment, then threw herself down on the couch. “Oh, Susan!” she moaned. “I *knew* you’d blame me. But I tell you it wasn’t my fault! I just went with Bernie Crawford to look at the old farm because his father is thinking of buying it for a summer——”

“I’m not blaming you,” Susan replied equably. “I’m not blaming anyone really.”

Nugent, Forbes, and George Fuller had come back and Violet was clinging to Nugent’s arm and shuddering. The thunder was almost incessant, and Susan had to raise her voice to be heard. Nugent’s guests crowded into the hall, but Susan ignored them coolly.

“**W**HAT’S the idea, Sue?” Nugent demanded, pointing to the suitcase on the floor. “You’re not going anywhere tonight, are you?”

Susan glanced at her wrist watch. “I’m leaving on the 12:10,” she told him with a serene smile. “I have still forty minutes. The storm will let up in time—and perhaps George will drive me down to the depot. I’m going, and I’m not coming back.”

“What *are* you talking about, Sue?” Edith demanded in a querulous voice.

Kit came swiftly and seized Susan’s arm. “Sue—you’re not going away like this, darling. Don’t look like that!” Her voice was shrill with panic. “Let’s go upstairs. I’ll explain everything and—I’ve got something to tell you.”

Forbes pushed toward Susan, looking nonplused. “You can’t do this, Susan, my dear. Why——” He drew himself up and grinned fatuously. “We want you here at Thanksgiving, Sue. Edith and I are going to be married at Thanksgiving. As a matter of fact, we hadn’t intended to announce it like this, but—it simply won’t do for you to leave us now.”

Susan looked with amusement from Forbes to Edith. “I’m sure you’ll be able to manage this by yourselves.”

Nugent thrust Forbes aside. “Look here, Sue, don’t be a damned fool! You’re not going out of the house in this storm.”

“This storm will blow over in a little while,” Susan said.

“Oh—you’re just being stupid,” Edith whimpered.

“I am—exactly,” Susan replied. “For once, I’m going to do just what I want to do. I’m going because I feel like it. I don’t have to explain. You and Kit and Nugent—you all know why I can’t stay.”

She turned with a smile toward George Fuller, who was standing now with one arm about Kit. “George, you’ll take me to the depot, won’t you?”

George looked at her with a shrewd, surprising twinkle. "I have never hesitated to do you a service, I think, when the opportunity presented itself."

Susan laughed. "Nice George. I always liked you."

He came close to her, his eyes dancing, and lowered his voice. "I think I should tell you that Kit and I have——"

"I've already guessed it, George. Let me be the first to wish you luck."

"She is taking a position—no, a *job*—in my office for—a few weeks of probation, so to speak." He turned to Kit and smiled. "She has agreed; and she's going to work like—like *hell!*"

"Nice George!" Kit squealed and kissed him impulsively. "But don't let Sue go away—please, George!"

"Your technique is excellent," George replied, "but your judgment still falls somewhat short as compared with Susan's."

Susan paused and listened. "The storm seems to have gone over." She glanced at her watch. "I have to dash back to the cabin for a moment. I'll be right back, George. You may put my suitcase in your car."

Edith began to cry, but Forbes Updyke's sturdy arm was immediately about her. Nugent and Violet made simultaneous outbursts of protest.

Susan got her raincoat from the hall closet, slipped into it, and started toward the kitchen. The sleeve of her coat caught a highball glass standing on an end table. It went crashing to the floor. She paused, looked at the fragments, smiled innocently, and went out through the kitchen, through the back porch.

The rain had almost stopped, but lightning still turned the trees to livid silver as she sped along the path to the cabin.

She found the lamp on Jonathan's table, struck a match with trembling fingers, and lighted it. Now that she had announced her intentions to the family, she felt a horrible, weak-kneed impulse to crumple down in a chair and cry her heart out. But that was an indulgence she would have to postpone. The bus would be leaving in less than half an hour.

She seated herself at the table, grasped pencil and paper—Jonathan's symmetrically sharpened, dark green, soft-leaded pencil, 4-B.

"Dear Jonathan, I am leaving immediately for points unknown and I——"

No, that sounded melodramatic and smacked of self-pity. She threw it aside.

"Dear Jonathan, Sorry I could not have talked to you before I left. Nugent will explain everything to you if you ask him. This is just by way of wishing you the best of luck with your play—and everything."

The raw, throbbing pain rose from her breast to her throat on the last words, and became almost insupportable. She scrawled her name quickly, got unsteadily to her feet, pressed her hands to her burning, wet cheeks. She placed an ink bottle over the note, stooped to blow out the light, then straightened again for one last glance about the room. It had rained in over the window sills. The curtains hung limp and sad. There were drops of rain on Jonathan's typewriter. She took her handkerchief and wiped them off hurriedly.

Then she saw the flowers in the old hawthorn vase on the mantel. Snapdragons and bachelor buttons and pinks—arranged with artless, still precision as a man would arrange them. Her own flowers—he must have gathered them early this morning.

There was a sound on the stone flag outside, and suddenly the door burst open. Susan turned with a startled pang.

Jonathan came straight to her, his eyes alight and strange. He threw aside his dripping hat and coat. Then he swung her about to the light to look down into her face. His grin was a mingling of excited disbelief and elation.

"I stopped in the house," he told her. "Nugent says you're leaving the roost."

"Let me go, Jonathan!" Susan burst out in pain. "I haven't time to——"

He turned her face up to him. "You're going to take time out, Sue." He held her and smiled down into her eyes. "They're all in a panic—squawking their heads off, in there."

She struggled in feeble bewilderment. When he forced her to meet his eyes, she saw in them a dark and intense need that was for her alone, she knew.

"Where is Nina Brandon?" she asked him.

"Tucked snugly in her little bed, probably, by now. I kissed her good-by; she insisted on that. She's leaving first thing in the morning. Before I'm up."

"She told me you had run away from her."

He laughed in loud astonishment. "She's an actress, darling. She has all sorts of fantastic ideas about herself—and about every man she meets. But they're not serious. She has to be humored—she's really going to make that play of mine. When you get to know her better, you'll understand. I've had to spend every minute of the past two days with her, thrashing out her part. But she got the idea straight finally, and now she's going back to work.

“**A**ND that is all there is to Nina Brandon. Now, let's talk about us for a change. As a matter of fact, you were running away from me just as

much as you were running away from your fond family. Am I right, or do I flatter myself?"

Susan's eyes felt stretched and hot. She looked down and all at once pressed her face against his shoulder. "Oh, Jon, I'm so tired!" she whispered.

"You're not tired—just good and mad," he said, a little unsteadily, his arms tightening about her.

"The—the lamp's smoking, Jon," Susan said, unsteadily.

"The hell with it!" he said and kissed her. "We'll start cleaning up tomorrow."

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story was published in *The Pictorial Review*, Sep. 1937 issue.

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Gardenias in her hair* by Martha Ostenso]