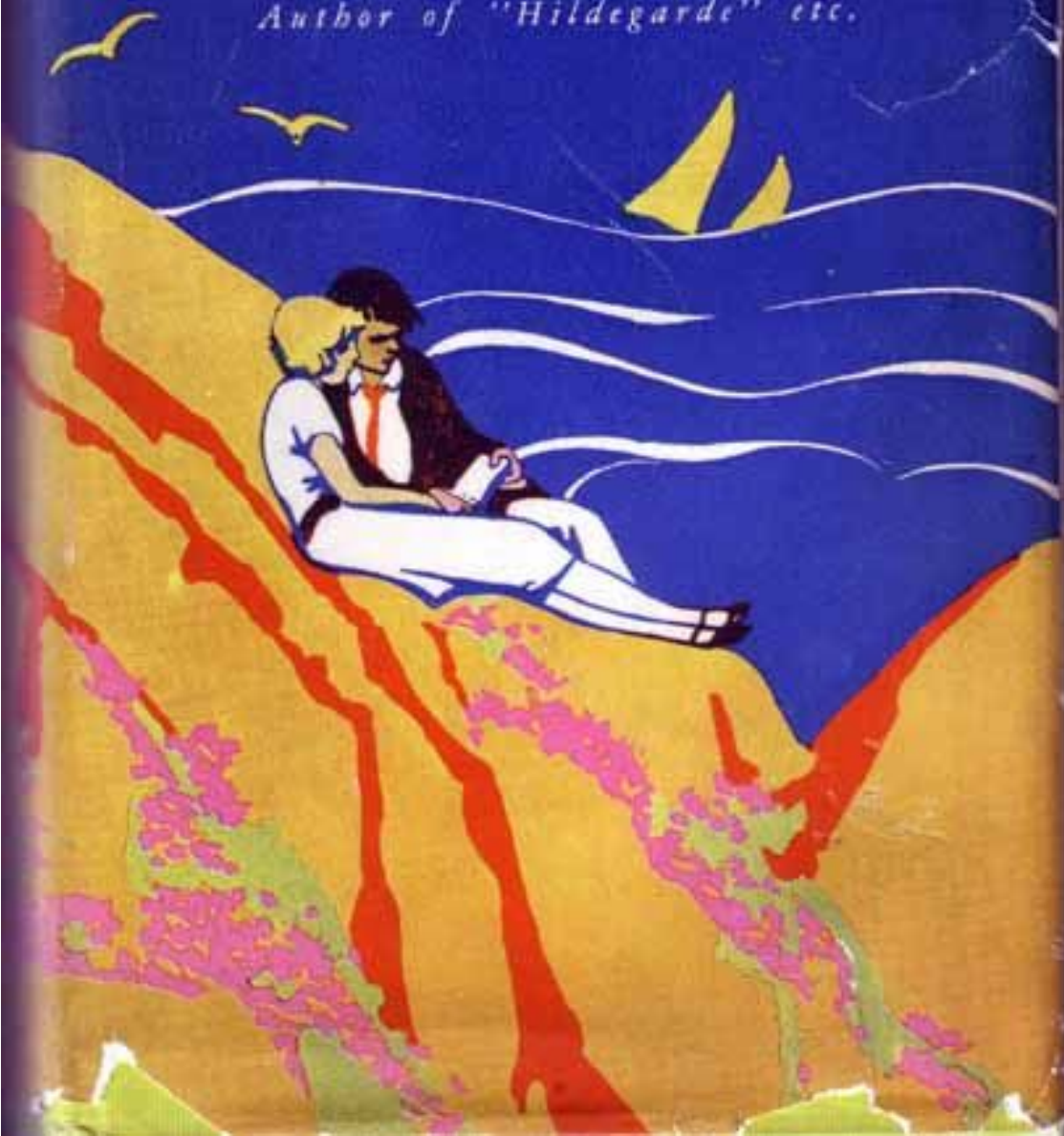


BARBERRY
BUSH

by Kathleen Norris

Author of "Hildegarde" etc.



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BARBERRY BUSH

BY
KATHLEEN NORRIS

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TO MARJORIE

FROM HER BIG SISTER, WITH A BOOK

—*For were these twenty years of joy and strife
Ours to relive in some returned life,*

*And were the flaws made true, the dark made plain,
Before old problems must be solved again,*

*Still you and I, across the long years' range
Could find no mood between us that must change,*

*Could find no hour, in all the rain and shine,
When my hand held not yours, your hand not mine.*

CHAPTER I

“The thing is,” said Amy, rubbing the sugar-bowl so firmly that her fingers suddenly bored holes through the polishing cloth, “the thing is that you’re twenty-two, Babs, and I’m twenty-four. Within the next six or seven years we’ll both marry, won’t we?”

“We certainly will,” Babs agreed fervently, from the sink.

She plunged the soap-shaker into a pan of hot water, frothed it to foam, slid into it a pile of scraped plates and saucers.

“Well, then, the question merely remains—*whom?*” Amy summarized it triumphantly.

“And when, and why, and where, and how,” her sister added.

“Oh, well, those’ll all take care of themselves!” Amy said easily. “The main point is: we’re *not* going to be old maids!”

“I suppose not,” Babs admitted uncertainly. And for some reason her breast rose and fell suddenly on a sharp sigh.

“But, now—*this* is what gets me,” Amy, with her air of fresh childish interest, went on animatedly, blowing at a silver spoon to dislodge the packed white powder on its chased handle, “do we know the boys now—the ones we are going to marry, I mean?”

Barbara Atherton laughed, and answered only with a faint shrug. She swept the dish mop gently about the receding tide of hot water in the sink, inverted the dishpan, wrung out the mop and set it on the window sill above the sink to dry. Then, with a fresh checked towel, she began rapidly to wipe the glasses and plates that were pyramided on the clean sink board.

“It seems likely,” she observed doubtfully, in a silence.

Amy, who had gone off into a dream, roused herself.

“What does?”

“I say it seems likely that we’ll both marry men from Cottonwood. Or near here, anyway.”

“Oh, I hope so!” Amy said, awakened, “I love it—’round here.”

“I believe,” Barbara observed thoughtfully, “that you do.”

“Well, you do, too, Barberry Bush!”

There was a second’s hesitation. Babs carried the hot, clean plates to the dresser, and stood there, stretching her young slim arms from shelf to shelf as she put them away.

“Of course I do. Only—I’ve never seen any place to compare Cottonwood to.”

“Barbara Atherton! You’ve seen San José and Santa Cruz millions of times, and San Francisco and Redwood City.”

Babs hung the last blue cup on its brass hook, turned about with a smile.

“That’s true. I forgot them. But we’ve never really lived anywhere but here, you know.”

The kitchen was hot, clean, shaded, orderly on this burning afternoon. To the girls it was an important and romantic spot. Although actually it was a commonplace room, conventionally furnished with a checked blue and brown linoleum, with two of the plain wooden chairs that are known the country over as “kitchen chairs,” and with a white stove, a white table, and a white cabinet. On the wall was a large calendar, embellished with a Corot painting, and lettered “Mackenzie & Co., Hardware, Plumbers’ Supplies and Sporting Goods, Cottonwood, California.”

Amelia Atherton, from her babyhood, had worn the far more appropriate title of Amy. Barbara was usually “Babs” in the family circle, but many years ago her grandmother had

given her the special title of “Barberry Bush.” Old Mrs. Bush had been a dignified and beautiful figure in Cottonwood’s history, and her motherless granddaughters had spent much of their time with her, it was she who had given Barbara her stately name, Barbara Bush Atherton, and the nickname had followed as a matter of course. With them all, the name meant a mood of affection and approval, and Barbara secretly loved to hear herself so called.

Since their grandmother’s death, the girls had kept house for their father, incidentally “arting” their little kitchen, as Babs expressed it, and lending to this utilitarian apartment what the younger sister further poetically characterized “the touch of a woman’s foot.”

Whatever the touch was, it was expressed in the cream-painted woodwork, the blue cotton curtains, the speckless order and simplicity of blue plates and white saucepans, the potted lobelia adding one more blue note in the side window, and the little breakfast alcove furnished with a narrow strip of table crossed by a cotton runner from Perugia, and decorated, on its two white walls, with coloured prints.

“We live by the backs of magazines,” Barbara once said. “We gloat on budgets and tables of calories, and for anything headed ‘Discoveries’ we make a simultaneous leap and fight over!”

Much of all this was true. Their father, Professor Arthur Choate Atherton, had been forced by poor health to give up his chair in entomology in a southern university some years earlier, and had come back to Cottonwood, California, where his motherless little girls had spent all their babyhood with their grandmother.

After that they had lived with Grandma in an ugly bay-windowed house in Washington Street, where the shops were beginning to encroach upon the chicken yards and side gardens of an older day. And when Grandma died, they had sold the ugly big house and bought a pretty little one, the very house in whose kitchen the girls were busy now.

The old Professor, who spent his days roaming about searching for California beetles and moths and parasites, and his nights writing articles about them, admired his daughters enormously. He told them that they were practical, as their lovely mother had been, and that it was much wiser and better to be practical, in this cold world, than a dreamer like himself.

But as a matter of fact, Barbara was not really practical by nature. She, like Amy, had had a good deal of responsibility thrust upon her when very young, and she had risen to her burden rather from necessity than choice.

It was only a form of dreaming, her enthusiasm for new ways, for strange meals, and “arty” kitchens, odd frocks and queer books. She visualized them, when she found them in the backs of magazines, and Amy, who was her slave, was the one who actually brought them into being.

Half seriously, half wistfully, Barbara would mention blue bowls or vegetable suppers, the desirability of practice in French, or of hollyhocks outside the kitchen window, and Amy would quite seriously bring home bowls, seeds, books of verbs, and tomatoes and carrots.

Babs would perhaps have forgotten them entirely by the time they appeared, but her enthusiasms were always easily reawakened, and she would display such dashing originality in her manner of employing them that even Amy would immediately forget that she herself had had any hand in the matter.

Amy was clever, staid, sensible, sweet. Barbara was a wild, brilliant creature of varying moods and violent emotions. Amy was talented, as all the town knew. But Babs, which nobody suspected, was already a personality in embryo, and half her vagaries and heartaches

came from the fact that she was instinctively and quite unconsciously seeking self-expression, in any way, by any path, through any door.

The younger sister was pretty, with blue eyes, and a soft snug cap of chestnut hair. Amy's nose was short and straight, her hands and wrists nicely turned, her skin clear and almost colourless, her mouth small and dimpled. But Barbara was always more, or less, than actually pretty.

Sometimes she was merely a tall girl, with splendid bronze curly hair tangled over a low forehead, and hanging in a loose knot on her neck, a girl with blue eyes suspiciously frowning, and wide scarlet mouth bitten in moments of thought or argument by big, square white teeth. Golden freckles were powdered over Barbara's milk-white skin, and when she was excited apricot colour blazed on her high cheek bones. Her eyes were long, dark-lashed, and strangely sweet and appealing in expression; "sweet eyes," Barry du Spain called them sometimes; sweet even when Babs was at her homeliest.

But at her prettiest, on those rare occasions when freshly brushed curling bronze hair, skin, eyes, frock, and mood all matched, she could be startlingly handsome. Sometimes a new boy in town would meet her so, at a beach picnic or a dance, a starry-eyed creature all laughter and gipsy beauty, and would come to call upon her a few evenings later, to be pained and amazed at the bored, oddly dulled, plain girl into which an unfortunate mood had metamorphosed her.

She did not care much about her appearance; indeed, from her very teens Barbara had worn an air of abstracted and busy indifference to a great many of the interests of her school group. She was always adventuring, experimenting, reaching beyond the placid limitations of the life in Cottonwood, trying to find something bigger, something more essentially her own. All the other girls imitated certain things about Barbara, but she never imitated anyone.

And behind her, adoring and scolding and bewildered, came Amy, consoling her for her many tumbles, and inserting, beneath her castles in the air, a solid foundation of practical help and common sense.

"If you had to marry one boy in Cottonwood, now, Babs," Amy pursued, on this particular afternoon, "whom would you marry?"

"One? Amy, I'm ashamed of you! Do you mean that you think of marrying *more* than one?"

Amy giggled, screwing the powdered box-top firmly over the polishing powder.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"I suspect you of meaning a great deal more than you seem to," Barbara answered shrewdly. She gathered Amy's new-polished silver into her fine big hands. "You've been after something all afternoon," she added suspiciously.

"I have not! I was just wondering," Amy answered, flushing and laughing guiltily.

"Well, whom would *you*?"

"If—I—had—to—marry—a—Cottonwood—boy—" Amy mused, pursing her lips, narrowing her eyes and staring into space—"maybe Joe Dodge," she offered, temporizing.

"Joe Dodge!" Babs echoed, with a scoffing laugh.

"Well, Fatto Roach," Amy suggested. "I'll tell you whom!" she interrupted herself suddenly. "I'd marry Ward Duffy, in a minute! You know—the Duffys who keep boarders on Cherry Street."

"Amy, you wouldn't marry a doctor!"

"I think Ward's a darling," Amy was ruminating, more and more pleased with the thought. "Next time we go down to the river, let's ask Ward. We've never asked him. I used to love him

—let's ask him.”

“We couldn't ask him before. He's been away at Medical College for five years.”

“I know. But let's ask him! He's kind of homely,” Amy admitted affectionately, “but I'll bet he's smart. I'm going to ask him.”

She stopped, smiling, rose to put her silver polish away, hung her apron behind the closet door, and washed her hands.

“Let's go down to Washington Street—they'll all be down there, it's much cooler,” Barbara suggested, “and we can have some sodas.”

“Yes, but now you, Babs. Whom would you marry, if you had to marry a boy you know right now?”

“Oh, let me see——” The younger girl bit her lip, squinted.

“Barbara Atherton, you are the most affected girl I ever saw!” Amy said. Babs burst out laughing, and her colour rose.

“You think I could get Link Mackenzie away from Inez?” she asked self-consciously. This was sheer nonsense, and Amy laughed. Inez was not popular.

“I think you could get anyone away from Pola Negri!”

“Well, Inez may have Link,” Barbara said seriously. It was without concern, as Amy noted with a sinking heart. “But I like Link,” Barbara added. “We have the same birthday—Christmas Eve. And ever since I was about fourteen Link has *always* sent me a present!”

“And if Inez did, whom then, Babs?”

“Oh, Fox, I guess. Fox Madison. I've always thought he had such an adorable name. Harry Lawrence Fox George Madison.”

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” said the other girl, hurt.

Barbara glanced at her quickly. A penitent look crossed her laughing face, and she coloured brilliantly.

“You mean you think I'd take Barry?” she said, rather low.

“Well, wouldn't you?” Amy asked fearfully.

“Not——” Babs cleared her throat—“not if he didn't ask me, dear.”

It was at moments like this that she seemed, to Amy, so much older than she was. Amy could not have said a thing like that, she was infinitely less simple than Barbara, for all her sense and sweetness. Barbara's odd, splendid humility sometimes took her sister's breath away.

“But if he did ask you?”

Babs's head was hanging, her eyes averted.

“I don't know,” she whispered.

Amy came to the screen door beside her, tried to look into her face.

“You wouldn't marry him!”

No answer.

“Babs, he hasn't a penny. You'd have to go down the Coast to that awful old deserted ranch of his and raise pigs! All he can do is write poetry—and poets never have any money! And he's so selfish—and he's so stuck on himself.”

Barbara laughed briefly, mirthlessly.

“I don't think he's really conceited—Barry. It's just that he—he *sees* things differently from the rest of us.”

“I'll say he sees things differently from the rest of us,” Amy muttered rebelliously. “He'll spoil any party, to get the seat next to you; he'll read about that darned old Congo, or about

going down to Kew in lilac time—wherever it is!—until everyone but you goes to sleep, and you only stay awake out of politeness. He thinks I'm a fussy old maid——”

“I'm not going to marry Barry du Spain, Amy,” Barbara said as the other's voice failed. She put her hand on Amy's shoulder, and looked a little sadly, yet whimsically smiling, too, into Amy's eyes. “In the first place, he isn't going to ask me,” she went on. “He isn't the kind of boy who falls in love with *anyone*.”

“Except himself!” thought Amy. But she had the tact to be still.

“And in the second place,” resumed Barbara, who was perhaps talking as much to herself as her sister, “in the second place, he is too rare—and queer—too much Pan and fairy and gnome—to marry.”

“Your life,” Amy said solemnly, suppressing a desire to ejaculate first: “I'd pan *him!*”—“your life would be perfectly crazy. You'd never do anything the way other people do, and you'd never know where the next meal was coming from. You'd live like the penguins on Abalone Rock.”

“And I might like that!” Barbara murmured, dimpling, her cheeks roses.

“Your children,” Amy added firmly, “would be freaks.”

“I adore freaks!”

“Barbara,” pleaded Amy, abandoning argument, and appealing only to the emotions, “*please* don't marry him!”

“But I'm not even thinking about it, you idiot!”

“Only—you *do* like him.”

The traitor blood came into Babs's cheeks; she lowered her eyes again.

“Well, come on! We're going to get some sodas,” she changed the subject briskly. “Bring out my white hat, and while you're getting yours, I'll give this stuff to the chickens.”

She picked up a covered granite-ware pan from the table on the kitchen porch and went down two plastered steps into the backyard.

It was a pretty backyard, one of a friendly neighbourhood of pretty backyards. The Athertons lived in the new development called “Las Haciendas” on the south boundary of the town; theirs was one of fifty charming six-room bungalows, plastered in cream and distempered pink, and roofed with pipe tiles. The gardens were walled high and quaintly, the square windows grilled, and there were arches and patios, flagged paths and fountains, all on a small but perfect scale.

The Athertons had no car in their garage, but it was useful to house their father's precious Buff Orpingtons, eleven fowls, six chicks, and a rooster, and it also sheltered flower pots, garden tools, watering hose, and some lockers in which their father carried on modest entomological experiments.

Barbara, as the chickens pecked about her feet to-day, was joined casually by a tall, loosely built young man, who stared at her through glasses and smiled sleepily as he said:

“Aren't you home early, Barberry Bush?”

“Hello, Barry,” the girl smiled, with a quick analytical glance. “Early? No, it's almost five.”

“Oh, Lord! I thought it was about three.”

“And what have you been doing all day, that you could lose two hours so casually?”

“I went out to the ranch this morning—on Tomas's milk wagon; twelve miles. And Rita scrambled me some eggs. And then I went out to Abalone Rock for awhile.”

Barbara smiled at him indulgently, scattering the last crumbs. It didn't matter what Barry said to her, or in what mood he chanced to be. His measure, by that mysterious ruling that is the secret of romantic girlhood, was always the exact measure of her own heart.

He did not suspect it; indeed, she had only recently made the discovery herself; it still astonished and fluttered her, in the secret depths of her soul. It had only been very recently, during the last few months, that she had been able to face it. She loved Barry du Spain. This—this funny shaky feeling, this strange glowing and quivering and thrilling, Barbara told herself innocently, was the great thing itself—was love!

It made her feel oddly like a little girl, sometimes. But more often she felt motherly toward Barry, infinitely older and wiser and more developed than he.

"There is a copper shine on your brown hair," the man said now, in the unmistakable rhythm of the sonnet, "as if from out your mother earth you drew bright metal strands to make a part of you—a fillet, like her hand in blessing, there! Yet, I, your poet——" He stopped short.

"Barry, you aren't making that up as you go along!"

"Well—kinder——"

"Well, I think that's perfectly charming! Why on *earth* don't you write them down and make them into a book? Now, come into the kitchen and let me get a pencil, and go on with that poem 'To Barbara, in a June Sunset.'"

"Oh, forget it! Speaking of sunset, *look* at it, Barberrry Bush! And you talk about kitchens and pencils!"

She stood beside him, erect and slender and tall, but not as tall as he, even though his broad shoulders drooped a little toward her, and the characteristic attitude of his head was to be just a hint lowered toward the world. Barry was an enormous person, at twenty-five, lean, loosely built, strong. His bones were big, his shoulders wide, his arms and legs long. His hair was black, worn in loose shining scallops pushed carelessly from a thoughtful forehead, and his pleasant, blinking eyes were very, very blue. He had a husky, drawling voice, a beautiful mouth whose smile showed splendid even teeth, and the rather high cheek bones and slightly underslung jaw that hinted at his Spanish blood.

"By golly, I met the most interesting man I ever saw in my life to-day!" he said now suddenly.

Babs had been dreaming; wondering what it would be like to have this man's love. She could love him, of course, any woman could. But suppose *he* loved, some day? Suppose he suddenly began to experience the trembling and the ecstasies; ah, what a titanic and glorious person Barry would be then!

"Barry, were you ever in love?" she wanted to ask him. But because her own feelings toward him were so vital a part of her being, she did not dare. She concentrated her attention resolutely upon what he was saying.

"Cotter, that's his name. He's the tall red-headed guy who goes around the Nation House, cleaning things."

The girl gave a scandalized laugh.

"Not the person who sweeps the sidewalk and washes the windows?"

"That's the one," Barry agreed eagerly. "He's a wonder. It seems—it's the most interesting thing you ever heard!—it seems——"

"Babs, aren't we going down to Bartell's for sodas?" Amy called patiently, at this point, from the house.

Babs, who had been laughing indulgently at Barry, felt a little check. Somehow his enthusiastic friendship for the servant at the Nation House did not seem so amusing when Amy, coldly unsympathetic, was also a listener.

“His father was in a circus,” Barry resumed the story, when they were walking down the street, “and this kid, when he was only about eight, used to have to——”

Amy’s patient glance met her sister’s eye. Barbara found herself wishing that Barry, by some inspiration, might some day suspect that Amy did not like him.

CHAPTER II

They walked north through the plaster gates, with chains and tiles, at the entrance of Las Haciendas, and through the edges of the town's aristocratic quarters, where the Poetts and the Wilsons and the Mackenzies lived, in old-fashioned wooden houses surrounded by enormous trees and deep gardens.

Then came a wooden bridge across a little river, and then, irregularly set, and with other streets crisscrossing it at all sorts of angles, came Washington Street, the principal thoroughfare of the town, faced on both sides with shop windows and dentists' doorways and the big entrances of hotels. Cars were parked at angles between painted white lines, all along the curbs, and there was a crowd outside the Post Office; the mail was in.

Sunset light was streaming along Washington Street, and the brick spire of an old church, set squarely across it, half a mile away, finished the western vista with a note of Old World picturesqueness. All the left-hand streets led to the sea, and wore little signs: "To the Beach," "To the Casino," "To Skinner's Auto Park," for the benefit of visitors. On the northeast side of the town there were low cliffs, on which were perched cheap little summer hotels, not yet opened for the summer season. The town of Cottonwood doubled its population during the school vacation. But the natives, like the Atherton girls and the Poetts and the Roaches, rather despised this noisy and intrusive element, and liked the quiet, unpopular seasons the best, when their own town seemed to be restored to them.

At this hour, on any pleasant afternoon, groups of young persons always gathered at Bartell's for sodas and gossip. Bartell's candy store was like a club; there were other candy stores, and almost all the drug stores had soda counters. But the correct place to go was Bartell's.

The large dark space back of the shop had been decorated with mirrors, lattices of green wood, large artificial grape leaves, and dangling electric lights. It was furnished with small tables and small tippy chairs with bronze wire legs. On its walls were signs regarding fresh fruit sundaes and banana specials. One sign represented a soda-fountain clerk, life-size, smiling and beckoning in so ingratiating a manner that strangers sometimes signalled to him, to the undying amusement of Bartell's habitual customers.

Here Amy, Barbara, and Barry, nodding and calling greetings to friends as they came in, found a small table, whose damp top was immediately swept by a wet rag, in the same gesture with which the waitress put a card before them. They studied the card interestedly, although they knew it by heart. It was spattered with faint pink and yellow blots.

On one side of it was printed the list of regular sodas and drinks, hot and cold; on the other were Bartell's Specials: "Bartell's Ambassador," "Bartell's Sunkist," "Bartell's Best Girl."

"'Bartell's El Dorado,'" read Amy. "'Vanilla and mocha ice cream, apricots, marshmallows, orange ice, chopped nuts, meringue and maraschino cherries. Forty cents.'"

"What are you going to have, Amy?"

"Oh, plain vanilla—like always."

"Orange ice," said Barbara, a sudden cloud over her mood. She wondered if Barry would remember to pay for the ices.

If he had the money and thought of it, of course he would. But neither condition was probable. Loyalty to him and fear of his failing her began to make her nervous.

Suddenly a squarely built, grinning man joined them, slipping into the fourth chair.

“Hello, Barbara—Amy. ’Lo, Barry!”

“I didn’t see you, Link,” Amy said cordially.

Lincoln Mackenzie’s beaming smile included them all, but his special glance was for Barbara. He was just Barry’s age, she knew; the two had gone all through grammar and high schools together. But he looked older than Barry.

An ugly, nice red face, smooth tawny hair, and a hard jaw that suggested remote Scottish ancestry. Barry, who had all the faun’s fear of convention and formality, despised Link, because he was the richest boy in town and had gone into his father’s hardware business, after college, with the quite open intention of making even more money, on his own account. But everyone else in town liked Link.

He was not tall, but he was hard and athletic in build; he had done better in sports than Barry, though he was some thirty pounds lighter. A quite unaffected, simple, cheerful sort of person, vigorously and wholesomely interested in his car and his business, his father’s health, his sisters’ love affairs; he wore his social prominence modestly, and became embarrassed the minute he was made to feel different from all the others in the crowd.

“Inez Wilson’s cousin got in on the mail train,” he began without preamble. He put his thumb under “Ginger Ale,” and nodded to the waitress, before going on animatedly: “Say, she is one little Georgia peach—believe me! I was over at the express office, looking for some rolls of fence wire, when I heard Inez’s voice. She was meeting this girl—oh, boy! Eyes! Plenty of eyes.”

“Marianne Scott—that’s her name. Inez told me last week that her cousin was coming,” Babs answered interestedly. “Pretty, is she?”

“She’s a peach.”

“Inez is going to give her a party, I know.”

“She said something about it to-night. I’m going up there to dinner—at least, I will if Dad doesn’t mind.”

“What type is she, Link?”

“Oh, I don’t know—sort of sleepy eyes. She was all mussed up from the train, of course.”

“Well,” Barbara submitted, “I guess you’ll all come down to the Concert and Dance?”

“To-night? Oh, that’s right, I forgot. Oh, sure, we’ll all be there. Dad’s coming down, and the girls—Ellen Clapp’s beau is here from Santa Cruz—Ellen’s tickled stiff!”

“D’you s’pose she’s really going to marry him, Link? She’s come so close to it twice before this. Miss Reed, at the Library, told me that Ellen told her that she never was going to marry——”

She paused, glancing with compunction at Barry, who had quite audibly sighed. Barry loathed gossip.

Link put his big hand over the check. “Here, this is mine,” he said easily, spilling change on the table from the fingers he had thrust, check and all, into his pocket. “Seventy, is it? That’s all right, May,” he said to the waitress. “Who’s taking you to-night?” he added, to Barbara.

“Oh, Dad and Amy and I’ll come together—we hadn’t discussed it much.”

“Well, I’ll see you there, then.” They all stood up, began to drift toward the door. It was almost twilight now, and pink and yellow lights were beginning to war with the last daylight in Washington Street. There were gaps in the lines of cars along the curbs, and the Post Office was deserted.

The heat of the day had dropped with the sun; there was a delicious coolness in the air, and the heavy new leaves of the trees stirred pleasantly in the twilight. Pepper trees, eucalyptus trees, fruit trees. Here and there a branched, sturdy live oak, on some vacant corner lot, and in the old gardens beyond the bridge, magnolia and locust and poplar trees, and rose trees throwing their tentacles a dozen feet above the roofs of garages and barns.

Among the lower limbs of the trees, strips and lines of red light still lingered; the west was on fire. Even while the Atherton girls and Barry du Spain walked home, the day ended, and moony squares of pale light from dining rooms and kitchens shone in angles and bars among the little Spanish houses.

Here a grating showed a warm glow, there an iron lantern was lighted to show an arched doorway and a solid wooden door, or some unseen light caught the shining leaves of a palm.

Professor Atherton was in the kitchen when they arrived; he had put on the kettle and was placidly reading. His daughters kissed him enthusiastically, tumbling the fine snowy hair that was his one beauty. For the rest, his was an intellectual, plain face, disfigured by heavy spectacles and lighted by an expression always amiable and sympathetic.

“Pop, are you going to the Elks’ Concert to-night?”

“Pop, do you just want salad, or shall I do you a meat cake?”

“I object,” said Professor Atherton, “to Pop.”

“Dad, then.”

“Dad, too,” said the Professor, without resentment, “is a disrespectful term.”

“Babbo mio!” Barbara, draping her long person across him, in the rocker, her feet in the air, and half strangling him with a strong arm about his neck, substituted affectionately.

“What would you like them to call you? Father?” Barry asked, from a seat at the kitchen table.

His face was flushed with interest and pleasure now; he was a different being from the man who had so recently been bored and had yawned so impolitely at Bartell’s. Familiarly at ease, here in their hospitable kitchen, he was again his best self, radiant with friendliness and sympathy. Barbara, glancing at the beautiful face under the loosened satiny wing of raven black hair, thought that so might the young Byron have looked, in the flower of his splendid youth.

“Papa is nice,” timidly suggested the Professor. “We used to call my father ‘Papa.’ ”

“Papa!” they all scoffed in chorus. And Babs added, “ ‘Papa’ always reminds me of cheap picnickers, streaming along the beach, with the sand blowing into their eyes, and a lot of kids following, yelling, ‘Papa!’ ”

“No, dear,” Amy said maternally from the stove, before which she had knelt to light the oven, “we won’t call you ‘Papa.’ ”

“You are popped, as it were, for life, Arthur,” Barbara added, laying her forehead against his own, and kissing his hair lazily.

“Call him ‘Pater,’ ” Barry suggested, tipping his head to study the older man thoughtfully.

“I really think—and whenever we discuss this I always say—that ‘Dad’ is best,” said Amy.

“We are so bold we call you Father, God,” Barry began. “You to whose altars older worlds brought fear, to us are so familiar and so near we call you Father. Only——”

He stopped.

“Go on!” Babs directed him, listening, and scowling anxiously.

“Anon, sweet coz!” promised Barry. “I always hitch on that damn’ fourth line,” he complained mildly.

“At that,” said the old man, “there are those among us who couldn’t get that far.”

“Barry, we’re having hot rolls and what Babs calls ‘salad du garbage,’” Amy said. “Do you want more? There’s some chopped meat here.”

“Babs, you don’t care whose appetite you take away with your disgusting remarks, do you?”

“I devoutly hope that name *will* take your appetite away.” Barbara, now busy with the contents of a big china platter, said inhospitably. “For this is positively the most delicious salad even *I* ever made, and there’s none too much! I’ve thousand-islanded the dressing, as an experiment,” she went on. “It’s just the regular Women’s Exchange mayonnaise, with half as much chili sauce dashed in—but look, look at the asparagus and eggs and string beans and beets—our own beets!—and that alluring little suggestion of watercress. Professor, kindly move a few inches out of the main line of traffic. Amy, don’t forget your rolls. Sweet pilgrim, coming to us from strange, far lands, put this platter on the table, and kindly remember that, should’st thou fall upon thy paunch, thou’lt look further for thy faring!”

“Thousand-islanded is a fair verb, Babs,” said her father, wedging himself against the window in the little breakfast alcove where they had almost all their meals.

“I’ll bet I could get one thousand shorter words out of it,” Amy boasted.

“How many words do you suppose you could get out of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, Barberry?” Barry asked.

“Birds’ brains—that’s his trouble!” Babs said to the wall. “Why, you poor simpleton, you could get all the words there *are*, out of the alphabet!” she scoffed, trapped.

“You couldn’t get the word ‘alphabet’ itself, for one,” he triumphed. “Nor noon, nor mood, nor pepper, nor butter, nor coffee, nor houses——”

Barbara’s incredulous and astonished look softened.

“Oh, well—oh, well—of course, I forgot the double letters!” she admitted, in some confusion.

“Birds’ brains,” Barry muttered. “What did you do to the nurse, Professor?” he asked.

“What nurse was that?” asked the Professor innocently, putting up a fine thin hand to ward off more salad from the spoon Amy was wielding.

“The nurse that dropped Barberry on her head when she was only a dear little innocent, unconscious baby.”

Amy laughed deliciously. They all laughed.

“Babs, what are you going to wear to-night?”

“Green.”

“I think I’ll just wear my pink and white. It’s so comfortable.”

“I’d certainly be comfortable. It’s going to be a mob, no one’ll notice.”

Amy put her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her hands, and sighed happily.

“I’m not terribly keen to go to-night,” she yawned.

“I’m terribly keen to stay here, by ourselves,” Barry added.

“Oh, come on!” Barbara, with her usual appalling energy, was already attacking the dishpan. The few plates, the bright glasses, flew through her fingers. In fifteen minutes the kitchen was in order, and the girls had disappeared into their own room, to dress.

They had spent a hundred evenings so; it was just an Elks’ Concert, with a dance to follow. But anything, in Cottonwood, was an event. The Athertons never paid for tickets to

these affairs; there were always friends of their father or grandmother upon whose generosity they could rely. Sometimes they had six or eight tickets to a single affair and could be hospitable in turn.

To-night, Professor Atherton firmly declining to accompany them, they left the house escorted only by Barry. But before they had walked the five squares between their house and the Town Hall, a young Englishman, Fox Madison, had joined them, and as they went up the main aisle of the auditorium, between the rows of filling chairs, they were greeted by other swains, some of whom attached themselves at once to the Atherton party.

Conversation of a small-town type went on, between the chairs. Barbara and Amy knew everybody, even the crimped and staring smallest of the children; they settled themselves in a wave of greetings.

“Barbara—Father coming?”

“Not to-night, Judge. He became very fractious. I don’t know what we’re going to do with him.”

“Looks like a pretty good programme, don’t it?”

“Well, it does. They always have good shows.”

“What say?”

“That they always have good shows.”

“Someone ought to speak to those boys, down in front. It’s terrible.”

“Wait until Doc Roach gets here—we’ll see a change.”

“Hot, ain’t it?”

“Well, ’tis. Yet it was real cool outside.”

“That’s what Ma was saying.”

The rough walls of the hall, cut by high windows, had been trimmed with lengths of red-white-and-blue bunting, and there was a splendid flag hung on either side of the stage. The curtain was down, except where it looped itself awkwardly at the right, over a square piano.

The air was hot, and bright lights shone baldly down upon the squirming audience. Almost everybody was seated at least sidewise, if not entirely turned about in his chair, to see arrivals as they came up the aisle.

Barbara seated herself with a wriggle of pleasure.

“I love it!” she said.

“You’ve made yourself *think* you love it,” Barry amended. “You don’t really think of yourself as a part of it,” he went on. “You only think that these people are amusing and kind, and that you like them. You’re not one of them.”

She considered. “No, I really do love it.”

“You dramatize it,” Barry told her.

“Perhaps,” she admitted, dimpling.

“The Bunners,” said Amy, on her other side, “sent their little boy to say that the Wilsons and Link want us to hold seats for them, near us.”

She began to drape her evening coat, and Barbara’s, over some empty seats, just in front of them. Barbara’s spirits rose; a delicious feeling of being popular put sparkle into her manner and a soft light into her blue eyes. Barry sulked beside her.

“Gosh, I loathe those Wilsons!” he growled.

Babs slipped a slim cool hand into his, unobserved. Instantly his manner softened, and he gave her a sidewise smile.

“Shall we take our lunch and go down to Mission Creek to-morrow?” he asked.

She pondered, smiling. She taught a morning class in the town's nicest private school. But to-morrow, Saturday, was free. Only—only Amy always put her nose in the air at the idea of her marvellous Babs wasting half a day with a moony poet like Barry.

“All right,” she consented. They had done this before, half a dozen times. While Barbara rested, dreamed, with her back against a fallen tree trunk and her eyes on the gray stream, Barry read poetry aloud: Keats, Shelley, and the modern Americans.

There was an expectant rustle and stir all through the hall, as the lights waned, and the curtain went creaking up. Barbara saw the Wilson party with Link, wedging itself into the row in front, with much whispering and stumbling and suppressed laughter. But she did not meet Inez's pretty cousin until the intermission.

CHAPTER III

At half-past ten the elders had gone home, and the dancing had become fast and furious. A fine mist rose from the floor, and, mingling with cigarette smoke, hung like a haze in the room. Through the haze the saxophones whined, and the shuffling of feet and occasional bursts of laughter and voices merged into a sort of steady dull hubbub as predominant as a sustained organ note.

The air was suffocating. Collars wilted, the men's faces shone, the girls' dresses looked bedraggled, and crisp bobs that were rapidly losing their curl were pushed carelessly from flushed damp faces.

Barbara, as she danced with Link, discussed the Wilsons' cousin.

"Do you think she's so pretty, Link?"

"Well, she looks sort of crazy and Russian—with that black hair and white skin."

"Barry can't stand her."

"Well, I'm not crazy about her. She talks sort of affected. She's a rotten dancer."

"She smokes," said Babs, who did not. "And she let one of the Poetts—Orville, I think it was, put something in her ginger ale—I saw it."

"Oh, well," Link said, with unexpected lenience, "they all do that. That wasn't so bad."

"Link!" the girl said, surprised. "I thought you hated that sort of thing at dances."

The man gave her an odd look; there was something almost speculative in it, as if he saw her or some aspect of her for the first time.

"Let's go outside and get a breath of air," he suggested.

They went to the main door, where young Dr. Ward Duffy gallantly offered Barbara his coat. Cold outside, he said, interestedly.

Barbara slipped her bare arms into the light, soft, loose garment, and she and Link stepped out into dark, cool Washington Street. The fresh night air, striking her hot face and parched lungs, was delicious as creek water.

The little Park, spattered with blots and streaks of moonshine, was just opposite the Hall. Rows of cars, unlighted, were parked between. The night was so still that except when the trolley spun by, in a whirl of humming noise and harsh light, they could hear the sea, crashing evenly on the shore, a quarter of a mile away.

Link was not as large a man as Barry, but there was something infinitely more impressive about him. His voice, his strong hands, the keen glance of his handsome gray eyes, the male notes in his pleasant voice, and a hundred other things made Link seem more of a man than Barry. His most trivial comment or statement was taken seriously by his group, whereas all Cottonwood—and especially young Cottonwood—had laughed at Barry from kindergarten days.

Link was rich, but even if he had not been of an age and nature that take small cognizance of material things, he would have been far more, at twenty-five, than a rich man's son. He was temperate, industrious, conscientious—just a shade too much indeed, of all these good things to seem quite human. Link's wealth seemed a natural appurtenance, rather than an actuating element, in his life.

Barbara had too honest an indifference to money in her own make-up to appreciate this particular quality in him. She never thought of herself as becoming a rich woman, when the

other girls teased her about Link as a beau. Wealth, at this particular moment, would have made small difference in her dreams. She did not want many clothes; she would have shuddered at the idea that servants must positively and unavoidably be under her orders.

Books, friends, the beach, her own little waxwork kitchen, her experiments and dreams, were enough. And to these Link could only add companionship, should he prove to be the right companion, and perhaps be the means through which her innocent thoughts might go on to children—she loved children.

Now she glanced toward him, as they strolled slowly between the pepper and palm trees, and saw the glitter of his eyes, in the dark.

“I thought you hated women smoking.”

“Well, I do—in a way. At least, I told you I was kind of glad Lucy and Margaret didn’t. But—but——”

“But what?” asked Barbara, surprised, as he paused.

They were in a dark, deserted part of the Park. Now suddenly he threw his cigarette away, and caught her tightly in his arms.

Silently, terrified, Barbara bent her body back, her hands hard against his shoulders, her face twisting and jerking madly away from his expected kiss.

“I hate this sort of thing!” she said breathlessly.

Link was not moving. And after a few blind seconds of struggle the girl, held close against him, became motionless, too.

“Link, this is so silly!” she panted, trying to laugh. “I tell you I hate it!”

“Exactly,” he said, a little shaken himself, yet with a sort of easy mastery. “I know you do.”

“Please——” Barbara began, making a sudden and ineffectual movement to free herself.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” Link said unsteadily.

“Then—then why hold me this way?”

“But the point is—you’ve told me twice that you hate it. But why do you hate it? Most girls don’t.”

“I don’t know about other girls,” Babs said, warming, “but I know I do.”

“Hate what?” he asked teasingly.

“Mushing,” Barbara answered viciously.

“Oh, is this mushing?”

She jerked violently again—again felt the firm grip of the iron fingers.

“I just would like to know why all the other girls in this town will let boys kiss them, and you won’t,” Link said.

“I do believe”—said Barbara, glancing up insolently at him, with her bright, strange eyes—“you’ve been drinking!”

“Well. If I have?”

She knew him to be abstemious almost to fanaticism, and a new fear shook her. Suppose he had taken enough to make himself entirely irresponsible?

“Other girls,” he was saying, “when they like men—well, they show it. They flirt, they get kissed and kiss back.”

“Well, I don’t!” Barbara whispered, struggling again.

“Keep still. *Why* don’t you?”

“Because I *loathe* it!”

"But you shouldn't. You're young, you're pretty, and you cut yourself out of all this like a nun! When I dance with you I feel as if I was dancing with a nun. You hold off—you talk about Coventry Patmore!"

A reluctant laugh, not entirely unlike a sob, broke from her, and somewhat cleared the air.

"Barbara, how many boys have kissed you?"

"How many—— I think you're very insulting. No boys, of course, except at Hallowe'en parties, and under mistletoe and all that!"

"I thought so," Link said, with a sort of gloomy triumph.

She had forgotten everything but the argument now, and despite the fact that his fingers still kept her an ignominious prisoner, she spoke with natural interest.

"Well, is it your idea that every boy in town shall kiss the—the girl—shall kiss any of the girls you happen to like?"

Link was silent, but he sighed, on a note of despair. He dropped his hands, and he and Barbara walked back in the darkness, toward the windows that were gushing light from the Hall.

The first relieved feeling of getting safely back to her familiar moorings was presently invaded for Barbara by an odd sense of anticlimax. If he had wanted to kiss her, back there in the Park, why hadn't he done it? Was there something about her that not only didn't invite advances, but that actually repelled them?

"You don't smoke, you don't drink, you don't make up, you don't let boys kiss you," Link summarized it.

"Oh, I do make up!" She was almost defending the custom. "That is, Amy and I use powder, when we feel like it, and she often says she'd use rouge, only it always shows on her so. I don't need it—I'd use it in a minute if I did. As for the other things, I don't do them because I don't like them."

"But, Barbara, you ought to want to do them, and give them up because they aren't—well, quite nice."

They were close to the Hall now, and her laugh could ring out unafraid. Instantly the murmuring and laughing in more than one car, parked close by in the dark street, stopped as if by magic.

"That sort of thing, I mean!" Link persisted, jerking his head in the direction from which the amorous murmuring had come.

"What on earth," Barbara asked curiously, "has started you off on this track to-night? Are you so strong for petting parties and hip flasks?"

"You know I'm not. I only feel that—that a girl can carry——"

"Prudishness," she supplied scornfully, as he groped for a word.

"Well, prudishness, then. Can carry it too far!"

"Link, what nonsense! You know very well that all the mothers and fathers and clergymen in the country have been perfectly aghast at the way young people have been going on, at dances and roadhouses, and the way they've been running round in motor cars——"

"I know it. Only—only you're too young and pretty, Barbara, to side with them."

Barbara pondered. Link was, after all, an important person in her world, and she was impressed by his stumbling and ineloquent earnestness.

"I have a good time," she offered presently in self-defence. "I don't sit around talking to the old ladies at dances."

"I know you do—or don't, I mean! But all the fellows know that you won't stand for the slightest—for the least——"

"Liberty." She gave him his word again. "Well, is that so bad?" she asked innocently.

"No, of course it's not bad. But—but things—like kissing, *do* have their place, Barbara, you have to admit that?"

"When you're engaged—yes." The girl answered promptly and dispassionately.

"And how are you ever going to *get* engaged, if you are so stand-offish?" Link persisted.

They were walking slowly up and down the sidewalk now, between the dark row of the cars, and the darker, massed foliage of the Park. The girl laughed softly.

"My dear Lincoln, *when* it is the real thing, one—one breaks. One *gives* all that——"

There was a silence. Then Link threw away his cigarette, and said discontentedly:

"Some women never get it, and never want it, and never miss it. My mother was like that. Cool—loving, but not demonstrative. She'd put up her cheek for us to kiss."

"I think your mother was one of the finest women in this town," Barbara countered triumphantly. "I wouldn't want to be any different!"

"Yes, but Mother belonged to another generation. They didn't do the things in her day that they do now."

"Exactly. And I like the old way best!"

"You like to go down to the river with Barry, and have him read his poetry to you," Link burst out suddenly, resentfully.

"Well, why not? Why wouldn't marriage be exactly on such lines as that?" the girl demanded. "I think we hear altogether too much of this sex talk. I think the whole nation's gone crazy on the subject. Companionship—that's the priceless thing. Marriage, of course, and children, and friends, and all the rest. But companionship first. I could love a person madly, I know I could, without wanting him to grab me in his arms all the time and kiss my face out of shape!"

"That shows how much you know. I'm never with you, Barbara," Link confessed, a little shamefacedly, a little resentfully, "but what I want to kiss you."

She was so much restored, after the recent indignation and fright, to her own daring self, that she could raise her laughing face toward him, visible in the moonshine and shadow.

"Go ahead!" she whispered.

Again his iron fingers gripped her shoulders, but he made no attempt to kiss her, and he did not smile.

"No, I'll be damned if I will," he growled. "Not while you feel that way about it."

"But back there in the Park," she laughed sensibly, "when I made a fuss, then *that* made you mad, too!"

"We're talking different languages," Link said quietly. Barbara, even while she told herself that she must be right and he wrong, had an odd sense of having failed him, as she walked back to the Hall.

Later, she discussed it with Amy. Amy was sitting on the edge of her bed, rubbing cold cream into her face. Barbara, already comfortable on her own pillows, on the other side of the room, was reading her Bible. Their grandmother had raised the girls with strong religious principles, and they usually read a "chapter," every night, still hearing Granny's cracked, sweet old voice on the familiar words.

It was almost one o'clock. Amy, thinking of entirely unrelated matters, while listening dreamily to the story of the Prodigal Son, yawned undisguisedly and ruffled her chestnut hair.

“Amy, do you think I’m a prude?” Barbara demanded suddenly. “Well, Link does,” she added aggrievedly, as Amy laughed.

“Did he say so?” Amy asked, instantly alert.

“Practically.”

“Oh, Babs, I think he is really crazy about you!” Amy said elatedly. “Imagine. With all the girls in town after him! I knew his never forgetting your birthday meant something!”

“He thinks girls ought to go in for kissing and petting and all the rest of it!” Barbara observed.

“Link Mackenzie! He does not. Maybe,” Amy admitted, “he wanted to kiss *you*.”

“No, it wasn’t that. But he said that—that side of it was important. The—the animal side. He didn’t use that phrase, but that was what he meant.”

Amy hesitated, looking thoughtfully at her sister.

“Well—and don’t you think so, Babs?”

“Of course I think so—after you’re married.”

“But—but the point is, Babs, that you can’t just decide about it like that. It’s an impulse—an emotion—it’s like getting hungry. It takes possession of you!”

Barbara flushed darkly.

“I think that’s disgusting,” she said briefly, in distaste.

“Well, it can be *made* disgusting,” Amy admitted, “all those girls going out between dances to sit in cars with boys, and get kissed, and so on—Mrs. Cobb was saying to-night, when they brought us home, that she actually hates to chaperon most girls nowadays, even the daughters of her oldest friends, because she never knows what’s going on. But—but it isn’t *all* disgusting, Babs.”

“To me it is,” Barbara said decisively. “Oh, I can’t see,” she went on impatiently, “why there has to be so much fuss about it! Everyone talking about uncontrollable passions! I’d be ashamed to have any feeling I couldn’t control.”

Amy was silent for a long minute, and Babs innocently suspected that she had entirely lost interest in the subject when she said suddenly:

“Sis, falling in love *is* that.”

“Nonsense!” Barbara scoffed, but a little uneasily. “I’ve been having beaux since I was fifteen.”

“That’s just a phrase you use,” Amy interrupted with unusual firmness. “Of course, you’ve had boy friends, and men have loved you. But you’ve never been in love, Babs.”

Barbara, with a sudden quickening of heart beats, decided that this was the time for the revelation.

“Amy, I think I am in love,” she said faintly. And she added, “with Barry du Spain.”

Amy, whose face had lighted it the first admission, laughed scornfully.

“Babs, don’t talk nonsense! Why, Barry isn’t a *man*. He’s just a dreaming kid, a poet. He idolizes you, the way he would a Madonna painted on a wall.”

“Do you think he does?” Barbara asked eagerly, diverted.

“Of course I think he does—I know he does, because lately he’s been acting so pettish and silly. But Barry doesn’t know anything about real love, any more than you do!”

“Any more than I do!” Barbara echoed, affronted. “Well, I’ll bet I could have Link Mackenzie to-morrow, if I wanted him!”

“I think you could, too, darling. But I see poor Link’s meaning. He wants you to—well, to kiss back, to sit in his lap——” She stopped, laughing ashamedly.

“Ugh, you make me sick!” Barbara ejaculated.

“Well, I know, and I was only fooling, in a way,” Amy hastened to apologize. “But the truth is, Babs, that, for all your smartness, you’re only a little girl in lots of ways. You haven’t waked up. Now, I’m not half as popular with the boys as you are—or as you *could* be,” Amy altered it thoughtfully. “But I understand all this more. You’ve got to—if you want to get a man and hold a man—you’ve got to let go, in these days.”

“Amelia Atherton, what would Granny say to that?”

“What all the grannies *are* saying, I suppose,” Amy admitted meekly.

“Companionship, liking the same things, laughing at the same jokes——” Barbara began magnificently.

“My dear Babs, any woman could have all that with any man and not do her husband the slightest wrong,” Amy said sensibly, in the pause. “Don’t talk nonsense! If that were enough, we would never hear of scandals and divorces and the grand passion and all the rest of it.”

“Then,” said Barbara sulkily, “I devoutly trust that I will never experience the grand passion!”

“Well, you *will*,” Amy predicted. “And meanwhile,” she added, coaxingly and affectionately, “here is Link Mackenzie, the finest match in town, just ready to fall in love with you, if he isn’t already. All you have to do is be gentle—loving——”

“My dear Amy, when we meet Link at Bartell’s, I’m crazy about him. When he gets all hoarse and gentle at dances, and wants to paw me—and mutter things close in my ear—and mash kisses on to me——”

“Babs!” Amy gasped and laughed, scarlet, her hands over her ears.

“I’d much rather be down on the creek, making little water-dog villages with Barry!” Barbara finished.

“Well, I don’t care whether you marry Link or not,” Amy said finally, “but I will say that, if you go on much further with Barry du Spain, making him think he’s a genius, and playing around with him as if you were both eight years old, then I’ll think you’re a fool!”

But, being Amy, she said it so pleadingly, so mildly, so adoringly indeed, that Barbara could not be hurt. It never occurred to her to be hurt at Amy, for beneath everything that Amy said, there ran, sure and strong, the river of her love for her sister.

“Barry’s the handsomest man I ever saw in my life, and Inez’s cousin said so, too,” Barbara said now, subsiding.

“’Andsome is as ’andsome does, miss!” said Amy. “She can have him. That’d be a very nice match.”

“He loathes her.”

“Well, you look out, or she’ll get Link. She’s very different from Inez. She’s a siren, that girl.”

“She can have him!” Barbara snapped off her night light, threw her pillow on the floor. The waning moonlight streamed in bars and angles across the room. “Good-night, darling,” she said. And Amy, vaguely fretted, and lying wakeful, only had to wait one minute to hear her sister’s innocent, deep breathing in her first sleep.

CHAPTER IV

Barbara would have slept less soundly, perhaps, had she been able to hear another conversation, again between two girls, only a few blocks away.

Inez Wilson, the town's richest girl, slender, sallow, fair, and not without a sort of lifeless beauty, was seated on the foot of her visitor's bed. Marianne Scott, twenty-six, dark, strikingly handsome, sat up in her pillows and hugged her knees, and occasionally looked self-consciously at herself in the mirror, far across the darkened room. The girls talked in cautious undertones; the household was long asleep.

"No, not the pretty, neat-looking one. The tall one, with the reddish hair."

"That's Barbara Atherton. They're sisters. The Englishman you liked was with them."

"Fox—what's his name? Yes, he was rather amusing," Marianne said, in her cool, sophisticated tones.

"Fox Madison. He's a younger son—we all think he got into some trouble at home. Anyway, his family in England send him about five hundred a quarter to stay away."

"Exactly! He looks the part. But to go back to the red-headed girls—who are they?"

"The Athertons? Well, they were the big people of the place a few years ago. Their grandmother was old Mrs. Bush—their grandfather was an Englishman who came out here in '49, or something, and practically owned the whole place. But their mother died when Barbara was about three, and their father was a professor at some college, and he retired, or something, and they sold the old Bush place and bought a little Spanish bungalow, here, and they live there."

"Not rich?" Marianne questioned, raising the fine, plucked line of beautifully groomed eyebrows.

"Oh, no—not now. But everyone likes them. Barbara is one of the most popular girls in town!"

"That's the neat little one?"

"No. That's Amy. She's terribly nice, too. She was in my grade all through school. She has a job in the Post Office, and Barbara teaches in the Montessori School."

The visitor smiled cryptically, narrowed her long, sloe-black eyes, and bit her brilliant, scarlet-dyed lower lip.

"And the young Greek god?"

"That's Barry du Spain. He *is* handsome, isn't he?" Inez agreed interestedly.

"Handsome! He's the most heavenly looking thing I ever laid my eyes upon. That ivory skin, and those eyes, and that mass of black hair. He looks like—well, who was it wrote 'The Raven'?—he looks like Poe," said Marianne Scott.

"But, remember, you said you were going after Link Mackenzie," Inez said, laughing.

"I said so, perhaps," admitted the other girl, "when we were just talking about these boys—before I came here. But I hadn't seen—what's his name?—du Spain, then. Mr. Mackenzie, after all, is rather—isn't he?—*vin ordinaire*?"

Inez had studied French for some years, and she instantly recognized the last word. But the first rather puzzled her, and checked a reply.

"Mr. Mackenzie is rich, is he?"

“Oh, yes. Besides the hardware business, his father practically owned the whole Westview Shores development, and they made a mint out of Las Haciendas. Link is with him, and the sister’s husband, too, Otis Barnard. But they were rich anyway. They live—” Inez jerked her head backward, toward the dark window behind her—“they live right next door here, in an immense place—the mother’s dead. There isn’t a family thought more of here than they are,” she ended, in a complicated phrase that was yet perfectly clear to her hearer.

“And this Barbara Atherton, I take it,” Marianne summarized it, still smiling mysteriously into space, and biting her lower lip, “has both Mr. Mackenzie and Mr. du Spain on her string?”

“Well, in a way. Link likes her a lot; he has always been a sort of beau of hers. And Barry du Spain is a dreamy sort of poet, you know, he has no money—he just has an old ranch, down the coast, that his mother left him. But—for what it’s worth, he is crazy about Barbara, too. Only in a sort of poetic, silly way,” elucidated Inez. “He just about lives at the Athertons; their father likes him because he’s a bookworm.”

“I could get him away from her like *that*,” Marianne said, smiling a faint, malicious smile, and snapping her slim fingers.

Inez’s rather uninteresting eyes lighted suddenly.

“You cat!” she commented admiringly.

“Well, but I *could*, my dear,” repeated the other girl seriously.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. And I’d like—” Inez admitted—“I’d like to see you do it. Only—only, if you’re going after anyone, Marianne, why not Link Mackenzie? He’s really worth while,” she added, with a little giggle of excitement.

“I might take the Adonis first and wind up with the millionaire,” Marianne suggested, with her confident laugh.

Inez laughed, too, but she was profoundly impressed. She had never, in all her twenty-four years as the daughter of one of the town’s rich men, been able to take this magnificent attitude toward the attentions of young men. Inez was haughty and vain in manner, but in her soul she was a timid wallflower of a girl who suffered agonies of apprehension before every picnic, and telephoned all the boys she dared, to arrange for dances, before she would go to a dance.

She had often thought of herself as taking love affairs carelessly for granted, as the Atherton girls did; of saying casually: “I’ve nothing but an extra, Ward,” when men asked her to dance; of refusing invitations to ride or walk, rather than angling for them. But the proud moment had never come. Never until now, when she began to hope that vicariously, through her dashing cousin, Marianne, she might taste of this heady wine for the first time, and see the Athertons routed from their own field.

“I don’t think you’d have much trouble,” she said now. “She’s an awful prude, you know—Barbara Atherton.”

“Prude, is she?” echoed Marianne, with gleaming eyes.

“Well, yes. Their father won’t let them go off on motor parties, and they wouldn’t think of letting any boy kiss them!”

“Nonsense!” Marianne said incredulously, after a moment of staring. “All girls do, now.”

“Well, Barbara doesn’t. Amy isn’t so bad. Frank told me so—said they were the straightest girls in town. He used to admire Barbara terribly, you know, before he was married.”

“Your brother Frank? But he’s years older than she,” Marianne protested, finding the information distasteful.

“Oh, this was years ago, when she was about sixteen and Frank was about twenty-five. He likes her still, and so does his wife. He says she’s the finest girl in Cottonwood.”

"You mean that a professor's daughter, who hasn't a penny, refused your brother, who is one of the prominent men in town?" Marianne asked, arching her brows.

"I don't say she refused him—exactly. But I know that he had a terrible case on her—everyone knew that. You'll understand it when you know her better, Marianne. Barbara Atherton isn't a bit mercenary, really. She's—they're all different. They stay at home evenings and play writing games and poetry games with their father."

"Oh, good *Lord!*" Marianne ejaculated scornfully, amusedly. "It's about time someone came along and wakened you web-foots up," she added, laughing. "I don't see anything so remarkable about this Barbara Atherton. You and I'll get together, Inez, and give some parties, and we'll see what we can do!" she finished, on a significant note.

"I'd love it!" Inez consented, excited. "Mother would, too. You see, we've been very quiet since my father died."

"But, goodness gracious, didn't he die more than three years ago?"

"Ye—es," Inez admitted reluctantly. Her father's death had had nothing to do with her unpopularity, after all, but she hated to admit it, even to herself.

To have herself captured Link Mackenzie or Fatto Roach would have been a wholly satisfying triumph. But, since there seemed no possibility of her doing either, it would surely be the next best thing to see her cousin snare these eligibles; to have them swarming about Marianne would mean that Inez came in for a sort of overflow popularity. Inez's somewhat expressionless face flushed and her eyes shone.

"You'd like to have me marry your friend Link some day, and settle down here for life, wouldn't you?" Marianne asked.

"It would be piles of fun! But I thought you were more taken with Barry?"

"Barry? He's the sheik. He's lovely," Marianne said, "but I don't imagine myself *marrying* him!"

Inez fell into a dream in which she, Inez, was given the sweet task of consoling Barry for Marianne's heartlessness. She heard herself saying: "Some day you'll care for someone else, Barry, and love will be all the deeper and truer because of this blow."

"What did you say?" she asked her cousin, rousing.

"Has this Barry du Spain any family?"

"None, only himself."

"And the other—the Mackenzie boy?"

"He has a father and a sister at home, and a married sister, Lucy Barnard. Marianne——?" Inez said, struck by a sudden thought, and stopped. "Marianne, if you really should fall in love with either of them, would you tell him?"

Marianne's expression clouded a little, and she flushed.

"Would I *what?*"

"Would you tell him? You know—about——"

"Oh!" said Marianne then, with a proud smile. "I might. And I might not! It would all depend upon how much—how much he cared for me!"

Inez said nothing. The surety of it, the insolent, easy assurance, quite took away her breath.

"Real men," said Marianne, "don't like stand-offish girls, and the proof of it is that the popular girls are the ones who are not—blue-nosed. This Mackenzie boy strikes me as just like all the rest, and—now that I come to think of it!—I'll bet he was talking about this very Atherton girl, when he said, to-night at dinner, that he thought there were lots of girls,

nowadays, who were as particular as their mothers had been. He got quite red in the face about it. *I* said,” Marianne went on, smiling mysteriously, “that I was afraid he was trying his arts on the wrong girl, because I didn’t know *any* girl, in these days, who wouldn’t let a boy kiss her if she liked him enough!”

She paused, thinking. Then she flung herself back in the pillows, yawning, and stretched a slim hand for her watch, on the little table beside her bed.

“Half-past one!” she said. “Good-night, Inez. Ask Aunt Madge to let me sleep in the morning. I’m sunk. And don’t worry about Mr. Mackenzie; I’ve got *his* number. He’ll not give me any trouble. *I’m* no prude!”

CHAPTER V

“Why is it,” Barbara asked, in affectionate and indulgent reproach, “that you can be so charming on a little picnic like this, and when we have a big one, you can be so unspeakably difficult?”

Barry, sprawled comfortably at her feet, on the warm rocks, wound a fragrant bit of yerba buena about the shabby toe of her sturdy brown shoe. The little leaves stood up boldly and saucily, like a coronet.

“This isn’t a picnic, Barberry Bush!” he protested lazily.

“Well, what do you call it, when you take your lunch out of doors?”

“I call it heaven, Barberry,” Barry answered prettily.

“Yes, and it’s lovely of you to say so. But why would it spoil it to have others—say Amy and Ward Duffy along?”

“I like Amy, and I like Ward Duffy, too—at least he isn’t a gabbling fool like the rest of them,” Barry conceded, “but they don’t belong in my heaven, that’s all!”

“And I do,” Barbara added, unembarrassed. Barry would always pour out this sort of idealized love-making when they were alone together.

She liked it without taking it very seriously. It was only lately that she had been wondering if any real feeling lay back of it.

“You know I do!” he said. “Barberry, did you see that poem in the *Letter-Bag*?” he asked eagerly.

“No, but I have the magazine, right beside my bed. I’ll read it to-night.”

She was silent, and in the blue, still hour of the spring afternoon the only sounds they could hear were those of the sea and the wood. The sun shone warmly down upon them, and in their retreat under the young willows there was no wind.

A dozen feet from where they were established, the narrow stream known as Mission Creek widened to meet the ocean waters. To the south ran the long, lazy curves of the ocean shore, broken here and there by the roofs of old farmhouses, buried in plantations of eucalyptus and pepper and dismal cypress trees. The northern aspect was cut away by the cliff behind them.

Mission Creek, a coffee-coloured torrent in winter, a thin, pooled thread of silver in summer, emerged from a tangle of mallows, willows, high cat-tailed grasses and tangled undergrowth, just below the bridge, a mile above. From that point it took on an ocean quality; there was white sand on its banks, where gulls swooped and peeped above the bewildered heads of grazing cattle, and the fresh, sparkling waters of the stream were met by a ruffle of gray salt water, surging to and fro with the shallow tides.

On this perfect afternoon, the tide was receding, in a series of wide, leisurely, frothy curves on the sands, and the gulls, enormous flocks of them, were walking with dainty little twisting motions on the wet strand that mirrored their gray and white bodies.

Barbara let her clear, child-like eyes follow the flight of one of them into the bright air. The bird hung motionless, high up in the blue, not a feather or a muscle stirring, yet with perfect balance and unchanged elevation exquisitely preserved.

“Funny how woodeny and clumsy they are on their feet, Barry. Their bodies have no more shape than the little cheap boats in the five-and-ten. Yet once they are on wings——!”

“Woodeny is a nice word,” Barry commented dreamily.

“Do you wonder, Barry, that the old religious writers decided that we are all to have wings in heaven? Can you imagine anything more wonderful than lifting one’s self straight up into the air, and drifting so, for hours at a time? Our wings, you know,” Barbara said, with childish seriousness, “our wings would be at least fifteen feet long, Barry—they’d have to be. Those birds’ wings are three times as long as their stiff little bodies are!”

“Do you s’pose you’ll always believe in God, Babs?”

“I know in God,” the girl corrected it quickly, with a little stress of the second word.

“You say that, my dear, and it’s impressive. But nobody can *know*.”

“Oh, that’s where I differ with you, Barry! You know, for example, that you like these days with me; nobody has to prove that to you.”

“But I can see you, Barberry, and actually taste your stuffed eggs and chocolate cake!”

“Yes, and a good many people could see me, and even see stuffed eggs and chocolate cake, without considering that that made heaven.”

“You know, some day you’ll stop believing in God, with a bump, and then you’ll see how you’re deceiving yourself!”

Barbara’s bright face clouded.

“Barry, I hate to have you talk that way!”

“But why? My God, Babs, there you go—like all the inquisitionists! I’m not to be allowed even to speak.”

“Why do you say ‘my God’ if you believe there isn’t any?”

“That’s childish. But let’s not quarrel,” Barry pleaded charmingly, rolling over to plant his elbows in the sand under the willows, and resting his square chin on his hands. His face was flushed with the tonic of open air and sunshine; his rich dark hair was tumbled, and upon his beautiful mouth was his own impish, boyish, irresistible smile.

“Well, the fact remains,” Barbara persisted, returning to her first point, “that I think Amy is beginning to resent my coming off with you on Saturdays.”

“Jealous,” grinned Barry, not sorry of it.

“But isn’t it selfish of us?” the girl said. “When I have you this way to myself, you’re perfectly charming, and we are laughing like a couple of kids all day. But the minute anyone else is around, you stiffen; you get sulky and silent and superior.”

“You mean Link Mackenzie,” Barry grumbled, sticking small clean bits of dead willow twig into a little fence, along a smooth strip of sand.

“I mean all of them. Harry, Rita, Inez, Fatto—all of them.”

“A lot they’d add to our picnics!” Barry scoffed. “Their idea of a good time is to put a bottle up on a rock and shy stones at it, and then go over to the Casino and dance.”

“They did that *once*—when the day turned out to be cold and foggy! It isn’t fair to judge them by that.—That’s cute, Barry!” Barbara interrupted herself to say, in a pleased tone, her interest in his little fence suddenly awakened. She picked two smooth round pieces of wood, perhaps part of some old wheel-spoke, polished and shortened by the sea, from the tidal, dry, clean rubbish about her, and set them on a jutting rock, inside the fence, like microscopic cannon.

“Fortified,” she said simply.

“I adore you!” said Barry, with a flash of real joy in his strangely expressive eyes. “I adore our days together, our silliness—the day we cleaned the whole beach with rakes, and the day

we had a select academy for water-dogs! I hate their hot rooms and saxophones and perspiration.”

“But they think we’re weak-minded,” Barbara offered dubiously, biting a long spear of grass.

“Well, we know we’re not. We know we have more real fun in a minute than they have in a year!”

“But you *see* the expression in Amy’s eyes, when we tell them what we’ve been doing,” the girl argued, somewhat feebly.

“Amy’s a sweet, dear child,” Barry admitted loftily.

“Baby though she may be, she’s exactly seven months younger than you are, mouthpiece of Allah!”

“But you,” he said, “you’re *rare*. I wish I never had to be with anyone else—ever.”

Barbara dimpled, and flushed with sheer happiness. If this was not quite Link Mackenzie’s manner of wooing, at least it was as close as Barry would ever come to an expression of devotion. He was a faun, a Pan, wandering through the bewildering woods of life, and showing, even at twenty-five, the courage and character to pick out what he wanted, to revel in it, and to throw the rest aside.

Barry liked a woman for the qualities of her soul and mind, Barberry mused, not only for the thrilling touch of her fingers or the surrender of her lips.

Yet he was delightfully human, too, as witness the adventures with stuffed eggs and water-dogs. There was nothing unnatural, nothing transcendental or affected about his hearty pleasure in the childish joys of life.

That was it, really. Barry was a delicious, companionable, imaginative, and most appreciative child. And love-making, according to the new standard, was anything but that!

She felt very close to her companion to-day; very safe and sisterly and happy. It was restful to be with Barry; when they were alone together, he himself was obviously and ecstatically happy and made few demands. That she should play with him, talk to him, and let him pour about her the flood of his admiring devotion, was all that Barry asked.

After last night, with the searing memory of Link Mackenzie’s sudden onslaught still fresh in her troubled and bewildered soul, it was soothing to know that under no possible or imaginable stress of emotion could Barry, or would Barry, similarly offend her.

Barry did not expect girls to kiss and cuddle and squeeze hands. His ideal of womanhood was a good deal higher than that!

Link—what had suddenly possessed sober old Link to scare her so! Link, passionate and critical and dissatisfied—it was funny.

Not so funny, however, but that Barbara’s cheeks flushed at the memory of it. What had happened?

Resting on the dry leaves and shells and gathered seaweeds and grasses, her back braced against a group of young willows through whose April foliage the sinking sun crept in greenish yellows and ethereal golden lights, Barbara reconstructed the whole episode.

They had been dancing, and Ward Duffy had offered her his coat, to step out into Washington Street, and get a breath of cool air. No harm in that, surely? She had done it a thousand times before.

They had strolled into the little Park, Barbara’s bare arms covered with Ward’s warm, loose coat, her head bare, her face flushed and her hair a little disordered from dancing. And

Link had suddenly developed his strange, new theories about girls—girls ought to like to be kissed, girls ought to permit familiarities, even if they didn't quite enjoy them.

Barbara's face burned again, remembering the suddenness with which this argument had developed; remembering his quick, hard arms about her, his breath against her forehead, his suddenly passionate, unsmiling eyes close to her own.

It had been ridiculous and undignified. If Link Mackenzie wanted response of that sort from the girl he liked, he would have to find some other girl!

"To wait until I'm married, or at least engaged, indeed," Barbara reasoned, deep within her own soul, recalling all this in the clear, sensible daylight. "I don't believe I'd put up with it even if I were married! I don't believe one *has* to encourage that sort of thing, and pretend to like it!

"Why, my grandmother Atherton," she said, out of a silence, "lived twenty-seven years with her husband, and she never called him anything but 'm'sieu'!"

"Didn't it beat everything," Barry asked dreamily, "the way they'd have seventeen children by a man, and yet always speak of him—and to him—as 'Mr. Smith'?"

Barbara's clear laughter rang out. This was so like Barry. To see the clean side, the funny side, the historically and dramatically interesting side.

"If you married me, Babs, would you always speak respectfully to me as 'Mr.'—or better yet, as 'Señor du Spain'?"

"Why, I'd kneel down every time you addressed me and rub my forehead on the floor!"

A silence. Then Barry said:

"Wouldn't it be the authentic limit if we got married? We could, you know," he added eagerly, as the girl—yet not without a happy trembling at her heart—laughed carelessly. "We're of age. And I'm going to get a job, and I have the ranch, of course."

"Your job is going to be to write a play, little boy!"

"Well—all right." He considered it, his eyes brightening. "We could live on the ranch; there's an old house there."

"I've seen it."

"That's right, I forgot. You could keep house, and I could write a play!"

"Our eleven little girls and boys meanwhile frolicking along the beach and eating seaweed."

"Oh, Lord, no, there's eggs and sheep and milk and fruit! But we wouldn't have a lot of dirty little wet babies, Barberrry, I loathe 'em!" Barry protested jealously.

"It wouldn't matter how you felt. I'd—" Barbara drew a long breath—"I'd adore them!" she said, with shining eyes on space.

"Honestly, I do hate kids," Barry assured her seriously.

"Honestly, I know you do, because you are such a bad, jealous, moody little kid yourself. But I'd spank you and put you in the corner with the rest of them," Barbara answered cheerfully.

"Would you like it, Babs?" the man asked affectionately. "I think I'd be awfully good, if I had you all to myself, all the time," he added simply. "If Amy and Link and all the rest couldn't interfere, and you and I were just playing round together by ourselves. I'd be—" his voice thickened a little, and the black lashes misted with tears, like a child's thick lashes—"I'd be so damn' happy," he said, smiling.

"But, Barry—they'd think we were crazy, on no income at all!"

“We’d have an income. I rent the ranch to Portuguese, you know, and that more than pays taxes and insurance—or something like that!” Barry explained, his voice suddenly growing fretted and shrill, as one harassed beyond endurance by business responsibilities. “They pay me four hundred a year, and about two hundred of that’s eaten up with expenses—and the last two years they’ve only paid part——”

“They cheat you. But I’d learn ’em!” Barbara laughed, with her brow faintly lined and her lip bitten, as he paused.

“Well, my grandfather, my mother’s father, made a good living on that place!” the man agreed, looking at her with all a child’s confidence and expectation.

“How big is it, Barry?”

“About two hundred acres. And the cattle’s mine, too—only they get the calves for taking care of the barns. And they’re always killing some poor inoffensive old cow and eating her. They say she’s broken her leg or been drowned in the marsh or something, but I notice it’s never *their* calves or heifers that get hurt!”

“Would you let me run the place?” Babs asked, her fancy playing with the notion, as her slender, sun-browned fingers played with the dark hair at her knee.

“Let you run it? Why, I’d give it to you—out and out. You’d *have* to run it. I’d make you out a deed or something?”

“Poet farmers,” Barbara smiled, musing.

“Arcadians,” he substituted.

“Smocks and sunshine and grapes and candlelight. . .”

Her voice drifted into the dreamy blue silence. The afternoon was ending in soft glory; a golden haze had come up in the west, and the sea was veiled. But the air was still deliciously warm, and the shadows only softened. Quivering daffodil lights played among the young willows. And always their lazy talk had for its undertone the regular, thin crash of the shallow waves.

“Barberry!” Barry said, suddenly on his knees, his face alight. “Do you mean that we *might* do it? Are we really talking about something?”

His childish eagerness touched her, and she answered, with a new tenderness in her eyes:

“Dearest, there are so many things to think about, first!”

“No, but what—what?” he said. “What would we have to think about?”

“Everything, goose!”

“It would be such fun to give them all the go-by!” he said youthfully. “We’d take walks, and swim, and cook our meals together, and have the most wonderful times! You’d be Mrs. Barry du Spain, and the children would be Eskimos! I’m Irish and Spanish, and you’d bring in England and New England!”

“Crazy talk, Barry!” She was on her feet, the basket caught up, and swinging from her hand. “Come on, it’s after four, and I’ve got to get home!”

Crazy talk. But she liked it, none the less. It made her step joyously light and gay; it made her eyes dance with a strange happiness, as they walked the three miles home. That was the way a man and a woman ought to talk to each other, naturally and affectionately and simply, as children talk. There was nothing but danger and stupidity in all the rest, in this incessant feverish business of dancing and kissing.

Barbara put her limp, sweet, milk-scented buttercups, the first of the year, into the dishpan to soak, and went on into her bedroom, which smelled warm and close in the languid spring afternoon, to bathe and change. Her shoes were thick and stiff from salt water, and from the

roadside dust that gathers in California even in mid-April. Her hair was tangled from crawling through trees and brush, and her dress crumpled.

But the hot bath was deliciously refreshing, and after it Barbara tossed and brushed her copper hair vigorously, before slipping into the cool blue cotton that would do for cooking and for the home evening. And when she went into the kitchen, and found the last of the sweet spring daylight lingering there, and the buttercups stiff and varnished and fragrant in a pale-green and pale-gold mass, the joy of the long happy day still was with her.

Wonderful to tramp down to the beach and share lunch with a friend on the warm shingle of shore. Wonderful to come back to an orderly shaded kitchen, with angles of sunset lying in apricot colour on the walls, and buttercups smiling at one from the shining white sink. Wonderful to feel running through her veins the relaxation that follows a gipsy day, to smell sweet soap on her hands, and the delicate scorch of hot irons on the fresh blue cotton.

No girl had ever in this world had a more loyal, devoted, jealous, precocious, boyish, amusing, and ridiculous friend than Barry. Fancy being able to go off with him from noon until four o'clock, for hours of intimate and affectionate conversation, without experiencing one moment of awkwardness or sentimentality or foolishness! Laughter, plans, good stimulating talk about books and social systems and religion; and now home, happily wearied and satisfied, with an armful of buttercups!

Mrs. Barry du Spain. Barbara Atherton du Spain. It had a nice sound.

"But he'll never ask me to marry him," Babs decided maternally, setting a fourth place at the supper table in the sure conviction that he would join them. "At least, he'll never get any nearer to it than he did to-day. *I'll* have to tell *him* what we're going to do!"

And Barbara smiled contentedly, pleased that it should be that way. She filled a bowl with scarlet and black cherries—the cherries were early this year—and wished that she had taken a somewhat stronger stand with Link last night. She ought to have told him she would never speak to him again, instead of fighting like a silly high school girl, scolding and gasping, and then forgiving him meekly, and submitting to what really amounted to a scolding from him on the score of prudishness. Still, Link was an old, old friend, and one couldn't be angry with him long. It was foolish to expect him to be as fine and as sensitive as Barry.

CHAPTER VI

On Saturday nights, Link usually dined at home with his father and his unmarried sister, Margaret, and wandered around to the Athertons' at about half-past seven. Sometimes he brought Margaret with him, and perhaps Fatto Roach or Harry Poett, in which case they all played games around the dining-room table, if they felt like it, or went down to the Washington Theatre, if there was a film or a play worth seeing. Films were twenty-five cents, and plays only twice that much, so that it never was a serious matter for anyone to buy seats. The Casino down near the beach, where there was a cover charge and a cabaret, and dancing on Saturday nights, was considered to be a treat for special occasions. Motor parties reserved tables there sometimes by telephone, and the town's fastest element, a group of divorced or childless married couples, were usually to be seen there once a week.

Barbara vaguely disliked and distrusted the Casino, as introducing an element into the quieter life of Cottonwood that was not characteristic of the town. Cottonwood folk were simple persons, and the parties at the Casino had the reputation of being wild parties, and often lasted until two or three o'clock on Sunday mornings. The Roaches and Poetts and Wilsons and Mackenzies did not often go to the Casino.

Link duly appeared, on this particular Saturday night, but he was almost an hour late. It was nearly nine o'clock when the lights of his roadster began to feel their way like flashing tentacles among the plastered walls and tiled low roofs of Las Haciendas.

The three Athertons, with Barry du Spain, were in the patio, for the April night was unseasonably warm, and there was an early moon. Scarcely had the opalescent glow of sunset faded behind the eucalyptus and poplar trees that stood between them and the west before the great red disk floated up lazily from the eastern horizon, flooding the little square backyards with uncertain silver, and transforming utilitarian garages and gates and chicken-runs into fairyland.

"We're out here, Link!" Barbara called when the door in the hall clicked; "aren't you rather late?"

Link sat down on the grass beside Barbara's chair.

"I can see that your father got on to the topic of free silver and gold, and McKinley and Bryan, at dinner to-night," the girl suggested whimsically.

"No, I didn't dine at home! Evening, Professor. Hello, Amy, is that you there in the dark? 'Lo, Barry."

"You didn't dine at home Saturday night? Why, Lincoln, are you off the track completely?"

"Well, I took Inez and her cousin—Marianne Scott—out for a drive this afternoon. Say—" said Link, slightly drawling the last word—"that girl is a high-roller, believe me. She's full of the Old Nick! First she wanted to stop at the Cemetery——"

"The Cemetery!"

"Yep. And we all got into spasms, laughing at the graves. We ought to go up there, sometimes, Barbara, you've no idea what crazy things some of those tombstones have on them!"

"I remember copying some once from an old cemetery in New England," Professor Atherton said, in a silence. Barbara had drawn back a little, in the mellow shadows of the

plastered, tile-topped wall. She and Amy did sometimes go out to the little cemetery, where the mother they had never known, and the granny who had been a mother to them, were asleep. Link's mother lay there, too. He had perhaps forgotten that; and she was grateful, as the conversation wandered amusedly among ridiculous epitaphs, that neither he nor her father had followed her line of thought.

"Then we went on to Soquel," Link resumed, happily unconscious of any lack of sympathy, "and Marianne—" it was Marianne already, Barbara noted—"Marianne wanted tamales and tortillas—she'd never tasted them. So we went into a little joint there, one of these awful places with a spotty tablecloth and bottles of catsup, and we all had tamales. By that time, it was almost six, so I telephoned my sister I wouldn't be home, and we all fooled up and down the street, and went to a fortune teller—I never laughed so much in my life!"

There was amused and interested comment from the others in the group, but Barbara was silent. She did not like Link in this mood of hilarity; it did not, somehow, sound quite genuine. However jolly and spontaneous the afternoon's merry-making had been, it had been the sort of foolishness that belongs strictly to the moment; it could not be preserved or quoted or shared. Only a stupid person could possibly attempt to convey its giddy charm to others, and Barbara irritably felt that Link was stupid in thinking he could do so. Evidently he had had such a merry time that he had lost all his usual quiet good sense.

"How did you happen to start on this mad carouse, Link?"

"Inez telephoned, just before I left the office—three o'clock, I guess—and asked me if I didn't want to come over for some tennis. But when I got there they didn't have a fourth, and—I don't know—somebody suggested that we go around in the car and take a look at the town."

"And she's attractive, is she, Miss Scott?"

"Well, she's lots of fun. She plunges right into everything, doesn't care what anybody thinks of her or how many are looking on. But, say, Barbara, I came to get you. We're going down to the Casino."

"To the Casino? What's happening to-night?"

"Nothing special. But they always have cabaret there Saturday nights, you know."

"But, Link, it's so late now, it's after nine."

"Well, that's all right. They're going on ahead, Inez and Marianne and Harry Poett, and maybe some other fellow, if they can get one, and you and I are to join them."

"Oh, but you don't need me, Link. I'm not dressed——"

Amy and her father instantly joined him in trying to persuade her to go. She'd have a lovely time, and they didn't have to make it late unless they felt like it, and she could slip into her blue in five minutes. Amy went so far as to extend a slim foot, in the dark, and press it significantly against her sister's foot. And Barbara perfectly interpreted the message: "Don't let her think she can have it all her own way with Link Mackenzie!"

Only Barry was ominously and sulkily silent.

"We need another man," Link remembered suddenly, "come along, why don't you, Barry?"

"Oh, thank you, Link." It was Barry's coldest, ugliest voice. "You're awfully kind. But I don't feel like it."

Barbara added her pleading. Even though Barry would probably spoil the party, where Barry was, Barbara Atherton had a single-eyed, single-minded, single-hearted slave. Let

Marianne Scott, who had thought Barry so handsome, who had made unmistakable overtures to him at the dance last night, thoroughly understand that.

But Barry wouldn't go, and about half an hour later, Barbara, still feeling that this hysterical rushing about so late at night was extremely silly, and still disturbed by Link's elation and excitement over his experience of the afternoon, duly climbed into the roadster beside him and was duly escorted to the Casino, down on the shore.

The great place, pagoda-shaped, looking almost like some fanciful great junk, moored at the edge of the moonlit sea, was gushing raw light into the soft spring night. Jangling scraps of discordant music drifted out upon the air, and the entrance, like an old-fashioned drawbridge, brilliantly illumined, and lined with cotton palms in pots, was surrounded by the dark, shining oblongs of parked cars.

Inez Wilson had been able to get a desirable table, close to the dancing, of course. Nothing in Cottonwood was ever refused to a Wilson of the Wilson Fruit Bank. She and Harry Poett, Marianne, and Fox Madison had just seated themselves, when Barbara and Link, threading the already well-filled tables, and trying to seem quite unconscious of interested glances from all sides, joined them.

Inez was looking and acting her worst, sallow in the new shade of sickly sea green, noisy, laughing, and flirtatious. But Marianne was the most striking woman in the room.

She was a little older than the other girls, twenty-five or six, with a perfectly colourless ivory skin, black eyes, a thin and sinuous body, and long white hands. To-night she was wrapped, rather than dressed, in a brocade garment of dull red and blue and gold and silver, her sleek black hair, straight and bobbed short, almost concealed by a tightly wound turban of gold gauze and pearls, and her full, rather sensuous mouth brilliant with Japanese rouge.

Fox Madison, a florid, thin, eyeglassed Englishman of perhaps forty years, was laughing at her with that sort of proprietary pride that a man of the world feels in any clever and beautiful woman. Harry Poett, a nice-looking, simple boy, was apparently captivated, too.

"Oh, here's Miss Atherton—how d'ye do?" Marianne interrupted her giddy rush of chatter to say with a composed upward sweep of her black eyes. "Link didn't think you'd come—and I knew you would, and I was right, wasn't I? He said you mightn't want to interrupt that game of Parchesi."

Barbara, inclined to be good-humoured, laughed with the rest.

"We didn't happen to be playing," she admitted. "We were all out in the backyard."

"The——? Oh, the backyard. I see," Marianne repeated it carefully. And suddenly it sounded rusticated, to sit in one's backyard—even to mention a backyard.

"This is a wild spree for me, Fox," Barbara said to the man on her left; "after last night, to come to a party again to-night."

"Last night?" Marianne asked, arching her plucked black brows.

"Last night there was a dance, too, you know. We were all up until after midnight," Barbara reminded her, smiling at Harry Poett, in greeting.

"After midnight! Oh, excuse me, but that's delicious!" Marianne repeated, bursting into soft laughter. "Why, when I was in New York, a few weeks ago, we often danced all night," she told them, "and then stopped in Brumayer's for coffee—that's the thing to do this winter—and went to bed in the daylight. Inez, do tell me, must I be tucked up in bed at ten o'clock every night all the while I'm in Cottonwood?" she demanded whimsically.

But dance music, beginning with the squawk of saxophones, interrupted her. The instruments, played by Negroes in white frogged coats, in a sort of balcony in a corner of the

room, rose instantly to such brazen clamour that conversation became impossible. Link, with a nod for Marianne, rose to his feet, Harry claimed Inez, and Barbara was left with Fox Madison, who detested dancing.

No use to try to talk seriously, against the noise. Barbara sat with her elbows on the table, her linked hands lying before her, and smiled amiably at Fox, when he shouted an occasional comment. Chicken sandwiches and ginger ale all round, she supposed? Fox nodded, and the waiter wrote the order and vanished.

She knew strangely few of the dancers; they were mostly visitors, casual passers-by, who had stopped their cars for dinner at the Casino. "Sporty-looking," Barbara characterized them. Women underdressed, with painted cheeks and eyelids and lips and finger nails. Little dangling dresses all beads or sequins, bobbed heads tightly curled and brightly coloured. They talked to their men while they pressed still more scarlet paint upon their lips, between dances.

The evening, as far as Barbara was concerned, was a failure. Link danced with her, Harry danced with her, and both told her that she was a far better dancer than Marianne was. But Marianne was the success of the hour; no use denying it, one might as well face it.

Harry and Fox both had flat silver flasks, and Marianne toned her ginger ale with Scotch, and so did Inez. The latter was either actually affected by the unusual stimulant to become sillier than ever, or pretended she was. Presently a head waiter bent over Link, who was host at the party, and murmured that he would serve some real vintage champagne if Mr. Mackenzie liked.

Mr. Mackenzie, whom Barbara decided she had never seen to so little advantage, gave a flushed and excited assent. He wanted Barbara to drink to Marianne's happy stay in Cottonwood, with the others; but she declined, and the golden bubbles were spilled by the persistent waiter against her arresting hand.

"It's all so silly—so utterly and idiotically *silly!*" she said to herself, trying to smile naturally and indulgently, trying to stay with them, to be a good sport.

The clock on the wall said ten minutes to twelve, the band banged and throbbed like some hammering nerve in one's head, the air grew thick with dust and cigar and cigarette smoke, and the meaty fumes of food. Women laughed hysterically, made plunging movements across the tables, screaming, reaching for glasses, and were quieted by their embarrassed friends.

All the lights went out, except for a bright pool in the centre of the empty dancing floor. Into this a slim girl with big rings on first and fourth fingers, and an Egyptian headdress and belt, wriggled and squirmed her way. Her body was bare, except that her breasts were covered with plates of brilliants, and a fringed belt was loose on her hips. She worked her rings like the eyes of moving serpents.

"These people would think the Indian corn dance barbaric," Barbara mused scornfully, watching and applauding with the rest. She thought of the shingle down near the creek, of afternoon light through the young, green-yellow of the willows, of the clean sea water meeting the clear creek water, on the sandy, shell-strewn beach.

One o'clock. She was past scorn now; she was weary and sleepy to the point of agony. The open-air picnic, after the late hours last night, the six-mile walk, and these dragging hours of heat and noise and close air, made her feel utterly broken. Barbara could have laid her copper head upon the littered table and slept where she sat. And still the saxophones blared and throbbed and the Negro boys broke out into hoarse, vocal accompaniment.

Link was paying the check; sixty-two dollars. It was outrageous to tip the waiter, and tip the head-waiter, and pay sixty-two dollars besides for this preposterous, dull evening!

However, one couldn't say anything about it. Especially she, Barbara, couldn't. She had probably betrayed her bored and disapproving attitude quite plainly enough, without verbal underscoring.

Cold, delicious sea air rushed at them when they went down to the thinned line of waiting cars. Harry could take two in his car; Barbara and Fox squeezed in beside him. Link took the other girls home, Marianne cuddling up against his shoulder with a little trill of still fresh and untired laughter.

"Do you hear what she said, Barbara?" Link called, laughing, amused and shocked, as the two cars started.

"Who said?" Barbara called back.

"Marianne. She said she was running off with your beau!"

"She's the limit!" Harry Poett said, with an appreciative chuckle. "Bold as brass."

"She's extraordinarily lovely to look at," Fox added, scratching a match as they swept out into the dark street.

Barbara said nothing.

She felt dreamy, tired, and oddly quiet, all the next day. Outwardly, it was just like all their other Sundays. But inwardly, Barbara felt old and wise.

Link's sister Margaret telephoned her at about noon. Link wanted to know if Barbara could come over to dinner at one o'clock. Afterward, they were all going somewhere.

Where? Margaret didn't know. She was quite a little girl, not more than seventeen, and she was evidently being teased as she telephoned.

"Ouch—stop!" she was giggling. She was in such a gale of laughter that she could hardly speak.

"Will you—they're all making such a racket! Will you, Barbara? Inez and Marianne are here already—they're going to play tennis."

"Where are they going afterward, do you know?"

"No-o-o-o! Oh, *ouch*—Barbara wants to know where we are going afterward—stop that!"

Barbara's voice had sympathetic, mirthful notes in it, but she felt a little hurt.

"Is Link there?"

"He's just gone downstairs."

"Well, I don't see how I can come, Margaret. We haven't had dinner yet, and Mrs. Godley hasn't come. Amy and I were just getting things started, and I can't very well walk out and leave everything to her!"

Margaret protested only perfunctorily. Was it youthful *gaucherie*, or had she gathered, from the attitude of the others, that they were not especially anxious for Barbara's company?

"Oh, go!" Amy urged her regretfully, when she went slowly back to the kitchen.

"I don't care anything about it," Barbara assured her, a little heavily. She was experiencing a queer, numb emotion, not at all like anger or jealousy.

Dinner. Let's see—what were we having? Green peas that had been shelled yesterday, and that rapped like tiny bullets when they were poured into the white saucepan. Barbara put a lump of butter into them, and a wet lettuce leaf over them, and covered them snugly as she lighted the light under them.

Peas, and asparagus salad, and brown muffins, and cherry tart. The girl began to mix her batter easily and comfortably; she had been able to make muffins for Granny before she was twelve. She buttered the little pans with a brush.

"Amy, if you mix what was left of the French dressing with what was left of the Thousand Island, there'll be enough, and it might be kind of nice and light, with asparagus."

"For the love of Allah, make enough muffins, Babs," Barry said. "Six is just silly!"

"When I made six, Barry, I had no idea that you were going to come back from the ranch on the same day you bid us a tearful farewell and said you were going down there to live in holy seclusion until your book was written."

"All right—all right! That was last week. Why haul it up now?"

"I haul it up?" Barbara repeated, with indignant emphasis on the pronoun. "You started it!"

"I love asparagus," Amy said childishly, sucking her finger.

"I hope—" said Professor Atherton's bland voice—"I hope I am duly grateful to my Maker for one such day as this! The sun shining, my two girls laughing together as they prepare a meal, the fat of the land about to be placed upon my simple table——"

"Hire a hall, darling!" Amy suggested, kissing him.

"Do you include me in your thanksgiving?" Barry, sitting flat on the floor before the oven, charged with the browning of the muffins, asked happily. So seated, with his hair tossed as usual, and his loose white shirt, he looked no more than the handsome, impudent, confident child he loved to be.

"Of course I do, Barry, my boy."

"Barbara wouldn't go over to the Mackenzies'," Amy volunteered, "because Mrs. Godley didn't come to get dinner. They're going somewhere afterward, too, aren't they, Babs?"

"They may be." Barbara slipped a plate to heat for the muffins between the pot of peas and their cover. "But I don't want to go racing off all over the country in the traffic of Sunday afternoon," she objected. "It seems to me crazy. A dance Friday night, the Casino last night, and now they all jam into the car and go off again."

Her own voice sounded convincing, even to her. But the wretched little sense of being excluded, of being hurt, persisted. What were they all doing in the big Mackenzie house, where Norah was serving the fried chicken and Tilly was taking a last glance at the freezer of ice cream? Were they really having fun? Barbara would be welcome enough, of course, if she went, even now. But did they really want her?

The peas, the asparagus salad, the cherry tart seemed suddenly flat. There was a tameness in the usually pleasant process of moving a table into the patio, and propping the fourth leg with the blade of a knife, on the uneven bricks. The breakfast ingle in the kitchen was always too hot at noon, in spring. It faced southwest, and summer lunches and many summer suppers were eaten in the blue eucalyptus shadows under the protection of the plastered, tile-topped wall.

"After lunch let's make exactly four sandwiches," said Barry, when the meal was almost over, "no more, now, I loathe those shoe boxes full of mushy stuff that you have to bring home to save! Four sandwiches, and four chocolate bars. Have we any chocolate bars, by the way?"

"We have those Sanito-nervo-tonico-bites," Amy said, weakening with sudden disrespectful laughter.

"Well, they're all right, if they *are* digestible. Have we four?"

"Four? You forget that Dad sent five dollars! We have crates of them. They came yesterday."

"All right. Four sandwiches, four Sanito-nervo-tonico-bites," Barry resumed, "and the drinking cup. This is the day we're going to walk out the old mesa trail, have a drink at the pool above the trough, supper up there, and coast down this side of the mountain home."

“Oh, say—I feel like doing that to-day!” Amy agreed enthusiastically. “Old shoes, small hats, sweaters——”

“Amy,” Barbara said, suddenly taking part in the conversation, “why don’t you telephone and ask Ward Duffy to go? He’s lonely; he doesn’t have much fun!”

Amy hesitated, her colour changing, her eyes bright.

“Oh, I don’t like to. But I’d love to.”

“Five sandwiches, five Sanito-nervo-tonico-bites,” Barry altered it droningly, as Amy flew to the telephone.

“Cheer up. You’ll have a nice time,” he pleaded rather than stated in an undertone to Barbara.

Carrying the empty salad platter, he was following her into the kitchen with his hands full of plates. The girl gave him a shamed and grateful glance.

“I know I will! I always do.”

“You wouldn’t want to be skidding all over the place in that roadster, Babs?” the man, capably rinsing his plates before piling them neatly in the sink, asked anxiously and simply.

“No-o. I don’t really like that sort of thing.” She fell silent, arresting him with a touch of fingers on his cuff, her troubled eyes averted. “But—if they are going to do it,” she stammered presently, trying to make her thought clear, “if we *are* to have parties every day, and excitement—if *someone* is to be popular and in constant demand——”

“I know,” Barry murmured as she paused, distressed eyes on her face. “How long is that Marianne girl—that Scott, going to be here?” he asked.

“Oh, *she* doesn’t matter!” Barbara said hastily.

“I think she does. I think she despises us all here and that she’s just going to kick holes in us—if she can,” Barry answered with unexpected feeling.

A combination of pride and shame suddenly braced Barbara. The usurper had been only forty-eight hours in town, and here was she, Barbara Atherton, meekly laying down her arms without a struggle.

“I don’t know,” she said briskly and sensibly, pouring heavy cream from a small fat bottle into a small fat pitcher. “But I’m extremely silly to let it make me feel cross. They asked me to go and I said I didn’t want to go—I’d much rather be with my own crowd. They’ll probably make a fuss about Marianne Scott for a few weeks, and then forget her, or at least she’ll settle down like the rest of us. Perhaps she’ll marry Fox.”

“Has she money?” Barry asked, with simplicity.

“Well, some, I imagine.”

“She’ll go after Link,” the boy predicted. And all Barbara’s unworthy fears were set suddenly fluttering again. Would she really? Would Marianne Scott become mistress of the big house under the big trees? Well, what of it, if she did? Barbara surely didn’t want Link Mackenzie—Barbara surely didn’t want Link Mackenzie. . . .

“I’m never with you, Barbara, but what I want to kiss you,” he had said. A pulse hammered in her throat, to-day, remembering clumsy, quiet Link saying that, although she had felt quite composed and cool at the time. And for the first time in her twenty-two years, Barbara Atherton felt a little shaken—a little confused—over the thought of a man.

CHAPTER VII

The disquieting thought returned more than once, during the long afternoon, when she and Amy and Barry and quiet young Dr. Ward Duffy were walking; it returned often in the days that followed. Spring came to all the ranches lying on the low hills all about Cottonwood in a flood of fruit blossoms, and even in the woods, where so many trees—oak, redwood, manzanita, eucalyptus—did not lose their leaves in autumn, there was a beautiful fresh thickening of foliage everywhere, and madrone trees and wild lilacs and willows put on fresh and delicate green. The redwoods wore tiny, furry tips of blue-green, spread like fingers at the ends of their wide, flat branches; the buck-eye trees, the western chestnuts, were plumed with fragrant spikes of creamy-white bloom. And all over the hillsides, against the darker woods, the wild lilac blossomed in rifts of pale, smoky blue.

Barbara Atherton, teaching in the soft, lazy mornings, watching the children as they shrieked and ran in the school yard at eleven, and walking slowly home through familiar, quiet streets at half-past one to the house that Mrs. Godley always had in perfect order long before that time, wondered, sometimes, what life had been like to her, without the disturbing element of Marianne Scott.

She saw Marianne frequently, and when she did not see her, she managed always to have an idea of what Marianne was doing. The other girl's mere existence fretted her; everything she heard about Marianne seemed unduly important, seemed significant, almost menacing, in Barbara's own scheme.

Fox Madison, for example, the florid, big, good-natured Englishman who had been a figure in the town for twenty years, had already nicknamed her, "Helen of Troy." Helen of Troy! What was the quality in a girl, what peculiar charm must she have, when a man, after a few weeks' acquaintance, could name her so?

Fatto Roach, a tall, thin young man who had hitherto paid small attention to girls, also seemed to be strangely attracted to Marianne. Inez Wilson's house, an enormous, ugly wooden place, with mill-work decorating its turrets and bay windows, in a very jungle of garden shrubs and trees, and begonias blooming in a little conservatory off the dining room, became, for the first time in its forty years, now that Marianne was in it, quite a meeting place for the younger crowd.

There was tennis there on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and there were boys and girls spending the evening there almost every night. Twice, in her first month in Cottonwood, Marianne and Inez and Link Mackenzie, with his married sister Lucy Barnard for chaperon, went off for the whole week-end to Del Monte, and to San Francisco. At Del Monte they played golf and watched the polo and dined at Pebble Beach; and in San Francisco they shopped and went to the theatre. On the first occasion, Barbara was asked.

"But I don't see how you could possibly jam Lucy and Marianne and Inez and me into your roadster?" she had objected.

"Oh, we're borrowing my father's car. Seven passenger."

"Well, I'll ask Dad." And Barbara, without feeling much heart in the project, had indeed asked her father.

"Driving to Del Monte Saturday, eh? And coming back Sunday night after dinner? Whose guest would you be, Babs?"

“Well—Lucy’s, I guess. Lucy and Otis Barnard are chaperoning.”

“Lucy—” the Professor had reminded her, looking over his glasses in a way that generally signified disapproval—“Lucy didn’t ask you?”

“No, Link asked me. It’s the way they do things, now, making plans all in a rush, without stopping to think much of the details. Marianne just suggests something, and in two seconds they’re all talking about it. Lucy *would* have asked me, I suppose, if she had been there.”

“Oh, Lucy wasn’t there?”

“No, but Link was going on to talk to her, when he brought me home.”

“Well,” the Professor had said finally, returning to his paper, “I’d rather you didn’t go. I don’t care much about these week-end parties of young persons in hotels. At the same time, if you very much want to go, I shan’t stop you. Only, there’s a big expense to it. When the National Entomological Society held its convention in San Francisco, rooms at the good hotels were five and seven dollars a day; everything’s expensive—you’d find precious little left out of twenty dollars, after such a week-end. However, you use your own judgment.”

Barbara had hesitated, undecided, in spite of Amy’s vigorous nod, from behind their father’s head, and Amy’s mouth rounded to form the word, “Go!”

“You’ll have piles of fun!” Amy had urged later. But Barbara had decided not to go, after all. She knew, by this time, that wherever Marianne Scott was, she would not have piles of fun.

Marianne, who seemed to men the jolliest and most original of companions, was instantly recognized by every woman with whom she came in contact as a person who did not play fair. Her game was always for herself against all comers, and to win a laugh from the company, or to impress a man with her own attractiveness, there was no friendship Marianne would not sacrifice and no sensitive heart she would not wound.

Her art in drawing the interest of the group to herself, her skill in making herself seem fascinating, were helped by a sense of absolute self-confidence, of native power. And power she really did have: the strange quality of always being able to make what happened to Marianne Scott seem the important and enviable thing.

One afternoon in early June, when she had been four or five weeks in Cottonwood, Barbara and Barry du Spain were in the group that gathered on the lawn at the Wilsons’ house, to watch the tennis. The ugly big house was behind them; before them was the lovely stretch of the grass, the court, with its protecting nets etched by the delicate fingers of banksia climbing roses, and the background of stable yard and trees.

Men’s doubles were being played; little red-headed Jim Bonner and Otis Barnard were partners against Link and Harry Poett. Inez and Fox Madison, who played well, had been beaten a few minutes earlier by Joe Dodge and Link’s little sister Margaret; Marianne, Barry, and Barbara were sitting with them now, watching the second contest, laughing, gossiping, and generally enjoying the bland decline of the perfect summer afternoon.

Inez had never had such a summer, had never dreamed that she could have such a glorious time. The advent of her fascinating cousin had brought into her life all the thrilling elements hitherto denied her; had made her a participant in joys upon which she had before this been only an onlooker.

To have men telephoning to the house at all hours, trying to make engagements, planning the most delightful parties—to have the choicest group of Cottonwood’s young persons saying carelessly, “Meet you at Wilsons’,” was intoxicating to Inez. She had never had a real admirer

in her life, for all her wealth and position; and despite her carefully selected, expensive hats and beautiful little frocks, she had never seemed to possess any attractions for men.

But now all this was changed. Helen of Troy, lazy, audacious, confident of her power, had come to stay at "Pampas Park," as Inez's mid-Victorian grandfather and grandmother had seen fit to name their pretentious home; and where Marianne was, all the world flocked.

To be sure, the delicious cup was not without its bitterness. Mamma complained of the constant, demoralizing hospitality, the midnight suppers and unexpected guests, and the cook, Hatty White, who was afraid of nobody, had taken lately to the undesirable habit of expressing her opinion of the changed state of affairs, from the kitchen, in a voice quite loud enough to be heard in the dining room, as more than one guest's heightened colour and sudden nervousness had recently testified.

But these were trifles. To-day, sunk in a basket chair, with her sallow face flushed from her tennis game, and her costume quite the prettiest in the crowd, Inez felt happy to the silly point, and babbled and chattered and giggled her worst.

Barbara was sitting on the ground, with her back braced against Inez's chair. Pulled down over her soft coppersy hair was a small white hat, her white dress, opened at the throat with a turned-back collar, was as plain, as short, as modern as a dress could be. Yet somehow the costume suggested the difference, the little-girl simpleness and straight-forwardness, that marked Barbara apart from the other girls of the group. Her eyes were thoughtful to-day, as she chewed on a long ribbon of young grass, her cheeks flushed, and the line of her young mouth unusually firm and serious.

Marianne, in a near-by wicker chair, was wrapped in a thin garment of bright scarlet silk, flowered with great orange and black and yellow poppies. Upon the sleek black cap of her hair a wide red hat was tipped at a daring angle, and drawn down almost to her strange dark eyes; her bare arms were ringed with bracelets, and heavy earrings drew down the lobes of her ears. Her mouth drooped with the weight of scarlet paint.

Half-smiling, she kept an eye on Inez. Now and then, turning her gaze full upon Fox Madison, she murmured a few syllables to him. Barbara, watching her without seeming to watch her, wondered what the words were that they should hold Fox silent and content, at her knee, all afternoon long.

Cottonwood had always seemed a rather dull little place before Marianne's advent. The girls there had bemoaned the lack of interesting men; especially when Link Mackenzie and Joe Dodge were away at college, and Ward Duffy taking post-graduate medical work in Europe. Little Jim Bonner, who stuttered, and Fox Madison, who was almost middle-aged, and Barry du Spain, who was as queer as Dick's hatband—well, these were all males to be sure. But the Cottonwood girls did not consider them exactly exciting material, and "hen parties," despised by all healthy young womanhood, had been somewhat the order of the day at this time last year.

However, now Joe and Link were home, and when it was merely a question of balancing sexes, the other youths were well enough to fill in with—anyway, the effect of the Wilsons' lawn this afternoon was gratifying. Four stalwart men playing tennis, and, with the girls on the grass, almost as many more unmarried attractive males as audience.

And Barbara loved it; she loved afternoon gatherings, and all the laughter and flirting and chatter that accompanied them.

Only there was always that sinister slim figure between her and the full light of living, nowadays. Marianne Scott, with her sophisticated ideals, and her reckless tongue, and her

insolent, confident eyes. Helen of Troy!

Beyond the tennis court, and the Wilsons' old stables and table orchard, she could see the upper windows and sloping roof of the Mackenzie house through the trees. If Marianne really married Link, she would be mistress there—she would be the first lady of Cottonwood.

"Well, if that's what's going to happen," Barbara thought, "I wish it would happen and be done with!"

"Barbara," said Marianne, out of a silence that was underscored rather than broken by Inez's senseless babble.

Barbara looked up expectantly, and Barry, beside her, turned at the name and looked up, too.

"What have you done to the poet laureate to make him see nobody else in the world but you?" Marianne asked idly.

Barbara laughed.

"I feed him, for one thing. He likes my corn bread."

"Ah, well," Marianne said resignedly, "I can't compete there. You domestic treasures, you have a woman like me, every time!"

"How do you like being discussed before your face this way, Barry?" Barbara asked him.

"I don't mind it." He spoke briefly, with distaste. He would not rise to the nonsense, to the easy levity of the hour. Barry, who could be as giddy as a happy child in the Atherton kitchen, was resentful and unresponsive and deliberately uncomprehending here. Barbara could gladly have slapped Marianne for the amused and indulgent glance the older girl sent toward him.

"Why don't you clap our aces? You clap theirs!" Joe Dodge shouted from the courts. The girls began dutifully to applaud.

"Score, Link?" Marianne called. She already had everyone's given name comfortably at command; Barbara did not know whether to resent or to laugh at her enthusiastic greetings when, after a few hours', or at most a few days', separation she met "dear old Fox," or "adorable Fatto," or "that fascinating Harry person," at a dance or movie. Marianne always had the air of being among intimate old friends, always had something important for the ear of Link alone—something that had to be whispered to Harry or Joe.

"The games are three-two," Link called back, making a ball run up his racket, between games, and crossing the court.

The sun shone down upon them placidly; the longest day of the year was close upon them now, and at four o'clock there was no sense of lessening light. Deep sweet shadows lay on the lawn, the shade was permeated strangely with brightness and glowed as if it might diffuse a radiance of its own.

"What a day!" Barbara said, to say something. The strangely troubling effect of this girl was to make Barbara afraid of silence. What did Marianne think they were all thinking, in silences?

"Divine," Marianne agreed easily. "I hope the Hamiltons have such weather!"

"The Hamiltons?"

"Carter Hamilton, the novelist, and his wife. She and I are old friends. They're motoring up to San Francisco from Los Angeles, and they'll stop here with my aunt, overnight."

"Well, what if they do?" that restless, unsatisfied inner tribunal of Barbara's asked fiercely. But outwardly she made merely a commonplace comment. They must be interesting persons. Oh, Marianne said, they were. She wanted Barbara to meet them.

Later, when the game was over, and Link had thrown himself down beside Marianne, Barbara, apparently deep in cheerful conversation with Ward and Fox, could catch occasional phrases: "It made me proud . . . I'm always proud when my friends do anything well, even if it's only a game of tennis. . . ."

And still later, when Barbara and almost all the others were going away, Marianne managed to walk with Barry down to the gate. They were behind the group, Marianne quite deliberately loitering, Barry detained, perhaps against his will, by her slow step, her upward glances, her full stops in the flower-framed old path.

When he and Barbara were alone, walking home between the quiet old homes, asleep behind their trees and shrubs and fences, Barry said viciously that he loathed that sort of girl.

"But she seemed to like you, Barry."

"Like me! That was all for Link's benefit," Barry growled. Barbara, who had been oddly soothed by his irritation, did not like this point of view so well.

"Do you suppose she's really after Link Mackenzie?"

"Of course she is. Isn't he the richest man in town?"

"Is he so fearfully rich, Barry?"

"Well, he will be when the old man dies, I guess."

They walked on slowly, around the Roaches' corner, in a long slant across the Poetts' side yard, through the Duffy place. It was the same old familiar scene: upper windows opened on this warm evening, gracious pear trees and sycamore branches moving gently in the sunset air. Judge Cobb's chauffeur was cleaning the car, with a great swishing and spouting of water, and the Bonner children were having their supper on the side porch.

With a whole square block in the nicest neighbourhood of all for its own, with the biggest of trees and the handsomest of old brick fences, with awnings and a pergola, and trimmed shrubs throwing clean long shadows across the brick walls, and with the sinking sun setting the famous maples literally on fire, she came to "Major Mackenzie's place."

It had been called "The Laurels" once, years and years ago. But although the double line of tall, glossy-leaved trees grew bigger and handsomer every year, the name they had given it had fallen into disuse, and it was proudly pointed out to visitors as "Major Mackenzie's place" now. Mackenzie owned the one big hardware store, and was interested besides in real estate; Mackenzie was on the School Board and the Board of Health, and he had been Mayor three times.

Across the side street, facing the south front of his property, was the pretty, modern home of his older daughter, Lucy, who was Mrs. Otis Barnard now. Lucy had a fat baby daughter of two, named Margaret for her sister and her mother, and every woman in town had known every amazing detail of Lucy Mackenzie's wedding outfit, and of the marvellous layette she had prepared for the baby. Old Major Tom Mackenzie went across the road every evening at about five o'clock to see his granddaughter get her bath and her supper, and be laid, cool and sweet and powdered and tiny, in her white crib, with her big white bear.

And Cottonwood, knowing this, knew that old Major Tom would like to see his son married, too; like to see Link's children running about the place, some day. If Link and Inez had fancied each other, he would have been well pleased, because Inez would have plenty of money some day, and he had known and liked her father. But if the boy preferred some other girl—that red-headed Atherton girl, for example, well—Major Mackenzie had known that family all his life, too, and her grandmother, old Mrs. Bush, had been a fine old lady.

Barbara, as she and Barry walked past the Mackenzie place to-night, found herself wondering what old Major Tom would think of Marianne, and felt a sudden pang of homesickness for the old days and the old ways that seemed to be so peculiarly threatened; that seemed already gone into the past. What simple, happy times they all had had, only a few weeks ago, without any particular consciousness of being grown-up men and women, with the great problem of life decisions to face!

If Link really were going to fall in love with Marianne, and if they were going to have all the fuss of announcing an engagement, and making plans for so important a wedding, then Barbara wished, with an angry sort of ache in her heart, that she might be miles away; that at least she need not hear all about it, be bored and satiated with it.

"All the way to San Juan, for a Spanish dinner, and then dancing practically all night—I'd like to know what they get out of it," Barry said scornfully.

"Who's going to do that?"

"They are, they say. Thursday night. It sounds perfectly crazy, to me."

"Barry, do you think she's pretty?"

"Marianne Scott?"

"Yes." But she was sorry that he had known the pronoun could mean no one else.

"Sure she's pretty. She's more than pretty. She's kind of fascinating, like a tiger."

Barbara, all the way home, did not speak again.

But she thought a good deal. She told herself that Marianne wasn't anything more than an unusually pretty and poised and self-confident girl. She found these adjectives slowly, conscious for the first time in her life that she herself was neither poised nor self-confident. Marianne was not Cleopatra, Marianne was not Helen of Troy, Barbara mused; this attitude of uneasiness and fear and curiosity was ridiculous.

"I'm not afraid of her!" she said. "There's nothing superhuman about her!"

And yet there was something unnatural, something stronger than herself, in the uncomfortable attraction that drew Barbara over and over again, against her will, into Marianne's neighbourhood; that invested everything the other girl said and did with a strange and troubling fascination. Almost every day Barbara found some excuse to drift in upon Inez and Marianne, for talk, for luncheon or tea, for tennis or bridge.

If it were morning, she was apt to find them still in bed, or at least wandering about in pajamas or Japanese coats, through the big ugly rooms of the upper floor. Marianne might be treating her satin black hair to a shampoo, or a vigorous brushing; she might be at the mirror, eyeing herself critically as she applied pastes and powders and tints; she might be stretched comfortably in bed, with her breakfast tray hardly disturbed, and set aside on a chair, and the sheets of the morning paper opened in her hands.

"Barbara, come in here!" she would call. And Barbara, feeling more than ordinarily respectable and middle-class and conventional and dull would obey, seating herself on the foot of Marianne's bed, and giving the older girl the laughing yet guarded confidences that her innate fear of Marianne dictated.

"Don't tell me that you've been up since six, and fed chickens, and frosted cakes, and had a bath and made your bed, already," Marianne might protest, moving her feet, under the light covering, to accommodate her caller, and linking her fingers behind her head with the same gesture that sent the paper to the floor. Her tone would make the feeding of chickens and frosting of cakes and making of beds consummately absurd.

“But, Barbara,” Marianne would go on whimsically, “you’re young, you’re pretty—why do you *do* these things?”

“Well, I like to, for one thing.”

“Like to? Nonsense! No girl likes to. I never frosted a cake or fed a chicken in my life. I used to make my bed sometimes at boarding school, when I couldn’t get some other girl to do it for me. No, girls like to be out dancing all night, and to sleep until noon . . .”

And Marianne would buff the flaming tips of her fingers lazily, and begin to discuss her plans for the day. To Barbara’s secret surprise, she had not only made herself a sort of special guest among the conservative old homes of Cottonwood, but her mere presence among them seemed to be a spur to all the first families, to the Bonners and Dodges and Mackenzies and Wilsons and Poetts, to entertain most unwontedly.

Barbara had known Link Mackenzie and Rita Roach and Fatto all her life, but she had never been asked to dine at their houses. The older group in Cottonwood had hitherto done little to entertain the younger crowd; boys dined in their own homes, and girls at their fathers’ elbows, and if the youngsters met later at a dance or movie they considered themselves quite fortunate enough.

But now the Wilsons’ girl guest was being made the object of a number of small but none the less important affairs. Inez was also asked, perforce, as Marianne’s hostess, but Barbara was not. Barbara had shared many a picnic lunch with Link and Margaret and Lucy Mackenzie; she had often had tea or ginger ale on their lawn, and sometimes, before Lucy’s marriage, she had come home for a Saturday luncheon with Lucy. But that was as far as it had gone with Barbara. Now it was for Marianne, a newcomer, to ask her innocently if she did not think old Major Mackenzie charming at the head of his own dinner table, and to comment upon the Bonners’ cook and the Poetts’ table service.

Of course, with Inez, there were two girls for whom hostesses must find dinner partners, in every case—not too easy a thing to do in Cottonwood. To ask Barbara Atherton meant that a third man must be invited, and that, with the family included, made a pretty big table.

So Barbara got her accounts of these affairs secondhand, and bore herself with what gallantry she could command. To buffet suppers and card parties and small dances she was of course bidden, and on these occasions she always made herself look as pretty as she could, and danced with all the boys impartially: with Fatto and Joe, Harry and Ward and Fox and Link.

CHAPTER VIII

One August day, in the long vacation, when she and Amy had walked back from the bathing beach, where all Cottonwood's younger crowd had gathered for a dip, and were lunching in the kitchen, Amy told her that Marianne had refused to marry Fox Madison.

Barbara stood perfectly still at the sink. Fox was a joke; no self-respecting girl in her twenties would want to marry this florid, unambitious idler past forty. Yet . . .

Yet, without anyone suspecting how he felt, quietly and unostentatiously, on one of these summer days, he had actually asked her. Who else had asked her? Who else was going to ask her?

"How do you know, Amy?"

"He told Ward Duffy, and Ward told me."

"And she refused him?"

"Oh, of course! She's waiting for Link. It makes me sick to have her get him," Amy said carelessly.

"She has lots of attractive points, Amy."

"Oh, she's fascinating, of course—she gets them all. Except Ward—except Ward—except Ward!" Amy did not say the last words aloud, she merely sang them in her heart. But their truth was the secret of her indifference to Marianne's charm.

"I guess she'll get Link," Barbara observed, hoping to be contradicted.

"Oh, he's crazy about her now; anyone can see it," Amy answered. Barbara told herself that Amy knew nothing about the matter. Link was constantly in Marianne's company, and that, in Cottonwood, was quite enough to start the rumour.

"We used to have such fun at our old Sunday night suppers," Barbara mused. Paper napkins, sandwiches, chocolate, and Barbara's famous ice-box cake, eight or ten guests scattered about the little patio, and afterward a walk if the evening were warm, and games in the kitchen if it were chilly. Delicious, noisy silly games, with the girls' faces getting flushed and their hair tumbling, weak gasping of laughter, feeble and tearful screams of mirth. "I wish we could have one of those evenings again," the girl thought wistfully.

Would Marianne think it silly, sandwiches and cocoa and games? Marianne would plunge into the cheapest coffee van, or the dirtiest tamale parlour, and find them great fun. But would she make the Athertons' kitchen and the paper napkins and the little patio seem ridiculous? Barbara knew she might.

And not for the first time, nor the tenth, Barbara only waited until the heat of the day somewhat lessened, with the coming of the late afternoon, to walk up to the Wilsons' and find out for herself what they were all doing. She despised herself for going, but she could not keep away.

A tall, slim girl, with her bright hair almost hidden under her small white hat, she strolled slowly toward the aristocratic portion of the town where the Mackenzies and Wilsons lived, and as she went she felt a sort of sickness in her soul.

Anything would have been better, more dignified than this—to hang about where one was not wanted.

But then she *was* wanted; they always welcomed her most enthusiastically when she came in.

Only this was different from the old feeling, the careless, cheerful impulse to go where one wished to go, and say and do what one wished. Marianne's coming had seemed to intensify everything—to make them all self-conscious and strange with one another.

Families were driving about through the wide, shady streets, in little motor cars, as families always did on pleasant summer afternoons. Mother and father with the baby on the front seat; Grandma and the older children in the back. Barbara smiled and nodded; many of these youngsters were, or had been, her pupils.

She felt within her a deep, restless discontent with life. Why couldn't she be happy with a new book; with her father's always interesting conversation; with the beach and the patio and the sweetness of the August day; with the contemplation of Amy's quiet affair with Ward Duffy, and with Barry's unswerving, if fantastic, fidelity to herself? Why didn't the mere prospect of a free afternoon, of figs for supper, of a swim before breakfast to-morrow, mean anything to her any more?

Nobody was at the Wilsons' house; the maid thought they were all over at Mr. Mackenzie's. Barbara walked the long block, under the big trees, and between the old-fashioned gardens where flowers made swimming blots of colour in the afternoon sun.

Inez, Marianne, Link, Margaret, and Harry Poett were in the dark, handsome library, among the musty shadows and the odorous leather bindings; they said it was cooler in here than anywhere out of doors. Barbara protested that it was not so hot, now. She, Amy, and Ward were going to walk down for a swim, before supper.

The library faced north, across the rose garden, where level shafts of sinking light shone like gold gauze, and bees shot to and fro. The flowers stood erect, mesmerized into motionless sleep, enveloped in strange bright luminescence.

Beyond the rose garden was the grape arbour; thick dusty clusters of fragrant Isabella grapes showed between the folds of the cotton leaves, dry tendrils curled about them. And still beyond was the high evergreen hedge that shut off the side road: a hedge so old that it wore barren patches, where the yellowed pattern of the branches was bare, and whose thicker, brownish-green parts were etched with dusty cobwebs, spread to the last delicate filament on the dark background.

To the west, whence streamed the banners of gold and red, lay the dignified wide leisurely stable yards and poultry runs, fences and windmill and pump, paddock and cow barns. There were fruit trees here, peach, pear, and apricot, and spreading high above the new brick garage a towering fig tree, whose green-black fruit strewed the bare ground beneath. Major Mackenzie's old roan looked mildly over a barred gate, now and then stretching a wrinkled kid nose toward the flowers of the hollyhock hedge, just out of reach, whinnying softly. A faucet, dripping under a heavily leaved and heavily flowered fuchsia bush, had made a pool where wary little brown birds were drinking and pluming themselves. The fuchsia flowers were royal purple, and pale clear pink, fringed and tasselled like court ladies.

Nothing sensational going on in the library, nothing to see in the side garden. Yet Barbara sensed change, sensed import under the smooth-running surface of the commonplace scene.

Marianne, always the centre of every group, was extended comfortably on a *chaise longue*, her slim legs and crossed ankles in full view, a cigarette in her fingers, her lazy, mischievous glance moving from one face to another in turn. She spoke little, and Barbara noted that Link, sunk into a wicker chair near by, spoke less. Harry was teasing young Margaret, and Inez was making her usual unfortunate effort to lend sprightliness to the conversation.

Link was charming in his own home, and Barbara found herself realizing, as if for the first time, that this splendid place, this big brick mansion, with its shuttered bay windows and big curved central stairway, would be his some day; barns and stables, flowers and arbours, fruit trees and idling horses.

Link's wife, whoever she might be, would be mistress here. What a rôle for a girl to fill! What a sunny life with this man for a companion, and this friendly town for a background!

Link asked her to help him, when refreshments were in order, and Barbara went with him into the clean, big pantry that smelled of scrubbed wood and cheese and apples, and they got out bottles of ginger ale, glasses, and cheese crackers, together.

The maids were out, it being Thursday afternoon; Barbara saw a supper of cold meat, salad, and cake neatly arranged for Margaret's convenience in the ice box. Sunshine slanted redly across the orderly, spacious kitchen, checked glass-towels were hanging neatly on hinged poles, two moss roses were in a glass on the spotless sink. Outside the screen door, watching them wistfully, lay Link's big Airedale.

"Hello, Gob!" Link greeted him. His voice seemed to Barbara oddly quiet and heavy, somehow. The dog's tail beat an instant response upon the porch floor, and his eyes blinked, but he did not stir otherwise.

"He knows you are not going to let him in, the old darling!" Barbara said affectionately.

"He knows he can't come into the kitchen," Link assented absently.

She gave a last glance at the tray, picked a bottle-opener from the hook where bottle-openers always hung waiting, and twirled it on her finger.

"Member one night in this kitchen, years ago, when we were kids, Link, when your Aunt Lily was here, and we had a candy pull?"

"Do I?"

He put the tray down, and Barbara felt herself amazed and a little frightened when she felt his big hands firmly holding her shoulders, and saw the expression on the face so near her own.

"Do you remember the night last spring, when you wouldn't let me kiss you, Babs?" he asked, in an odd tone, and with a strange smile.

"I remember the night you mean—yes."

"I wish—" Link said—"I wish you had let me!"

The pain in his voice and in his eyes puzzled Barbara and made her heart ache vaguely.

"Why?" she whispered.

"I don't know. But I wish you had. Everything was so simple, then." Link paused. "Marianne says you like Barry du Spain. Is that true, Barbara?" he added suddenly.

"Not—not that way. At least, I don't think so." The girl spoke confusedly, breathlessly, in a low tone.

"You don't think so?" he echoed, smiling bitterly. "My dear, when it's that—you won't think anything, you'll *know*." And he jerked his head in the direction of the library. Tone and expression, when he spoke again, were full of significance. "Would you be sorry?" he asked.

It had come. It had come. No more uneasy speculation and vague jealousy and restless analysis now.

The world plunged, for Barbara, resettled on its axis, but never to be the same. The impossible had happened, the unbearable must be borne.

"You *are* sorry?" Link rather accused her than asked her, reading her look.

"Oh, no—I'm glad, of course!" she faltered bravely.

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and walked to the window, and she followed him there. They stood together, looking out unseeing at the dooryard, and the laden gooseberry and currant bushes, and the rinsed milk bottles, neatly inverted on a vine-wrapped picket fence.

"I've got it awfully hard!" Link said presently, with a gruff, embarrassed boyish laugh.

The girl sent him a quick oblique glance, looked out of the window again.

"I know you have!" she said quickly, in a low voice, her face reddening.

"She likes you a lot, Barberry Bush," the man said awkwardly.

"I'm glad!" Her tone was quite lifeless; she felt oddly numb. What was the secret—why was she out of all this? Why hadn't he—why hadn't he made *her* understand? Why wasn't it of Barbara Atherton that he was telling some other girl this?

Jealousy caught her in sharp teeth and shook her. It was all for Marianne—all for Marianne! It wasn't fair.

Gooseberry bushes in the Mackenzie side garden, powdered with some white powder; a green painted trellis behind them, covered as closely and evenly as wall paper with the clean leaves and heavy white rosettes of the Lamarque rose.

"I guess it's the first time, with me," Link was saying, in a happily shamed and shaken voice he tried to make laughing. "She's *got* me—I love her so! I want her so."

"Good luck to you, dear," Barbara said solemnly. And as she raised her innocent, troubled face, and her luminous eyes to his, he stooped quite simply and kissed her.

"*Well!*" ejaculated Harry Poett from the hall doorway, in joyous appreciation. "Really, Link—really, Barbara—"

"Oh, you shut up and mind your own business!" Barbara could say good-naturedly, instantly armed, and twirling her bottle-opener again, as she preceded the two boys to the library. "Don't worry about Link and me!"

Marianne, raising a brown slim arm from which the flowered soft sleeve fluttered like a great wing, reached for another cigarette and regarded them with narrowed, brilliant eyes.

"Link, give an account of yourself," she commanded lazily.

Barbara saw Link's answering glance, she saw his big hands tremble as he opened and poured the drinks. Marianne's power over him seemed to radiate from her like a visible aura; she had only to speak and her accents dominated the room; even when she lay still, sipping her ginger ale, and watching them all with her bright, quick eyes, they were all conscious supremely and primarily of her.

When Link crossed the side garden in the summer evenings and went up the Wilsons' drive, Barbara wondered, when he took Marianne for walks under the big, moon-washed trees and loitered with her by a paddock gate, or when they two murmured and murmured on the side porch, deep into the night, did Marianne let him kiss her?

Barbara had not wanted him to kiss her, just a few months ago. He had told her she was stand-offish and cold. Was Marianne stand-offish and cold?

"People cure themselves of the drink habit and of the drug habit," Barbara told herself sternly, walking home alone to join Amy and Barry and Ward for a late dip in the sea. "And I'll cure myself of this. I'll not think about them—I'll not care what happens to Marianne, or how much she gets out of life! I have plenty without them—they really matter to me no more than if they were European royalty. I'll be nice, I'll be friendly and interested, but I'll build my life without them. I must, unless I want to suffer frightfully in the next year or two. They'll have announcement parties, and she'll have the handsomest trousseau ever seen in Cottonwood, and the biggest wedding, and she'll be mistress of that place . . .

“She’ll be mistress of that place. And I daresay she’ll have a beautiful baby immediately, to show exactly how easy everything is for her. . . .

“I mustn’t think this way, and I mustn’t care. Now! It’s over, and I’m going on my way serenely, to find my own place in the sun. Marianne Scott may be the most fascinating and irresistible woman alive, but she can’t marry more than one person, after all. . . .

“Link. He simply worships her. Trembling and red and shaken like a boy in his first love affair . . .

“But I mustn’t think about that. I’m not going there any more, I’m out of it, and it isn’t my fault, that’s just life. Some persons have things, and some persons haven’t, and that’s the end of it.”

It was hard to say; it was almost impossible to attempt. But Barbara had at least cleared the situation in her own mind by facing it heroically, and she armed herself to accept it heroically over and over again.

The commonplaceness—the uninterestingness of life overcame her like a flood. The very muscles of her hands and feet seemed to rebel at the eternal setting of tables, the washing of dishes, the patient, merry directions to the little stumbling children of the kindergarten. Life, for the first time, had mysteriously lost its flavour.

If before this she had analyzed the situation at all, it would have been to think that the pleasant days would go on in the same fashion forever; work, laughter, home duties, sodas at Bartell’s, dances at the Hall, and summer swims on the Casino Beach. And, presently, weddings for everyone.

But already there was a change. Already she was looking back at last winter, at last summer, as strangely happy times—gone forever. Some subtle, intangible agency had altered all the old relationships, had made all the careless, casual meetings between Cottonwood’s girls and boys self-conscious and significant.

Link Mackenzie and Marianne didn’t come to dances any more; there were not many dances, anyway. And somehow the life seemed to be taken out of any event at the Hall, for Barbara at least, when she knew that Link didn’t care about it, preferred to be somewhere else. All the town knew, now, that Link was in love with Marianne Scott and that his father was furious about it.

Amy was absorbed in a quiet yet deep affair with young Ward Duffy. Margaret Mackenzie had been sent East to boarding school. Inez Wilson had gone into professional invalidism and had vague and mysterious disorders, and trained nurses. Inez always looked cheerful and was beautifully dressed, in bed, but she would speak of nothing but blood pressure and aneurisms.

Link’s sister, young Mrs. “Ote” Barnard, appeared abstracted and anxious, when Barbara occasionally encountered her; Barbara was obliged to believe that either they had all been a crazy lot of irresponsible kids, a year ago, unaware of the real seriousness of life, or that this particular gloomy, foggy autumn was really duller and less eventful than any season Cottonwood had ever known.

In November there was rain, and heavy, milky fogs poured in from the ocean, and the smoke from damp leaf fires wrapped the town in pearly winding sheets. The air was still, cool, lifeless; clear yellow leaves still hung on the apple trees, and cosmos floated like little pale discs of pink and white on the bushy, delicate green of their thready, cloudlike foliage. In the shabby gardens of Cottonwood, heavy-headed chrysanthemums, beaded thick with water, hung motionless, and from the red hips of the rose trees spiders stretched great wheels of pale silver, jewelled with cloudy opals.

The sounds of clucking chickens, fish horns, boat whistles out on the coast, came dreamily through the still mornings. Barbara sometimes felt as if she were asleep, wondered vaguely what had metamorphosed her life so suddenly.

When Amy went off with Ward for supper in his mother's old mansarded boarding house, near State Street, or when Ward took Amy to the movies, Barbara and Barry and Professor Atherton got supper together, and afterward Barry was companionable and amusing. He was quite devoid of social sense; Link Mackenzie and Lucy and Marianne meant no more to him than did any other persons in town; Barry was delighted that Barbara was seeing nothing of them this winter, and quite content with vegetable suppers, and pencil games afterward, in the Atherton house. And Barbara loved him for it.

One night, when Professor Atherton had gone early to bed, and when they were waiting in the pleasant warmth and brightness of the kitchen for Ward to bring Amy home, Barry began idly to discuss the future.

"It's a definite thing between Ward and Amy, isn't it?"

"Oh, I think so. She won't admit it, but Ward's got a chance in Los Angeles, and Amy keeps talking as if she expected to go south."

"Your father'll go with them, won't he? He says he has to be there anyway, for some lectures."

"I suppose so. We haven't talked about it yet."

"Would you go, Barberry Bush?" He was suddenly rather flushed, and his eyes shone. The girl laughed at her own confusion in not seeing what excited him.

"I don't think so. I like my job. And Dad would be back in a few weeks. We might rent this place."

She was sitting opposite him, in the little breakfast ingle, the table between them. They had been exulting over a magazine, just arrived, in which two of Barry's poems had been given prominent place. It was far more amazing to Barbara than to him that almost everything he wrote was accepted, even though the pay of small magazines for short poems was never more than twenty-five dollars, and often five or ten. Barry took it coolly, but to Barbara it already spelled success.

Now she saw that he was smiling at her, foolishly and happily, and without knowing why, she smiled back. Her beautiful sunburned hand was lying palm upward on the table, and he dropped his own big firm hand upon it.

"Ever think about marrying me?" he asked, grinning, breathless, with a boy's daring laugh. Barbara laughed, too, jerking her hand away and turning red.

"I haven't happened to!"

There was a pause.

"Why not?" the man asked, suddenly earnest.

Another silence, although Barbara, with her head dropped on one side, looked at him deprecatingly; opened her mouth to speak, decided not to, and looked at him amusedly and reproachfully instead. She again essayed words, and no words came.

"Joke, huh?" he asked.

"No, Barry darling," she soothed him hastily, putting her hand back into his, and dropping her tone to one of affectionate protest. "Only—only you sounded so serious!" she said.

"Well, I was!" Barry answered.

Suddenly, as the strange silence again deepened between them, and Barbara continued to regard him with half-amused and half-frightened eyes, he got up and came around the table,

and sat down next to her. Holding her chin back like that of an unfriendly child, and laughing a little, she felt herself caught tight against his breast, and as she buried her face in his shoulder, the better to protect it, felt his kisses on her hair.

“I love you, Barberry Bush!” he said. “I love you terribly!”

She could not repulse him; it was so wonderful to be loved, to feel this big firm arm about her, to laugh excitedly into the shining eyes so close to her own.

“Barry, this is crazy!”

“Then let’s *be* crazy!”

And they both laughed joyously, as if it were a joke.

Perhaps it was, perhaps no sensible girl would have gotten satisfaction out of the passionate devotion of Barry du Spain. But the memory of that happy, silly half-hour in the kitchen, when they had talked all sorts of absurdities, and when his eyes had looked eagerness and joy and devotion into hers, was one of Barbara’s joys in the days that followed.

Amy was busy with her own affair, Professor Atherton was not very well and was glad to spend most of the cold, foggy season in bed. No one was paying any particular attention to Barbara and Barry; for two or three days the thrilling secret was their own, making all the commonplaces of the girl’s quiet life secretly thrilling and significant.

Barry wrote her exquisite poems and little love notes. Barbara would quite shamelessly catch up a volume of Shelley or Browning, and flash along the pages until she found just the right line or phrase with which to impress him, when she pencilled little requests or replies. Whenever they were alone, he put his arms about her and kissed her forehead, or the top of her shining coppery head, or her brown, shapely, slim hands.

It was like a masquerade to both. To Barbara there was great satisfaction and happiness in making him happy, in raising his mood to absolute ecstasy, as she talked of their married-life-to-be on the old ranch, and of the days of fame and fortune to come. It gratified her deeply to see her power over him, his agonies when she was critical, his delight when harmony reigned between them.

This went on for a week, perhaps, and then, on one particularly depressing morning, he found her at home, putting the pantry in order. Her father was not well, and Amy and Ward had decided upon a quiet wedding, early in the year, and would drive south to their new home for their honeymoon. Barbara admitted to herself she was unreasonable, but she could not banish from her heart a sense of being slighted, of being left behind by the current of events. She found herself looking at unmarried women curiously; Miss Porcher at the school, Miss Bates at the Library, both happy and busy and satisfactory human beings. But—but how the years flew by, between twenty and thirty, and how odd it would be some day to know one’s self to be finally grown beyond all the silly irrational planning for honeymoons and bungalows and budgets!

It was in this mood that Barry found her, putting the pantry in order, undecided and troubled about Amy’s plans, her father’s plans, her own plans. The patio was full of fog, the air was chilly in the pantry, and scented with ammonia and wet wood.

They talked for a few minutes, the man eagerly, the girl hesitatingly, her eyes lowered, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. After that, she ran upstairs to take a peep at her sleeping father and hastily change her clothes. She came down with her new blue coat buttoned snugly about her and a blue hat pulled down over her sunny hair. They were both laughing like mischievous children as Barbara, putting her hand in Barry’s, walked beside him

to the City Hall. Young Mr. Hutchinson, the new assistant rector at St. Rita's, married them just as the noon whistles were droning over Cottonwood.

Barbara Atherton watched the clergyman seriously, saw vaguely that there was the photograph of a pretty woman on his desk, and a pen tray of hand-painted china. Beyond his study window was a cold garden, drooping in the fog. The chrysanthemums wore shrivelled leaves of black, close to their white, sharply scented blooms.

Married. Married. They were getting married. The room was warmed upon this damp, inclement morning by a blue enamelled oil stove; it sent a ring of soft light into the air, as well as a column of warmth. Married. She would be Barbara du Spain.

"Anyway, he's the closest boy friend I ever had," she thought, glancing at Barry's serious, handsome face. "Anyway, other girls get married, and it all comes out happily enough. Anyway, if he is a little bit spoiled, I'll be so good to him, and make him so happy, that he'll change. Anyway, I won't be an old maid."

It was over. "Kiss her," said the clergyman, smiling, to Barry. The housemaid and Mrs. Pheland, for the Reverend Mr. Hutchinson boarded with Mrs. Pheland, appeared fluttered as they affixed their signatures, but Barbara wrote her new name with great composure. Barbara Atherton du Spain.

Barry, grinning boyishly, kissed her boyishly, too. It was the first time he had kissed her on the mouth.

CHAPTER IX

By two o'clock, the town had the news, and the Athertons' telephone bell was in a constant titter. Was it true that Barbara and Barry du Spain had run away that morning and been married by Mr. Hutchinson at St. Rita's? Presently all the other telephone bells were ringing, spreading the tidings in small-town fashion, and women everywhere asked each other what on earth the young couple thought they were going to live on—young du Spain's poetry, maybe?

"If Marianne Scott hadn't come along when she did, Barb'ry Atherton might have had Link Mackenzie," the gossips assured one another. And many were the errands made that afternoon in the neighbourhood of the Atherton house.

But Barbara did not care what they said or what they thought. She and Barry were going down to the hacienda on the coast, for a few days, and meanwhile she was laughing like a madwoman, as she kissed her father and Amy, more full of excitement and high spirits and nonsense than they had seen her for a long time.

The plan had been to start for the ranch at about two, but it was after three o'clock when they piled Barbara's hastily packed suitcases and the box of food that Amy had insisted upon providing into a station motor car, small, muddy, and rattling, and started on their short honeymoon trip.

"Take your time," Barry said to the driver, "the roads are bad. It's only twelve miles, but you can't make it much under an hour!"

"I don't care how long we take," Barbara assured him comfortably. She was laughing; it was all exciting and dramatic and strange. Barry sat with her in the back seat, an arm tight about her shoulders. He grinned at her in friendly fashion, and she smiled radiantly back.

"Like being married to me?"

"I think—" she said superbly—"it's grand!"

"Gee, I'll bet the whole town's buzzing!" Barry said boyishly, with relish.

"Can't you *hear* them?"

A jolt of the car sent her in helpless laughter against his big, sustaining shoulder. They straightened themselves only to be violently unseated once more.

"Deetour," the driver said bitterly and laconically, wrenching at his steering wheel. And it took no more than this to convulse his passengers with agonized and stifled mirth.

"Barberry Bush, darned if this isn't the smartest thing we ever did!"

"I think it is," she said contentedly.

Hers was the attitude of the generous mother pleasing a happy and expectant child, and Barry clung to her hand, exactly like that satisfied child, saying little, utterly at peace.

When they left the town behind them, they could see the wet fog, like a pulsing blanket, rising and sinking over the flat-lands between the dirt road and the sea. The sky was leaden and low, and beads of moisture formed and reformed on the windshield glass. Sometimes they passed a shore farm whose weather-beaten roof looked deserted and shabby under the vague, funereal plumes of the fog-shrouded eucalyptus; sometimes, toward the west, they could hear the steady beat and fall of the sea on invisible rocks.

The car rattled and joggled on ruts, and the driver whistled softly the eternal "Turkey in the Straw."

“Tooty-toot-toot-toot, tooty-toot-toot-toot . . .”

“Let’s hope we get there in daylight, Barry,” the girl said, peering out at the brown meadows, the brown wayside weeds, the worn old brown “shake” fences. “For we’ll have to do some airing and cleaning, I should imagine. How long ago did the Portuguese get out?”

“They didn’t live in the old house, anyway, they lived in a bunch of cabins, down near the barns.”

Barbara laughed excitedly.

“We’ll have quite an estate!”

“Lord, I’d like to get there—it may all be in a terrible mess,” Barry presently said, with some misgivings.

“Oh, we’ll fix it up!” the girl responded confidently. But as the bumping and halting, rattling and shaking went on, she grew stiff and chilly and weary, and in her heart echoed his wish that this journey might end.

It ended too soon, however, in mishap, half a mile from the ranch gates. Fisher, after a dispassionate and almost silent examination of the broken spring, turned up his collar and started philosophically upon the long walk to Turner, the nearest village, and Barbara and Barry picked up their bags and boxes and turned their faces the other way.

The old ranchhouse looked peculiarly deserted and forlorn, as they wearily approached it, just as darkness fell. It was wrapped mysteriously and sombrely in fog, its old plaster walls were discoloured and dirty, and the great kitchen, into which Barry’s keys admitted them, was almost devoid of furniture, and smelled only of dampness, mice, and decay. There was a great open fireplace opposite the door, flanked by a large rusty range, but Barbara’s first discouraged glances persuaded her that they could make no refuge here, at least to-night, and after a short consultation, during which they sat uncomfortably on the edges of their inverted suitcases, they determined to try the cabins.

In the dirty, dark little huddle of dwellings where the recently departed Portuguese families had been housed there was not much immediate promise. But there were iron pots, and an open fireplace, and in the early darkness Barbara’s first care was to get a fire going and to find a broken chair upon which she could lay her coat and hat.

Her hands by this time were not only cold but cracked and grimy; she slipped out of her dress and put on a kitchen gingham, and forced herself, in weariness, darkness, and cold, to gather what conveniences she might into the room.

Barry made trips between the cabin and the old hacienda, bringing a kerosene lamp, and managing to find oil for it; bringing blankets and chairs, a mattress, plates and spoons.

“By the Lord Harry, they gutted the place!” he said, in disgust. “They must have gotten into the house. When I was last down here, just before they all got out, the Lord knows it was dirty and upset enough. But this is the limit!”

Barbara, as the heartening warmth slowly began to penetrate the dark little peasant interior of the cabin, laughed at his dirty face; felt a lock of loosened hair slipping across her forehead and put up a dirty hand to fasten it in place.

“Well, it was a crazy thing to do,” she said, “but we’ll get out of it all right! To-morrow we’ll open up the big house and air it.”

The heating air was penetrated by an odour of stale grease and ashes. Amy’s sandwiches and jar of jam and tin of instant coffee, opened in this strange, miserable scene, looked oddly prim and clean.

“My room was locked over at the other place,” Barry explained, “so these blankets at least are mine. And there’s a big pantry there outside the kitchen, with salt and flour and so on in it; they didn’t get into that. But they didn’t leave much else!”

“Oh, let’s eat!” Barbara said, on a long, exhausted yawn. “Oh, Barry,” she added hopelessly, “you’ll have to go back to the big house and see if there is any sugar—we can’t take this coffee absolutely straight.”

He departed again obediently, and the girl sat inert and idle, her back humped, her grimed hands motionless, her weary eyes only half open. Red lights and shadows moved about the dirty room, and outside the fog gathered and deepened noiselessly, and the sea fell in even crashes, down on the rocks.

Barry’s shoes, as he brought in the rough logs, had left deep muddy tracks on the dark, greasy floor; the logs themselves had shed lichen and bark—no matter. The fireplace was banked with feathery ashes on whose fringes cigarette butts still lay unconsumed. Never mind, to-morrow they could make everything ship-shape. And nobody need ever know—nobody need ever know—about to-night.

“I wonder if I was a fool to do this?” Barbara said, half aloud.

In another moment Barry was back, letting in a cold shaft of foggy air as he opened the door, and causing the lamplight to swoop up in a black-red gust. Barbara got stiffly to her feet; he had brought sugar, thank goodness, and a can of milk.

“Different times, when I’d come down, I’d buy stuff at the grocery,” he explained, “and there’s quite a collection of cans there. But we can manage all that to-morrow.”

He had opened the door into the adjoining room, where the mattress and the blankets had been spread, that some of the warmth from the kitchen might penetrate it. There was no light in that room; Barbara felt that perhaps it would be as well not to carry even a candle in there to-night. The place smelled dirty. All very well to make a joke of these things, years from now, when Barry was recognized as a great poet, but in all the confusion and exhaustion of the present moment, since they could do nothing to make it more habitable, they might much more wisely spare themselves further shocks.

Yawning, she poured the coffee. Later, perhaps, she thought, she might heat a pot of water, and try to clean her black hands and face. But food was the important thing at present.

“It’s only ten minutes of six,” she announced in amazement, pushing her cuff aside with her chin, to avoid touching it with her grimed fingers, and glancing at her wrist watch before the apron sleeve had time to slip back again. “It feels to me like midnight!—— What’s that?”

For there was a timid knock at the door. Barbara’s eyes widened in quick fright, but Barry only laughed.

He crossed the kitchen and peered through the door he partly opened. A pale, rather sickly looking man of perhaps forty, shabby and bareheaded, stood there smiling.

“Good-evenin’, mate,” said the caller hesitatingly. “Didn’t want to scare you or the *frau*, and thought I’d better come over and say howdy.”

Barry glanced over his shoulder at Barbara, who was poised beside the table, expectantly watching, and with the lamplight glowing on her lovely face.

“Come in,” he said.

“My name’s Slinder,” the man said frankly, “Hilary Slinder.”

“My name’s Du Spain,” Barry answered, in his friendly simple way, “and this is Miss—Mrs. du Spain.”

“Let’s shut this door,” Slinder said companionably, doing so. “Mate,” he went on, to Barry, “before you see a funny man. A man that life has handed a dirty deal to and that ain’t bitter. Crazy, that’s what you’ll say, and the Madam here will say. All right—crazy. And what of it? I ain’t so crazy but what I can do a friend a good turn—but what I can make a life a little happier for the next fellow. I don’t want to shock you or your lady here, but I’ve done time. And I want you to know it!”

“Well,” Barry commented, with a brief laugh, “that doesn’t make you any less a friend of mine!”

The man looked at him keenly, his watery eyes pale in a leprous face.

“Boy,” he said, with emotion, “I didn’t know they made ’em like you, any more. Say, you ain’t the du Spain that owns this place, are you?” he added suddenly.

“That’s what I am,” Barry said.

The man glanced from Barry to Barbara, straightened up, and spoke with a sort of apologetic dignity.

“Then I’m a trespasser on your place, folks,” he said. “Old Slinder has been living here like a rat in a cheese for a week. I ain’t hurt your place, neighbour. Your Portuguese turned your cattle on to the next farm, but a lot of ’em’s strayed back, and I’ve watched ’em for ye. I’m bunking in the little shack down here past the windmill, and I didn’t want to scare ye with my fire—so I come up. If you’ll let me stay there until to-morrow I’ll get out.”

“Well,” said Barry, “I don’t see any reason for you to be in a hurry. My—my wife and I have come down to stay here for awhile and get the place somewhat into shape. I’m writing a play, and when it’s finished, we’ll rent the place and go on to New York. Meanwhile—Barbara, how about the eats?”

In Barbara’s coat pocket there was the little collapsible metal cup she and Barry took on their tramps and picnics, she fumbled for it, and mixed her own coffee in it rather than send Barry on another trip to the big house. The sandwiches were served on the pasteboard cover of the box in which Amy—how many centuries ago!—had packed them. The stranger neatly and deftly mended the fire, he praised everything, and was voluble in helpful, respectful suggestions as to the management of the ranch.

The food made Barbara feel dreamy and stupid; she sat listening to the men’s voices dully, too tired to stir, even to begin to clear away the papers and cups.

In a very agony of effort, she presently lighted a long, new candle, without a stick, and staggered into the adjoining room, tossing the contents of her suitcases wearily about in the dim candlelight. She smeared her face and hands generously with cold cream; no towel, but Amy had spread the pretty linen covers, with their cross-stitched “B. A.,” over both cases, and Barbara used them without hesitation.

The streaks and stains of black came off readily, and she felt better. She loosened her hair and brushed it; took off her apron and went cautiously to the closed door.

Barry’s appreciative chuckles and the stranger’s droning voice were still keeping each other company; Barry was enchanted with his new acquaintance, and Barbara could hear his enthusiastic: “By golly, that’s the most wonderful stuff I ever heard in my life!” as Slinder described jails and police courts, county hospitals, crooked roulette games, and the codes and customs of hold-up men.

Suddenly a determined light came into Barbara’s eyes, and with extraordinary quickness and noiselessness she undressed, slipped in between the blankets that even now seemed none

too dry or sweet smelling, blew out her candle, and placed herself in a position that simulated sleep.

Her heart beat high, but whether with nervousness, anger, fatigue, bewilderment, or a mixture of all four emotions, she did not stop to consider.

She could hear the sea, far off in the dark, and now and then a breaking noise in the fire, in the adjoining room, and the fresh crackle of flames. And she could hear Barry's voice, amused and eager, and the droning recitation of the stranger.

For awhile she lay wakeful, conscious of her rapid heartbeats, and of the strangeness and discomfort of the sheetless, low bed on the floor of the unknown room.

“. . . goes over there, slips Con a wink, puts down his roll . . .” That was Slinder.

“My God, what priceless stuff!” That was Barry.

Barbara's eyes closed, she turned slightly, snuggled her face against the soggy pillow. She was too tired to care, too tired to remember all that had happened since she had gone into the kitchen on a foggy, gloomy, smoky morning, to put the cupboard in order. Too tired to resent anything or wonder about anything any more.

She was asleep.

CHAPTER X

In all the years of their friendship, she had often called him a child. But she was married to Barry du Spain before she began really to feel how much of a child he was.

He would be companionable, happy, carefree, and deliciously amusing when everything went exactly as he liked. But Barry had his own very definite ideas about what he wanted, and it took only a trifle to upset him. There was no laughing him out of a sulky or resentful mood.

Barbara, like a million other young wives, speedily learned how to avoid occasions of dispute. And she was rewarded by his passionate young love, intense to the point of actual agony.

He liked to be lazy in the mornings; but only until that instant when sudden interest in breakfast and the day awakened. Then she must fly to be ready in time for him. He loved argument, but she must not present to him forcefully any detail he had not foreseen. Picnics and gipsy expeditions generally were his delight; but he must suggest them. If Barbara impulsively planned something of the sort, she was sure to be met with his cool "I don't feel a bit like it to-day. I couldn't. I'd much rather stay right here, comfortable and lazy, and talk, and read, and have waffles for lunch."

But, on the other hand, simple acquiescence in his own way made him delightfully happy. He teased her, he kissed her, he was inexhaustible in jokes. His conversation had all the wild charm of Pan, at one moment wise and old, at the next fanciful and childish beyond believing.

They played about the disreputable old place like two young kittens; chasing each other through the barns and paddocks, shouting with laughter, trying a hundred absurd experiments every hour. They dragged furniture about, and walked to the crossroads store at Milo, two miles away, for wire and paint and cans of corn and tomatoes. They drove the wheelbarrow through the stiff mud to Tomas Bettancourt's ranch, next to their own, and brought back Barry's chickens, tied in couples, and clucking their sense of outrage all the way.

Almost every luncheon hour found them down on the rocky shore, picnicking with whatever their larder afforded, opposite Abalone Rock. The great black projection three hundred feet from the cliff stood out high and bold against the west, and the seas foamed and volleyed and surged ineffectually about its feet. Slimy seaweeds draped it at water level; above them were a thousand crevices and jutting edges and shelves.

When Barry worked his cautious way along the line of sharp rocky teeth that attached it to the shore, Barbara had to go away. She could not watch his progress to its perilous height, she could not answer his shouts of triumph when he stood at last on what, to her, still seemed dangerous and terrifying foothold.

He would bring her back two or three abalones, wrenched from their suction hold on the underside of the rocks, beneath sea level, and Barbara cut the delicious fish into chowders and kept the pearly iridescent shells for garden borders. But she was never quite happy when Barry went out to Abalone Rock.

Working about her home, she wore dark blue kitchen gingham, and Barry adored her in them, and interrupted her domestic duties to kiss the soft warm place at the back of her neck, where the copper curls crept down. She made him waffles and soups and marvellous salads, and they had not been married for a week before they had their favourite dishes: omelettes with melted currant jelly, biscuits with dates cut into them.

Resolutely, the girl made the world perfect for him. She was always free when he wanted to walk or explore, she cooked and painted, swept and raked, mixed chicken food and peeled potatoes at his pleasure, with her own peculiar spirit and grace.

On the Monday that followed their wedding, they moved into the big house, or rather into the three enormous rooms of it that they had had time to make habitable. These rooms were the kitchen, an icy apartment next to the kitchen, whose floor level was actually a few feet lower than that of the garden outside, and a smaller room, once used for drying peppers and hams and herbs, and reached by a fascinating flight of three or four adobe steps behind the fireplace, which was to be Barry's workshop and study.

The igloo, as they called the cold room, was intended for a bedroom, and into it they moved a magnificent old four-poster from upstairs, two large bureaus whose drawers stuck from damp and disuse, and all the rugs and chairs and smaller tables available. Even so, the room looked only half furnished, and was so bitterly cold that the kitchen door must be left open all day long, so that the stove and fireplace heat might render it fairly habitable at night.

Barbara grew tired of fighting cold; of aching and shuddering with it. November. Well, in California, February was spring—they could think of that.

Besides the three rooms, they cleaned out a sort of storeroom, to be used as a washroom until they could have it properly fitted with basin and tub; they cleaned the pantry and the woodshed, polished the twinkling thick panes that filled some of the small windows, cut away masses of dark wet vines from about the bedroom eaves, gathered picturesque bits of pottery and glass from all the upstairs rooms—the hacienda possessed about twenty rooms, and had sheltered more than that many guests at a time in its day—and banished all possible ugliness from the kitchen.

Here, on the soft old irregular floor of warm brown tiles, Barbara set her table, established her reading lamp and chair, aligned her few books, pattered absorbedly over her cooking, and, in general, lived those hours she spent indoors.

Every morning at about ten o'clock, after the leisurely breakfast they loved, and much affectionate praise of each other's suggestions for the beautifying of the place, Barry left her, carrying pencils and papers up to the workshop that was tucked in like a bird's nest behind the big chimney.

Barbara, left alone, revelled in housewifeliness. She scraped and piled dishes, straightened chairs, and brushed the tiled floor. While the kettle was heating, she went into the cold bedroom, forcing herself not to slight the duty of making everything orderly and comfortable there, even on days so cold that she had to wrap herself in two sweaters to get through it at all.

Then back to hot water and the pleasant washing of the dishes she and Barry discussed so inexhaustibly and admired so much—his mother's Canton cups, not many of them, but beauties, Spanish plates, blue bowls, old glass, thin old silver. Nothing matched anything else; some of the platters were ridiculously large, for two persons' use, and some of the pitchers were cracked.

But no matter, they all looked enchanting when they were set out in rows on the ledge that ran like a shelf all about the room. When, hot and shining, they were all in place, Barbara capably rinsed her dishtowels, and hung them over the stove to dry. She and Amy had read in the back of a magazine a reminder to the effect that this simple habit would save the housekeeper the unsavoury necessity of washing great numbers of them every week, and although they had never risen to this height at the Atherton kitchen, Barbara began her married life with a determination to adhere to it.

Then came the part of her morning she enjoyed. A saucepan of warm food—usually the cereal saucepan, for Barbara had only a few pots—must be carried out to the chickens. These pensioners, at first all alike to Barbara, and merely to be regarded as a care, had had time to impress their several identities upon her now, and she found herself wishing that she might spend hours in their company.

Instead, there were always a hundred things to do, all sorts of fascinating employments that tended to the one end—the complete restoration of the hacienda. The flags of the patio, long sunken under silt and grass, must be unearthed one by one. The old fountain must be freed of accumulated weeds and dirt, and the patio doorway, stuck tight in mud, must be put in order to shut off this little place of silence and shadows once more. The palms and pampas and roses had all grown wild, the ground was matted thick with eucalyptus sickles and pepper leaves, and rubbish of all sorts, barrels and boxes, jars and empty cans and broken china had been flung carelessly here for too many years.

Barbara, assisted enthusiastically in the cold short winter afternoons by a perspiring, radiant Barry, kept a bonfire going for days at a time. This patio, to her, represented the starting point. Radiating from the patio, her beautifying touch was to permeate the entire hacienda, the old bottle windows were to look out on roses and brick paths once more, rather than on jungles of undergrowth; the fountain was to play among the blue shadows of the old plastered walls, and doves were to walk and to murmur on the weather-softened tiles of the low roofs.

The place was built of adobe, as substantially as a fort. In no place was it more than two stories high, and in many one or one and a half. Along the upper floor, in places, ran narrow poled balconies, sifted deep now in leaves and rubbish. At three angles, house walls and balconies framed the patio; on the fourth ran the high garden wall, cut only by the single narrow, arched gate.

Barbara's kitchen window sills were two feet thick; many of the rooms on the ground floor had no windows at all and were lighted only when the shuttered doors were open. They had been used, in the days of the hacienda's prime, for storage purposes, or for the casual housing of the servants of guests, who had flung themselves down contentedly on their master's travelling bags for the few hours' slumber that remained between the all-night dancing down at the bunkhouse and the early start in the dawn.

There was no inside stairway; two or three flights of narrow wooden stairs rose from the patio to the balconies. Upstairs, all the rooms were in a straight row, with the balcony for a hallway; there were no closets, no bathrooms, no dressing rooms. The casa long antedated the days of the gold rush, of the covered wagons and the pioneers; it was several decades more than a hundred years old.

In the cellar were empty wine casks and bottles, still scented with the blood of the famous muscat grapes that had filled them. Barbara found apples there, pyramids of them, rotting and soft, potatoes and cabbages, filling the air with a decaying, mouldy, earthy smell, rows of old jams and jellies—sweet and clean when their glass containers had been wiped and the deep furry scum that coated them lifted away.

Everything eatable Barbara brought upstairs, stacking one of many newly emptied and whitewashed tributary kitchens with winter provender, in good housewifely fashion. Barry scraped and shovelled and piled everything else into a length of old sailcloth, providentially discovered just as need for it arose, and dragged it out to the insatiable bonfire. The cellar, with its earthen floor raked and smooth, its cobwebs and rubbish swept away, and a slant of

winter sunshine striking upon its emptiness and order through a rubbed western window, was so heartening a sight that Barbara and Barry tiptoed cautiously down the steep stairs more than once, to stand with their arms locked, contemplating it in ecstasy.

It was in vain that the girl determined that every afternoon she would heat a kettle of water, take a sponge bath, and dress herself freshly, with neatly brushed hair, for supper and the evening. The days were too full and too tiring. The happy hours in the fresh, salty winter airs, the happy meals, when she and Barry linked their grimed tired hands and talked nonsense for half-hours together, the novelty and zest of this strange way of living overcame her day after day.

Barry kept her supplied with heavy wood, but she flashed out through the patio and into the woodshed yard a dozen times a day for smaller kindling. There were two lamps to fill, an oily, wretched business, involving rags and funnel. There were favourite dishes to prepare, not the simplest of dishes by any means. There were soup to strain and fires to watch, and a rush to the chicken yard for a last egg hunt, and a pause by the pump to watch the winter sunset glorifying the shores and the sea, and perhaps a gossip with Tomas—the neighbour who came over every night with milk from their own cows, still wintering on Tomas's ranch.

Every day had its animated discussions, its problems, and its fascination. Barbara brought to the ranch life her own spirited originality; she had reasons and opinions about the questions of pasturage, crops, and cattle. The cows must be left with Tomas until the spring, when their own fields would be green; The expected calf Barbara herself would shelter and raise; the white one-eyed hen must eventually be allowed to set, but not until the nights were a little warmer.

It was a great occasion when she and Barry sawed into short lengths the big fig tree that had fallen across the very centre of the patio and lain there for some six or seven years, and added its chopped trunk to the wood pile beside the kitchen door. They struggled and panted and toiled over this great affair for two days, and in the increased light that streamed into the downstairs rooms, and the improved appearance of the cleared space where the tree had lain, Barbara felt a swelling pride that lasted for a long time.

She studied the financial situation seriously. Their taxes were in the neighbourhood of two hundred dollars a year, their income began with the two dollars per month per cow that Tomas, who had a dairy business, paid Barry—seven cows, that meant fourteen dollars—the occasional sale of a calf to the butcher for perhaps seven or eight dollars every spring, and the rare, amazing joy when a poem was sold, and an editor's check for ten, or twenty, or even fifty dollars gave Barbara cause for awed thanksgiving.

They did not have to buy cattle feed, for Tomas took care of that; it was only a bag of chicken grain now and then, their own food, incidentals, and—some day, of course—new clothes. Still, even these unimportant-sounding items had a perplexing way of amounting to comparatively large sums. Stamps and long envelopes made holes in silver dollars; new axes cost almost five, and even innocent-looking lengths of glass-towelling, and rope at nine cents a foot, came to surprising totals. Barbara bought her butter from Tomas's wife, a sloe-eyed little Portuguese who lived in a dark, unaired kitchen, continually smiling, and covering fat dark babies with thick, odorous quilts; Tomas brought milk every night, and the chickens, encouraged by personal attentions and fed with hot cooked mash, produced astonishing numbers of eggs.

Then there were apples and hard pears and carrots and cabbages and potatoes now, and there would be other fruits and vegetables in the spring. The big blackheart cherry tree was

famed for its fruit, the peaches and apples and apricots would come along a few weeks after it set the fashion.

But, even then, one must buy sugar, coffee, flour, starch, soap, matches, thread, ink, soda, baking powder, nails, lard, and a hundred things of which other women never thought when they said lightly: "They can raise practically everything themselves!" Barbara used to laugh, in early days, at the long lists she had to pencil out for shopping tours to the small crossroads store at Milo.

"The brown sugar and raisins aren't absolutely necessary, darling," she would say, loitering on the high doorstep with her arms linked about Barry's neck, in farewell, "but the oatmeal and pepper and soup bones we must have!"

And she would lay her radiant cheek against his, rubbing her forehead gently up and down, like an affectionate pony.

"Don't let any casual passing tourist make eyes at my handsome husband!"

His face would flush, like that of a protesting child with his mother.

"Barbara, as if I could ever look at anyone but you!" The beautiful blue eyes would smile at her reproachfully. "Sweetheart, were ever any two persons in the world as happy as we are?" he would ask.

"I don't believe it!"

"Babs, you know that I *worship* you, don't you?"

"I kind of think maybe you do."

"And if I act cranky and inhospitable," Barry might say penitently, "it's only because I want you all to myself!"

"And if I want to ask all our friends from Cottonwood down here, for a sort of housewarming," Barbara might answer, in the same carefully calculated, light tone, "it's only because I don't want to seem rude—and more than that, I don't want them to be wondering and surmising things about us. Some Sunday afternoon we'll have a few roast chickens, and a lot of buttered bread, and I'll make a cake——"

But Barry never would yield a point.

"Then I'll not be here!" he would exclaim, instantly aroused to the hostile attitude he had taken when the question had first been raised. And from a loving mood of confidence and content, he would be angered, distressed, and alienated from her completely again. "You know how I hate the idea of a lot of people roaming around, here, criticizing and poking!" he would exclaim feverishly. "I'd hate it! I'll not stand it. You're enough for me, God knows, more than enough—my cup is full—I only ask my wife and my home and my work. And why you want Harry Poett and Lucy Barnard giggling and yelling all over the place——"

"I only thought that, when February comes, you cross-grained child, you, when the buttercups are up, and the fruit trees in bloom, we could have the most delicious party——"

"Party! Oh, my God, you conventional woman and your parties. Frosted cocoanut cake, I suppose, and mottoes! All right, go ahead, give your parties, but I won't be here. I'll go over to Tomas's, and Maria Bettancourt will give me some stew for supper—tell them your husband loathes the whole damn' lot of them——"

"Barry! Barry! How silly you are. Stop talking like such a crazy man. Stop it. I'm not so crazy to give a party as all this excitement comes to. But I'm proud of my home. I'd love to have my old friends here——"

But perhaps he would have flung himself away from her and started on his walk to the store, two miles away, his handsome head bent, his long legs carrying him in frenzied strides

over the rough wet clods of the fields.

Sometimes, in the beginning, Barbara wept after such a scene, and went about her dinner preparations with wet eyes and a heaving breast. But it was not natural to her to harbour resentment, and Barry would scarcely be out of hearing before her love for him, her happiness in his affection and his content, would melt her heart completely, and she would putter about the kitchen in a very fever of eagerness for reconciliation.

Barry, however, could carry bitterness of soul over some such trifling altercation as this for hours, and it was always Barbara who must make the first advance toward friendship. This she found it impossible not to do. No matter how unreasonable he had been, no matter how childish and rude, the knowledge that one apologetic, placating word from her would make him happy again was a temptation too strong to resist.

And when she had once broken the ice, Barry would soften instantly, stammering, choking, weeping, and clinging to her as if she had been indeed the mother whose part she found herself playing so often.

No use being reasonable or logical with Barry; this was mere waste of time. Altercations and arguments never exhausted him, he could go back to their very grammar school days, years ago, to unearth some unflattering recollection of her to prove his point; he could defend himself with all the zeal of a devil's advocate. His rudeness had been quite unconscious, her construction upon what he said had been entirely mistaken; he had had only her comfort, her welfare, her happiness in mind in acting as he had. And she was the least grateful, and sensitive, and appreciative of women.

His storm of words bewildered and tired her. Far wiser to agree with him always, give him his way in everything, and wait until the storm passed, and her ashamed and sorry little boy returned, as he always did return, to her knees, for forgiveness.

Wonderful hours these, when Barry, exhausted with fury and excitement, was gentle, generous, thoughtful again, and when his restored happiness made him more than ever the exquisitely amusing companion, the beautiful, joyous, gifted lover whom she had once called Pan and human child in one.

"Barry, you are so silly to let such little things excite you so. Don't you think that next time you could remember that we *always* come to an amicable agreement, that things always work out for the best?"

"Babs—" he would turn at her knee, firelight aureoling his magnificent black mane with scarlet, his eyes pulsing with strange sapphire lights, in the shadow—"Babs, I promise you I will, on my sacred honour."

But he never did. It was quite impossible that he ever should, and although he never could understand this, Barbara presently did, and conceded in her heart, as women must concede the unthinkable and unbearable, that this was a part of the price she must pay for her genius husband.

On the other hand, Barry was childishly simple and indifferent to both his own extraordinary beauty and to the serious attention that famous folk, in far-away and unknown New York, began to pay to his work. Almost all his poetry was accepted, and although all the magazines did not pay well, and sometimes the work of two days would bring him in something like ten or twelve dollars, yet the letters that accompanied the acceptances were astonishing to Barbara.

Eastern reviews were beginning to speak of him with great respect: "Du Spain, the Californian who can apparently pack whatever meaning he pleases into faultlessly rhythmic

phrases,” “Du Spain, whose little gems of verse say all this and much more,” “Barry du Spain, a name, we would warn our readers, with which they may as well make themselves respectfully familiar.”

Poets wrote him, poets of the younger school. They wrote him ungrammatically, in sprawling hands, but what they said made Barbara’s heart sing.

“Dear du Spain, your ‘Chloe’ was dam’ good. By God, that’s poetry—not like my own pig wash,” they said. Or, “Why the blankety-blank don’t you come on here and let a feller have a look at you?”

Barbara regretted their coarseness but rejoiced in the friendliness and generosity they showed. She kept all the letters, that Barry would have used to wedge the table leg or light the fire.

Sometimes college professors wrote; might they use Mr. du Spain’s lovely “Girl with Blue Eyes” to illustrate a lecture? Sometimes club women wrote: Was there a Mrs. du Spain, and were Mr. du Spain’s poems—“Bread Puddings and a Lady,” “Girl with Blue Eyes,” and “Laughter”—inspired by her?

Barry was working furiously now upon a period play, to be called *Napoleon Third*. If it was taken, and produced, of course he and Barbara would have to go to New York and see it.

“Oh, Barry, imagine us in a box!”

“I’d buy you everything, Barbara. Furs and big hats—you’d be the most envied woman in the world! We’d give entertainments that’d knock their eyes out.”

This was the man talking, and on the whole she liked him less than the child. For sometimes, following this line of thought, he would become magnificent and affected, and Barbara would suspect, from the nature of his discourse, that in his own mind he thought he was talking to these poets and editors and managers in the East.

“By God, if you write what’s in your heart, what does it matter whether the piffling fool of a public gets you or not? What the hell is the public to me? I’m free of ’em! I’ll be damned if I’ll ever kneel to ’em and lick their dirty boots. Write what you dam’ well want to write——”

“Less damns, darling. You are merely addressing the simple rustic woman who is your wife!”

And then he would laugh suddenly, half ashamed, half amused, all little boy again, and perhaps come around the lunch table to kneel beside her and link his long arms about her waist.

“Barberry Bush, are you the most beautiful woman in the world?”

“I have been told so.”

“Well, I think you are! Are you happy, darling—are you really happy down on this big, lonely place, with a cranky husband and no servant and no neighbours?”

“You know I’m happy!”

“Well, but you never *say* so, dearest.”

The fountain didn’t bubble in quite the old way, perhaps. Marriage wasn’t girlhood; wives had responsibilities, cares, soberer joys and closer fears than girls could know. Barbara and Amy had decided years ago that they despised these giggling, girlish wives who boasted that the great step made no change. Wifehood *was* a change, and happy marriage was a business that demanded infinite courage and patience, like any other.

CHAPTER XI

Barbara did not go to Amy's wedding in mid-January, conceding this point to Barry as balancing another great concession from him. That anything in the world could have kept her away from Amy on this day, she perhaps would not have believed, a few months earlier. But, under the circumstances, she felt that she had no choice.

In the joyous confusion of her own hasty wedding, she and Barry had mentioned more than once the time "when Amy's married and Dad comes to us for awhile." It had been tacitly understood, Barbara really believed, that such was to be the arrangement.

But when the first weeks of their life at the ranch had grown to months and the holidays were over, Barry appeared to feel differently about it. The cold and the constant, if exhilarating, struggle to keep themselves warm and fed had made this first plan seem not quite so simple. What would he do at the ranch, a gentle old professor who liked his morning paper and his morning bath, Barry asked thoughtfully, one afternoon about a week before Amy's wedding.

Barbara's heart gave a plunge of sheer, unreasoning terror. Not have Dad at the ranch——!
"And where would he sleep?" Barry pursued considerably. "He'd be fearfully uncomfortable here."

"He's a terribly good sport—you don't know how wonderful he is! He'll fit into our arrangements here as well as you do."

"He'd probably be far happier at Mrs. Pheland's."

"At twenty dollars a week. It would be a ridiculous waste!"

"Well, he has the rent of the house. It would be much the most sensible arrangement, even if you are too much afraid of hurting his feelings to make it. He comes down here—he has nothing to do—he breaks in on the most important part of my work——"

Barbara opened the stove lid to put a dustpan full of small sweepings into the fire.

"Barry, isn't it senseless to talk so? Nothing on earth would persuade me to write my father that it wasn't convenient to have him here. I simply couldn't do it!"

"You wouldn't have to do it. All you'd have to say is that the roads are simply awful between here and Cottonwood, and that we have no bathroom."

"He knows that. He was down here with Amy on my birthday—on Christmas Eve. Don't you remember they brought me a book from Link?"

"Other women can be perfectly simple and natural with their fathers," Barry muttered, beginning carefully to replace the scattered parts of the clock he was repairing, and squinting at a small cog threateningly. "You can't. You're always imagining he's getting hurt feelings. Whereas he probably would be actually relieved——"

"Don't talk nonsense!" Barbara requested shortly. She plunged her hands into a dishpan full of white suds, extracted tea cloths, and began to rub and rinse them capably. Wringing them firmly, she caught them by two corners and snapped them in the air; a fine warm fog floated to her own flushed cheeks as she did so, and with the back of her wet hand she pushed the hair from her forehead.

"There is no mistake in the world," Barry said solemnly, "like the mistake of things-in-law living together. It *never* works."

"Well, it'll work in this case!" Barbara prophesied lightly. But she was trembling.

"If your father was needy," Barry pursued, searching on the floor with narrowed eyes for an escaped wheel, "if he couldn't do anything else, even *then*——"

"Oh, Barry, please don't rag about it so! My father expects to come out here with me, after Amy is married—she and Ward are going to drive south in his car and send the trunks by rail—and I want him to come here, and that's all there is about it. Amy divided towels and sheets and so on to the last *clothes-pin*, and I have plenty of linen." Barbara stopped, worked busily in silence.

"Will you do this? Will you write your father and put the case to him simply," Barry persisted, "and explain that we know he'd be wretchedly uncomfortable here? If you'll do that and he still decides to come, then I promise you I'll be as agreeable as I can to him."

"Why, but that's nonsense! He'd be perfectly amazed and terribly hurt."

Barbara was stretching her arms to their utmost, pinning her wet towels to the high string that had been extended above the stove.

"Very well, then, don't complain of the way I treat him," Barry said, instantly at white heat. "This is my house and I intend to be master of it. I've always liked your father and I've always been kind to your father, but when it comes to his coming down here, in the first few weeks of my marriage, I think I have a right to kick, and I think ninety-nine men out of a hundred would kick."

"But you didn't say that before we were married!"

"I didn't *know* it before we were married. I didn't know how I'd feel about it. I do know now, and I feel very strongly. If you disregard my politely and quietly expressed wishes, if you go into town at half-past four in a winter morning with Tomas Bettancourt, perhaps catching your death of cold, arriving at Mrs. Pheland's before six, arousing everyone, and causing a lot of talk, everyone probably saying that your husband couldn't afford to get a taxi to take you in to your sister's wedding—if you court publicity and gossip that way, and make my name a joke——"

"Now, darling, now, darling, *please* don't get yourself all worked up. If I went in with Tomas on the milk wagon, I'd adore the ride, and I'd slip into Amy's room at Mrs. Pheland's before anyone in the place was up. A taxi would cost four dollars, and it simply isn't worth it—I'll probably have to come back in a taxi, anyway. *Please* don't let your imagination run away with you."

"And don't call me darling! You're going directly against my wishes, you're doing your best to ruin our marriage, you're bringing your father down here in defiance of my express request, and you think you can make it all right by calling me 'darling'!"

A silence. It was three o'clock on a dark January afternoon, rain was sluicing down in wildly blown gray sheets over the ranch house, and although both stove and fireplace were burning briskly, the room seemed damp and cool, and was heavily scented with wood smoke. Both lamps were lighted.

"Barry, you can't think that I could stay away from Amy's wedding?"

Silence. He had completed the tinkering with the clock now and shook it gently, afterward holding it to his ear and setting it down on the table before him to watch its operation. His face was frowning and dark.

"If it was a question of causing talk," Barbara added, "*that* would cause more talk than anything else! Everyone would think that I had gone out of my senses!"

Silence. Silence. Wood snapped on the fire, rain spattered and splashed outside of the dim window. And far away the sea broke and thundered and was still, and broke and thundered

again, on the shore.

“Very well,” Barbara said to herself with spirit, “if he won’t speak to me, I won’t speak to him. I can keep this up as long as he can!”

When he suddenly got up from the table and buttoned himself into his heavy coat, and pulled a cap down over his ears, she said nothing. And when he had gone, she put on her own thick coat and a soft woolly tarn and went out into the wind and rain herself.

She walked rapidly along the shore, enjoying the battle of the wild airs, looking out at the lashed and lashing sea as she was blown along, and thinking hard.

Poor Barry. He’d return heartbroken. Baked potatoes and bacon for dinner—both favourites—and French toast with guava jelly. The guava jelly was a mystery but none the less welcome. Where the fat little sugar-topped jars had come from nobody knew; Barry rather thought that a grocer in Cottonwood, who had failed, years ago, had sent them to his mother as payment of a loan. But he and Barbara liked them too much to care how they had happened to get them.

To-night he should find an especially nice dinner and an especially sweet wife. No allusions to the recent storm; just a dignified and generous acceptance of the situation. Of course she’d have to go in to Amy’s wedding, and of course she’d have to bring Dad back with her. Barry might consider himself fortunate enough if she did not demand his attendance at the event as well.

What could he do, poor ill-tempered boy, if she defied him flatly and rudely in this case and in every other that might arise? Well, he could be disagreeable to Dad, of course, and that might cause a temporary uncomfotableness. If Dad were hurt and went home . . .

But apart from that, what could Barry do? Sulk and be silent for days and weeks. But no man did that! He’d have to come to his senses sooner or later.

Meanwhile, would he and she mope about this place where they had been so happy and for which they had made so many plans? That would be a stupid, childish thing to do.

Barbara remembered the case of Ann Lee, a Cottonwood girl who had married a man named Earle Thornton. Ann had returned to her mother exactly three months after her marriage, explaining quite freely and unembarrassedly to her friends that Earle Thornton was “just simply a crazy man.” Yet Earle had married the oldest Robinson girl, some years later, and they appeared quite happy.

Was Barry just a little crazy? Or was the closeness and isolation of their life down here too much of a strain for his poetic nerves? Or was this just one of those young lover’s quarrels of which one heard so often? Barbara had never quarrelled with anyone in her life.

Her walk disposed of her own nerves and depression and excitement, in any case; she found herself looking wistfully for Barry’s brown overcoat on the hills or on the shore as she went. But she did not find him.

The potatoes were baked, the French toast piled in a golden-brown heap, the strips of bacon laid out and waiting by six—by half-past six—by seven o’clock. But he did not come in.

Barbara’s face, flushed with cooking, paled again with anger and surprise. She ate her own supper, resolutely reading a most interesting book, put his potato and toast on a plate in the oven, brushed the top of the stove, set the oatmeal soaking in the double boiler, and reduced the kitchen to scrupulous order.

At half-past eight, to the drowsy dripping of the rain and purring of the fire, she went to bed, taking with her the rather forlorn old cat she and Barry had found wandering about, and

somewhat tamed, for the occasion was lonesome and quiet enough to make her a little nervous.

The cat, purring violently, stepped about at the foot of the bed, settled herself, changed her position, and again succumbed. Barbara, finding it so cold in the bedroom that her exposed arms, holding her book, became chilled, put out her light, rolled herself up snugly, and went sensibly off to sleep.

Later, she started suddenly awake and found herself frightened. The bedroom was dark, but soft red firelight was streaming into it through the open kitchen door. Swiftly, without thinking what she did, the girl sprang from bed, and went quickly toward the encouraging warmth and light.

There was a couch in the kitchen, and upon it, covered with blankets and his own coat, Barry was lying, only half undressed, and sound asleep. Upon his fine face, painted with unnatural colour by the fire, and extraordinarily young and beautiful with the lashes lowered, and the dark, rich crest of his hair in disorder, there remained a dark and angry frown.

The morning began with the same smouldering silence. The two went to and fro, passing each other, elaborately avoiding each other's eyes.

Coffee was shared in silence; the meal was unwontedly brief, and before she had fairly finished her last mouthful of toast Barbara was on her feet, putting her chair in its place against the wall, gathering plates and spoons, capably commencing the kitchen clearance.

Barry brought in wood; bright sunshine danced through the wide doorway from a soaked and sparkling world. The cool air, rushing in, was rich with spring promise; the smell of wet earth and buttercups, grass, and the salt sea.

"Barry, this is extremely silly!" Barbara burst out unexpectedly, when he had gathered together his working materials and was obviously ready to mount to his little workshop.

His dark face darkened still more; he made an attempt to pass her with half-lidded eyes.

But she put her hands on his shoulders.

"Barry, we can't keep this up!" There was protestant laughter in her voice. "It's too utterly foolish!"

"I don't think it's foolish to try to protect the sacredness and happiness of my home," Barry said suddenly, in a hard, resentful voice.

"Darling, the sacredness and happiness of our home is just as dear to me as to you!"

Suddenly he broke.

"Oh, Barbara, I've been in hell!" he cried. "I've been suffering—you don't know what I've been suffering! For God's sake, be good to me!"

"Good to you!" Barbara exclaimed, her young strong arms instantly about him and their wet cheeks together. "Dearest, I've been wretcheder than you about it."

For a long luxurious minute they clung together, the man's face dropped on her shoulder. Then she began cautiously, maternally:

"But I *have* to go to my sister's wedding, Barry dear——"

And instantly he was furious again. He flung her off rather than released her, and his face actually paled with the violence of his revulsion of feeling.

"Are you going to begin that again?"

"Begin it? Barry darling, I've never stopped it. I have to go to Amy's wedding. She's my only sister. I couldn't *consider*——"

“Listen,” Barry interrupted her, with a great air of patience and self-control, “*if* we were living in Cottonwood, right near her, I wouldn’t say a word. *If* we had a car, of course I’d want you to go. *If* we’d gone into town for any other thing, since our marriage, we might be expected to go now.

“*But*—” he went on oratorically, as Barbara merely regarded him helplessly and ruefully, as a mother might stand regarding a puzzling child—“but we *have* no car. We never go into town! It would mean your getting up at half-past three, and driving twelve miles on the front seat of a milk wagon, arriving at Mrs. Pheland’s—”

“Barry dear, we went all over this yesterday!”

He stared at her a moment, his face livid.

“You mean you’re going?”

“I mean I *have* to go!”

“Then don’t come back here!” he answered furiously. “You can go to hell for all I care!”

He flung himself from the room. Barbara, trembling a little, and with more than one rending deep sigh, went composedly on with her housework. This was Wednesday. Amy was to be married very quietly on Saturday morning.

Silence. Silence. Their luncheon was so silent that a sea gull, walking about the patio, came to the kitchen doorway and regarded them with a tipped head and bright beady eye.

Silence all afternoon, all evening. Barbara told herself that she would not have believed that silence could be so heavy to bear. The leaden moments seemed to add themselves together and to weigh on her heart.

Well, he would have to get over his tantrum, because to hurt Amy’s feelings was the one thing Barbara could not and would not do.

Yet the unnatural stillness between them began to be an advocate for Barry. A woman had to stick to her husband first and foremost, after all, Barbara mused. His motive in not wanting her to take the long cold drive into town on the milk wagon was a loyal and protecting one, tempered perhaps by a little shame that his young wife should be reduced to such a mode of travel.

When Barbara thought of Barry, the free and romantic and beautiful, as being ashamed that he could not afford the eight dollars that would take her to and from Cottonwood on Amy’s wedding day, her heart ached for him with a strange, pitying pain.

He gave her every cent he had; indeed, he had given her the ranch, pushing the deed into her hand bashfully, a few days after their marriage. He had “just thought of it one day,” he had said. He had “wanted” her “to have it”; she had “all the business sense of the family, anyway!”

And he *was* a genius, poor Barry. And meanwhile they were wasting the first golden, radiant days of spring in this senseless fight!

“Barry,” she began, on Friday morning, after the endless hours of Thursday, silent, lifeless, hostile—broken only by one or two fresh bursts of altercation and fresh inflexible opposition to her plans on Barry’s part—had somehow been survived, “I’m going in with Tomas tomorrow—I have to go. I’m as sorry as I can be to distress you so, but I think you’ve taken an unreasonable position, and I’ve simply got to act as seems wisest. Amy’d never forgive me if I wasn’t at her wedding, even if I’d ever forgive myself. I’ll probably bring my father out here sometime in the afternoon.”

“Not to this house, you won’t!” Barry gritted, through shut teeth.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You certainly wouldn’t want to face the talk of the whole town.”

“Oh, to hell with the town! You conventional women, always thinking of the neighbours. You bring your father down here to-morrow and he’ll find my door shut in his face! And you can leave me the next day if you want to.”

Barbara began to brush about the stove carefully, coaxing the little fragments of ashes and dust with the tip of her broom. She forced herself to think of to-morrow. She must wear a sweater under her coat, for the cold start before dawn. How did one wake one’s self at half-past three, anyway? She must pack in a suitcase to-night the silk dress she would wear to the wedding.

For her father’s room she had selected a small apartment on the second floor, across the patio, and up the balcony stairs, and so some distance from the kitchen. If the beautiful weather returned, as it must, although to-day was bleak and foggy, he would be flooded with sun in the daytime, and at night he must have their bedroom oil stove, and the blankets that Barry was using for his couch bed in the kitchen.

Barry, standing in the middle of the kitchen, was still raging at her. She must think of other things.

“Answer me! I won’t have you ignore me—treat me with such disgusting rudeness!” he shouted.

“Answer you what, Barry?”

“I say that a man has a right to expect his home to himself, and that his wife will not bring under his roof persons uncongenial to him—and I say . . .”

Oh, she was so tired of it all. She was so tired of that hard, hammering voice, so tired of the arguments for and against.

He had snatched his coat from the wooden pin by the kitchen door, pulled on his cap again. He wasn’t going to work this morning; too much upset, probably. A drift of cold fog blew into the kitchen as he slammed the door behind him, and Barbara was alone.

The hours passed and Barry did not return. Barbara went out into the fog to attend to her chickens, brought in a bowlful of warm white eggs to which tiny curled feathers still clung, and baked a panful of fluffy brown-topped white biscuits. Barry loved them, hot or cold, and he could have them for his lonely breakfast to-morrow—the first breakfast, almost the first meal since their wedding, that they had not shared!—and for his lunch, too.

She and Dad would drive out at about four o’clock on Saturday afternoon, in plenty of time for Barbara to get her two men an appetizing dinner. And suppose Barry wouldn’t speak to her father?

Oh, well, but of course he would.

Tomas came in with the mail at about eleven, returning from his milk route. An ecstatic and excited note from Amy; everyone was being perfectly wonderful about the wedding; she had more presents than any girl in town had had since Lucy Mackenzie married Otis; she was dying to talk to Barbara.

Magazines, too. Three of the little impressionistic magazines that only used a very special type of poetry; and verse by Barry in all three. One verse was called “Seaweed,” and close under the title, in tiny print, was added, “For Barbara, November Fourteenth.”

They had been married on November tenth; she remembered his writing this verse a few days later, sprawling at her feet in the sand, down at Abalone Rock. It had been on the day of their first quarrel, oddly enough; a quarrel about that absurd old garrulous ex-convict Slinder, who had hung about so persistently during the beginning of their wedded lives.

Barbara had wanted Slinder banished, and Barry had persisted that common hospitality and brotherhood forbade him to send the derelict away. But the day the poem had been written Slinder had commenced sensationally with an unannounced departure before dawn, taking with him Barry's best sweater, and seven dollars from Barry's pocketbook. So that Slinder had ceased to be a cause for recrimination and had become a household joke instead.

And now here was the little poem, "Seaweed," to bring back to Barbara's mind that happy time when they had moved into the big house and exhausted themselves with cleaning and hauling, and had finally brought what the Athertons called a "tea-nic" down to the shore, where, muffled to the ears in sweaters, and with teeth that chattered on their coffee cups, they had decided that their first quarrel would be their last, and that they loved each other more than man and woman had ever loved before. Barry, snatching a notebook from his pocket, had sealed this bond with the eight lines called "Seaweed."

"Oh, dear," sighed Barbara, musing upon his excitability, his affectionateness, his general unreasonable difference from anybody else in the world, "I don't know what to do! I suppose the rule about things-in-law staying with one is perfectly true—it *never* works, especially when there isn't any money and people are only really camping, as we are here. Poor Barry—it makes me sick to think how wretched he is, and yet this is one of the cases where I'd lose my self-respect if I gave in."

She lunched alone, "one of those mixy lunches he loves!" mourned Barbara, reading *Barchester Towers* as she munched toast and finished the reheated tomato and creamed onions and fried potatoes. If Barry had come in she would have added poached eggs, to make what he had named "a little mess of whelks." She knew vaguely that the quotation came from Browning, and was conscious that his use of it always meant great approval and felicity.

Two o'clock. Where on earth had he gone! Three o'clock.

Barbara took an old coat, stiff with dried mud and sea water, from a hook, buttoned it snugly about her, and pulled her tam over her ears. She picked up the rake; that disorderly corner of the paddock might as well be attacked now as any time. Matches—for she would start a slow-burning fire—hatchet, heavy old gloves, rubbers—the ground was like sponge underfoot. She went out into the cool afternoon, closing the door of the warm, orderly kitchen behind her.

"I believe that under this heap there's actually a window, in the side of the chicken house!" she said aloud as she began the assault. For the chicken house was a dark, unsanitary place at present, and as, like everything else on the ranch, it was made of solid adobe, the problem of letting air and light into it had somewhat puzzled her.

She ran about the corner and into the chicken-house door. The warm, odorous darkness within almost blinded her. An old wooden door, cut from a single plank and some six feet square, was leaning against the wall; Barbara could not move it, but she could balance it in a perpendicular position, and peer behind it, to discover to her enormous satisfaction that there actually was a deep window sill there, obscured by cobwebs and closed shutters, and further invalidated by the pyramid of rubbish in the yard outside.

This so heartened her that she quite forgot Barry. She praised Topsy, the suspicious black hen who was nervously setting, opened the nest's wire door that had been triumphantly fashioned by Barbara herself, so that Topsy might take a little air and exercise in the yard, and went back to the rubbish heap with great enthusiasm.

It was composed of planks, empty boxes and barrels, long poles and strips of wire and rope, discarded fencing, old rakes and chains, broken wheels and odd fragments of rusty farm

machinery, and a hundred other odds and ends.

With her gloved hands, she courageously seized upon a projecting sharp branch of dead apple tree that had somehow become tangled into the mess, and the snag, unexpectedly loosening, caused her to sit down flatly and suddenly in the mud, the branch in her hands.

She heard her own laugh, exasperated yet gratified, and instantly the sound of another voice, a hoarse, low voice: one she had never heard before.

In the few seconds of panic, she scrambled to her feet and turned toward the sound. And it was Barry, soaked, ashen, dishevelled, who stood regarding her like a ghost from the curve of the patio door.

“Babs—for God’s sake——”

Her heart thundering with inexpressible fears, she ran to him.

“Barry—my darling—what is it!”

His teeth were chattering; the cheek he bent to her glowing one was as pallid and lifeless as the cheek of a dead man. His arms, as she put her own about him, hung lax, his eyes were lustreless.

“I think I’m sick—I’m going crazy, I guess!” he murmured hoarsely.

Afraid of she knew not what, and yet with her whole being warmed by being needed, by being reconciled to him again, somehow she got him into the kitchen and on to the couch, and somehow, murmuring as a mother might have murmured, all the time, she took off his soaked garments and got him into bed.

Breathlessly, hardly knowing what to do first, she piled wood on the fire, covered him with blankets, tore off her own rough garments, and slipped into a fresh kitchen dress.

He watched her move about the kitchen, his dark head quiet on the pillow, his teeth still chattering.

“Babs—d-d-do anything, I’ll do anything. I’ve almost g-g-gone crazy to-day! I’ve been in hell,” he whispered hoarsely.

“Drink this!” It was hot, thin tea, creamed and sugared. She had no stronger stimulant. She propped him tenderly against her own arm while he gratefully sipped it.

“Oh, Barberry Bush—” the beautiful blue eyes, at her elbow, were as beseeching as a child’s eyes—“don’t ever be angry with me again, I can’t b-b-bear it! You’re my whole world. D-d-do anything—anything, only don’t be angry at me! I wanted to k-k-kill myself this morning—I thought I would kill myself—I can’t *stand* it, to be out with you! If I’m wrong and s-s-stupid and selfish, it’s only because I adore you so—because I want you all to myself.”

She stooped and kissed the cool wave of his hair; instantly her eyes grew anxious and she put the teacup away and investigated his forehead, with her warm fingers, grasped his hands in her own.

“Are you getting warmer?”

“G-g-g-gloriously warm now! I lay d-d-down in the fields, f-f-fool that I was, and just sobbed——”

“You idiot!”

“I know. B-b-but it was w-w-worth it all, to have you take care of me! I love to be babied by you!”

He smiled at her meekly, childishly. And after a few moments she saw that he was sound asleep. The kitchen was warm, quiet; the cat purred.

Barbara sat quietly by the table, sewing a little, reading a little, writing an explanatory note to Amy. The peaceful moments went by, infinitely calm and restful moments, while the fog

moved in soft rolling masses over the low ranch house, outside in the spring dusk, and the fire snapped lazily, broke, and snapped again.

Now and then she stepped noiselessly to the stove, to the sink; opened the door without a sound to warn Tomas, who brought the milk, that he must not disturb Barry.

The milk was warm and frothy and coated with specks and bits of straw, in the battered old milking pail. She carried it to the pantry shelf, and strained it into the wide shallow pans, giving the empty pail back to Tomas, and with it the note to Amy.

Alone with Barry again, she cautiously lighted the lamp, sliced a loaf for supper toast, put apples in the oven to bake.

Happier so, oh, infinitely happier than if she had been cold to him, than if she were going away from him to-morrow for the whole day! Barbara's soul was at peace. He needed her and she could care for him. Her bad boy was all her own again.

He opened his eyes bewilderedly, he was burning with fever now.

"Barbara, you're going to Amy's wedding?"

"We'll see how you are in the morning, dear."

"But, Barbara—you've *got* to go! I'm all right, I'm fine—I want you to go." He flung off covers, tossed and sighed. "And tell your father we count on having him here indefinitely," he muttered. "Gosh, I am hot! Whew-w-w!"

"Don't worry about anything now." She opened the door for a moment, it was almost dark outside, and the fog boomed softly in from the dusk. "Drink this," she said, carrying him a cup of hot water.

"It's hot!"

"Yes, but it'll cool you." He seemed to her already cooler as he drifted off to sleep again. She drew the covers lightly over him, stooped to kiss the waves of tumbled hair.

Instantly his fingers caught hers tightly.

"Wonderful to me—wonderful to be sick and have you take care of me!" he murmured thickly.

Barbara propped her book against the sugar-bowl, and ate her supper with only absent-minded glances at plate and spoon. There was a charm about firelight and lamplight, fog and darkness and sea without, cosiness and tea and toast in the kitchen.

Amy was going to be married to-morrow. To be away from the wedding of one's only sister was, of course, no trifle.

But there was something infinitely satisfying about being a married woman, "needed at home." To be managing one's husband and house, cat and chickens—one's life, in short, was soul-filling.

To step softly to the sink, rinse plates, set baked apples on the pantry shelf, estimate firewood and lamp oil, to go about capable and adequate and necessary—there was a sense of real living in this.

Barbara resumed her rocker; the clock struck seven. Eight. Nine. She read *Barchester Towers*.

Now and then Barry roused, wanted a drink, stared bewilderedly about the kitchen, and sighed. When his troubled eyes found hers he would relax again, settle down with a child's weary content.

"Isn't it pretty hot in here, Babs?"

"I'll open the door a minute. But you must keep covered."

"Are you all right, dearest?"

“Fine.”

“And do you love me?”

“Dearly.”

CHAPTER XII

In all the glory of April blossoms, on a certain shining Saturday afternoon, Link Mackenzie and Marianne Scott drove down to the ranch, to call upon the Du Spains.

The place, as indeed the whole world, was at its loveliest, air, skies, and earth conspiring to intoxicate and enrapture everything that lived.

Larks whirled up from the thick roadside grasses, with their delirious liquid notes; gulls peeped and floated over the hacienda, fruit trees were great bouquets of dazzling bloom, and the fields were emerald green.

As Marianne and Link drove slowly along the muddy roads, the air sang, the sea sang, and the very earth seemed singing. Everywhere were colour, fragrance, movement, beauty. A cart galloped along the Bettancourt fences, flinging great clods of soft black earth into the air as he went; inside Barry's open gates lay great pools that reflected the lazy movements overhead of cottony clouds—white against blue.

The warm sun shone down on the ranch house; the leaves of eucalyptus and pepper trees were unstirred by wind. Plumes of lilac bowed on delicately foliaged branches at the side door; shadows lay blue in the white peace and order of the patio. There were chickens, ruffling and muttering in the yard, and a lean old cat who lay eyeing the visitors suspiciously, her furry belly to the sun. A calf fretted and cried in a pen; gulls walked on the old tiled roofs.

"Kiss me!" commanded Marianne, embracing the opportunity for an unobserved caress when they got down from the car.

Link caught her jaw in his big hard fingers, pressed his lips against hers. They stood so for a minute, without moving.

Then there was a stir in the kitchen, and Barbara's voice said cheerfully, from the doorway:

"You apparently think I'm rather rotten as a chaperon!"

The two in the patio jumped apart, laughing guiltily, and Marianne ran to Barbara. It was characteristic of a change in their relationship that they kissed each other.

Link had not seen Barbara since some weeks before her marriage. It immediately impressed him that she was altered, was older and yet simpler, oddly charming. He accompanied his handclasp with a bending of his head, and she raised her lips to his, colouring brightly.

"I can kiss the bride, too, can't I?"

"Well, I should think so!"

"Barbara, you're prettier than ever!" Marianne told her.

"There was room!" the other woman answered, laughing.

The three stood smiling at each other in the sun-spattered sweetness of the patio. All the raking and digging, the pruning and cleaning of the winter months had borne their fruit now. On the fountain, dry and mossy but unencumbered, doves were wheeling and stepping affectedly, the old flags were a marbled pattern of black and white; shadows from the narrow balconies lay clean and blue on soft distempered old adobe walls.

The sun struck upon Barbara's copper hair and turned it to molten gold. She wore a blue linen frock, an old frock, but the dark rich colour set off her own blazing brilliance of skin and hair and eyes, and the white collar was fresh and babyish about her soft throat. After the first

surprised second, her pleasure in seeing the visitors was delightfully obvious; Link found himself wondering what had caused the first impulse of hesitation, of something like dismay, that had not escaped him as they came in.

They went into the kitchen, shaded and quiet and orderly, with lettuce soaking in a blue bowl of cold clear water, and apple sauce cooling in a heavy old copper pot. Slants and angles of sunshine were tempered to a pleasant twilight here, and in the fireplace was massed a fragrant clump of the wild lilac's smoke-blue blooms, and the delicate enamelled pink and white of the pungent wild currant. The stove fire, mere embers now, looked at them with a sleepy red eye.

"This room is like a vault in winter," Barbara admitted animatedly, pushing chairs about, and eager to impress them with the charm of her domain. "Next winter, if we're here, we're going to get a small stove set up in one of the upstairs rooms, and simply move up there. But this is going to be delicious all summer."

Marianne looked exactly as Barbara would have expected her to look; just as she had looked upon that day of her first arrival in Cottonwood, almost a year ago. Her quick, fascinating black eyes shone under a little turban of gold and white, her nails shone, her teeth shone, there was a metallic glitter all about her. The general whiteness of her costume was broken only by two bands of heavy Russian embroidery, in peasant colours, on the sleeves of her linen coat. She looked like a little panther, like something watchful, suspicious, yet eager for the friendship of her kind.

"If you're here next winter," she repeated, studying Barbara fixedly, over her cigarette, "how do you mean? May you be somewhere else?"

"We may be in New York," Barbara said casually.

"Not really!" Marianne exclaimed, curious, dubious.

"Yes. A publishing firm there is bringing out a volume of Barry's poetry," Barbara announced. She had a twinge of conscience; was "volume" too pretentious a word for the slim, simple little sheaf of verse she had persuaded him to gather together and send eastward a few months ago? No, she reassured herself, any book was a volume, and this was actually to be a book.

"You don't mean it!" Marianne said. And for a few minutes she was silent, her eyes narrowed and her lips bitten, her cryptic gaze on space.

"Good for Barry," Link said, in his simple, pleasant voice. "Where is he now, by the way?"

"He went out, just a few minutes before your car turned in our gate. He's probably going to walk over to Bettancourt's—they had our cows last winter," Barbara explained brightly. She wondered if either hearer suspected that Barry had really escaped from the house a few minutes after Link's car had appeared, rather than before, and that while she was reproaching him with: "Barry, please don't desert me! They won't stay five minutes—we'll have our walk," she had been stripping off a disgracefully spotted and worn apron and jerking the fresh blue linen, with the immaculate white collar, over her head.

Thinner than she used to be, oddly womanly and sweet, there was something about her, some new quality, that puzzled Link. Beside Marianne, with her red lips and slave bracelet, her picked eyebrows and scarlet finger-nails, her jingling beauty case and cigarette box, Barbara looked like a freshly washed, freshly aproned, dewy-eyed child.

"She's a darling!" Link thought, feeling an affectionate, brotherly pride deep in his soul. "There's something—terribly nice about Barbara Atherton."

He laughed whenever she spoke to him, not knowing why. But her very glance made him smile, a shaken sort of smile, and when she spoke he found himself thinking more of the girl than of her words. She wanted him to help her, he did not quite know why, and he was conscious of eagerly wanting to help her.

“Awfully nice to come down here and see you in your own home, married and settled, Barbara!” he said, more than once, groping for some deeper phrase. And of Marianne he would ask eagerly: “Aren’t they well fixed here? Isn’t it fun to have your own place all to yourselves?”

“I’m so glad you like it!” Barbara would answer fervently. “We do, of course, but then we’ve sort of worked it out ourselves, and we forget that it’s really a sort of glorified camping.”

“We’re going to stay for lunch,” Marianne said, in her lazy, imperious way, “and cook it ourselves.”

“If we may,” Link added, with a questioning glance.

“Indeed you won’t cook it yourselves,” Barbara assured them laughingly, after the usual uneasy second of misgiving about Barry’s attitude. “A nice kitchen I’d have to clean up if you did anything like that! But I’ll cook it—look here!”

She uncovered an enormous jar of Spanish pottery, at one side of the range, and took from it a ladleful of a dark red mixture, extending the spoon for Marianne and then Link to taste.

“Did you ever taste anything so glorious as that! I found jars and jars of pickled tomatoes, all coated with mothwing, in the cellar, and bags of onions, and some roots of Chinese ginger, and we had dry peppers, of course—every peg in the house had a few hanging from it! And I invented this sauce for omelettes and macaroni and so on. I’ll give you either macaroni or omelette for lunch, with this *sauce barbare*, as Barry calls it.”

“Oh, heavenly!” Marianne said. Link was watching Barbara with a sort of indulgent, amused admiration. She tasted the sauce herself, frowned.

“Link, you wouldn’t know if that needed more pepper? I know Marianne wouldn’t,” she said, with a child’s anxious sweetness. And, glancing up, she saw that he was laughing at her, and laughed herself. “It’s only twelve o’clock,” she told them; “do let’s walk down to the shore before lunch! And tell me about everybody and everything.”

“You weren’t at Amy’s wedding, Barbara?” Link asked, as they skirted the stiff black mud of the old cow paddock and took a dipping little sandy lane toward the beach. The warm sun beat down on them, the blue air sang with happy spring sounds, and a crippled old plum tree, bending its branches to the green grass, was as dazzling white as a great popcorn ball against a background of blue sea.

“No—it broke my heart, of course. But Barry was frightfully ill, you know. You weren’t there, Link?”

“No, nobody but your father and two or three others—the Duffys and their cousins, I think.”

“They came down here that same day, right after the ceremony, on their way to Los Angeles for their honeymoon,” Barbara said. “It was the divinest day we ever had, I think, and old Amy did look so pretty and seemed to be so happy! Barry was much better; he got up on Sunday, in fact, and we kept my father here for three days. He and Barry became the greatest chums, and how they ate!—like two boys. We wanted to keep him longer, but the old darling has signed up for a lecture tour, seventeen lectures in seventeen towns in seven weeks—and

about ten dollars clear of expenses!—isn't that a programme? So he had to go. The last night he was here we brought our supper down to the beach——”

She picked up a grass-crusted clod of dark earth, and hurled it at a staring red cow, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world.

“That cow doesn't belong here; that isn't one of our cows,” she explained. “There's a quicksand where the creek goes into the ocean, and they get stuck there and give us the most awful trouble, with planks and ropes, getting them out!”

“It must be lots of fun, roaming about here with a poet husband to make a joke and a picnic of everything,” Marianne commented suddenly.

Barbara's eyes met Link's for the fraction of a second; a mild look, devoid of any significance, gone almost before it reached him. Yet it gave him a vague sense of wonder again. For what was she asking?

“It *is* fun!” she agreed, smiling.

“I suppose you have meals at any old time, and never say a sensible word,” Marianne suggested, and there was almost a trace of envy in her voice.

“Almost!” Barbara agreed again, again smiling.

As a matter of fact, her poet was scrupulously punctual about meal times and domestic regularity. But this was a quality almost impossible to reconcile with any theory of Barry's character. Barbara had heard him spout socialism and the age-old slavery of women and free love a hundred times in the old days, and she was still amazed to find him extremely conventional, detesting even an independent opinion in women, detesting much more their interest in politics or cigarettes, liking them to believe in the dependence, the domesticity, and the God he affected to despise.

But she couldn't tell Marianne that. And so she walked along between Marianne and Link composedly, smiling, and Link, studying her, marvelled at the change in her more and more.

Barry came abruptly to the patio just before two o'clock. He exchanged a quick angry look with Barbara, seeing the table set in the court for four; he welcomed Link and Marianne with a sort of stiff, resentful civility. But as the two men sat awaiting the meal and chatting about mutual interests in Cottonwood, the elder saw that his host's mood was changing: Barry was beginning to enjoy himself.

Presently they were all laughing without restraint, as Barbara recounted some of the absurd experiences of their early married days, and Link and Marianne displayed their quite frank envy of these younger persons who had found their Paradise so easily. And then Barbara put the great Canton platter of smoking macaroni on the table, and the hot buttered French bread, and jam, and a bowl of salad that smelled faintly of chives, and still more faintly of garlic, and glistened with green olive oil. The glorious odour of coffee went straight up into the blue air where gulls were circling, and pigeons making short flights, and the golden cream was clotted solid in the little pitcher.

“Never—never in my life,” said Marianne faintly, after awhile, “have I eaten such food or so much of it!”

“Barbara,” Link remarked solemnly, pushing back his chair and drawing a deep, grateful breath, “that was a *meal*.”

Barry's pleasure in his wife's cleverness and capability, his proud complacency in the charm and comfort he and she had managed to wrest from the ruined old hacienda, metamorphosed him into his sunniest mood. Loitering at the table, with the dim grays and browns and creams of the old plaster wall of the patio for a background, and the narrow

arched gate, set open upon rusty iron hinges, framing a blue distance of sky and sea, his beauty was so startling that even Link saw it clearly, as if for the first time, and read a reflection of his appreciation in the girls' eyes.

Barry's dark blue shirt, a labourer's shirt, was open at the throat, its sleeves were rolled about the elbow, and the splendid brown modelling of his arms and the hard straight column of his neck were bared. The rich mop of his black hair was carelessly pushed back from his low, broad forehead. The warmth of the spring day, and the exertions he had recently made with firewood and chairs, had brought a flush to the smooth ivory skin, and curled tiny feathers of black against his low forehead. His moody blue eyes, smiling and darkening a hundred times in a minute, finding Barbara's serene answering glance before he spoke, and in confirmation of everything he said, were oddly contradicted, in their childish puzzlement and innocence, by the firm line of the mouth and jaw.

Conciliatory. Link Mackenzie suddenly found the word, and knew that it fitted her. Conciliatory, that was what her attitude was, already, in relation to Barry, although they had been married so short a time and she was so young. She wanted him to be happy and she didn't know quite how to make him so.

Back of all this pretty new gravity of hers, this graceful, simple hospitality in circumstances so obviously straitened and limited, lay the cloud of his whim, and her eagerness to discern it, and satisfy it.

The strangeness of young marriage impressed Link, as they talked and laughed over the table, while the golden afternoon slipped by; the miracle of a man and a woman, singled off from the rest of their kind, from the old ways and faces and familiar rooms.

Barbara Atherton's die was cast. She was Barry du Spain's wife. Her life now was beside him, to keep him happy if she could, to share his fame and prosperity if he were to win them, and, if not, to bring what courage and vision she might to her part in his failure.

They had already had almost six months of it; they had become accustomed to each other's nearness and voices; each other's weakness and strength. They had shared walks, moods, meals, and plans for almost two hundred days and nights.

Link roused himself from deep contemplation. Barbara was talking, Barry watching her with burning, adoring eyes. Marianne, her little beauty case open in her hand, her glance roving regularly from Barbara's face to the tiny reflection of her own, wore an odd expression, an expression strangely compounded of vague uneasiness and vaguer envy.

"It seems extraordinary," Marianne presently commented, "that a kid like you—" her smiling look for Barry was flattering if her term was not—"that a kid like you can make himself felt in a city like New York, packed with poets and writers and dramatists, and that you may really go on there."

"If I finish my *Napoleon Third*, and if it's taken——" Barry muttered, frowning, staring into space, and absorbed in some consideration of his own.

"If——!" Barbara echoed promptly. "Shame on you!"

"Well, *when*," Barry amended, grinning.

"Fun," Marianne mused. "How you'll love it! Getting there some winter afternoon, when all the taxi lights are streaming up the Avenue, and the shop windows are filled with adorable hats and frocks——"

"And the chestnut peddlers, under the elevated trains," Barry added.

The girl turned to him in surprise:

"Do you know New York?"

“Oh, yes, I lived there for two years.”

“I didn’t know that!” Marianne commented, struck.

“Yes, when I was a boy, about fourteen, my mother went on there, to stay with my grandmother, the same grandmother who left me this place. I know Greenwich Village,” Barry went on. “And that’s where Babs and I would go.”

Barbara enthusiastically contributed her own theories about life in the Eastern capital, attics, tramps in the snow, secondhand bookshops, free concerts. Barry knew restaurants where all Bohemia congregated: “The Tin Coffee-Pot,” “The Bug House,” “The Twin Sisters.” Downstairs places, stencilled in startling poster colours, with bare tables and thick china. Link said that he never had been in New York; certainly would like to go, some day.

But Marianne sat silent, her bright eyes thoughtful, her lower lip lightly caught in her teeth, her look far beyond them all, fixed on space.

“Well, are we going to tell them, Link?” Marianne spoke suddenly with no reference to the preceding conversation.

Barbara’s glance flew to Link, and she knew instantly, with an odd little sinking at her heart, what they had to tell. Link flushed quickly and sent a dubious, almost disapproving glance to Marianne.

“Would you?” he asked, in an undertone.

“Of course you would!” said Barbara’s warm, heartening voice encouragingly. And she laid her hand quietly for a moment on his. “You must tell *us*.” She smiled at him reproachfully.

Marianne was sitting back, scowling.

“I don’t exactly—*like*—your hesitation, my friend,” she drawled, her half-closed eyes fixed upon Link.

“I didn’t hesitate, dear; don’t be silly!” he answered briefly, with an uncomfortable suggestion of a smile. “I just wondered——”

Barbara’s joyous enthusiasm filled the awkward little space. She jumped from her seat and went around the table to Marianne and kissed her, and Barry shook Link’s hand, a broad grin on his face.

“Of course, I suspected!” exclaimed Barbara. “Everyone does. But it is fun to really know!”

And presently, in a pause in the general babel, she could ask:

“But tell us your plans. When is the wedding to be?”

“September,” Link said promptly. Barbara looked her surprise.

“September? Isn’t that a long way off?”

“Well, we might as well tell them the whole story, mightn’t we, Link?” Marianne said then, impulsively. And putting her two slender elbows on the table, and glancing from one expectant face to the other, she began: “You see, I did a very naughty thing when I first came to Cottonwood last year,” she confessed. “I was really—Mrs. Scott, but I was so depressed and discouraged and down and out generally that I thought that it would be simpler, just for a little while, to be Miss. I wanted to be quiet! I wanted to be let alone!”

Barbara, astonished, glanced at Link, who was smiling indulgently at Marianne. She could not remember any noticeable depression, or any obvious desire for obscurity and quiet on Marianne’s part upon her arrival in Cottonwood. She remembered flirting and dancing, and the Casino, and the instant revival of a long-dead gaiety and hospitality, not only in the Wilson house but in the whole neighbourhood. A curious little change of feeling began to shake some

of the oldest and most solid foundations in her heart. The Wilsons—the Mackenzies—the great people at Cottonwood jolted, twisted, refitted themselves into her scheme. They were just—persons, men and women, after all. And Link Mackenzie’s girl, the girl who would be the social leader of the town some day, was something—just a hint—less than she had seemed.

“I left my husband just a year ago,” continued Marianne simply. “I’ve told Link all about it—I’ve told Link that no self-respecting woman could possibly have lived with Royal Scott. For three years—the best years of my life—I did my best. It was a silly marriage to begin with, and my own family was dead against it, but he had money and he was a great sport, and he dazzled me—little fool that I was! We lived in an apartment for awhile, and then in a hotel, and then he got running around with other women, and I just couldn’t stand it. Cry? I almost cried my eyes out—I was heartbroken. So finally I went home to my mother, and she suggested that I come out here and visit Inez and Aunt Madge.”

“You divorced him?” Barbara asked, in the pause. She had glanced at Link’s fine, sunburned, ugly, yet oddly likeable and impressive face. But Link, flushed, and with an expression just a little uncomfortable in his eyes, had fixed his gaze steadily upon Marianne. One of his big hands he had laid on hers, on the table.

“No, I couldn’t, there. Royal,” Marianne explained scornfully, “was always very careful to give me no grounds for that. No, I just left him, and came West. Where he is, or what he’s doing, I haven’t the faintest idea. Nor do I care! I filed my suit in San Francisco, and I get my decree on the first of next September.”

“So that she’s had a pretty rotten time of it,” Link added, his look demanding their sympathy.

“Awful!” Marianne said, with a shudder. “What women have to go through!” she added, shaking her head. “But, anyway, that’s the story. That’s why we have to wait until September,” she said, warming, “that’s why Link’s father has threatened to throw him out of the business and out of the house——”

Her voice rose impatiently.

“Now, now, now, what do we care?” Link soothed her.

“Well, I *do* care, Link!” she answered agitatedly. “I *do* care. I think he’s a mean old devil, and I don’t care who knows it! *You* built up that business, you are the real brains of the firm, you put your whole life into it, and he has no right to leave everything to your sisters—*no* father has any such right.”

“Oh, come—come—come!” Link protested, uncomfortable that Barbara and Barry should see her so excited. And Barbara perceived that they had been over this ground many times before. “He’ll forgive us, some day, and all this will be forgotten.”

“He won’t forgive *me*!” Marianne persisted viciously, and to Barbara’s surprise she saw that the older girl was actually in angry tears. “For I’ll never speak to him again, the close-fisted old tightwad.”

Honestly shocked, Barbara glanced quickly at Link. But Link was indulgently, if also somewhat uneasily, smiling. His feeling for Marianne, Barbara realized, had affected his vision of anything Marianne might say or do.

“Isn’t she a spitfire?” he asked, laughing. And patting her hand and speaking as if to a furious child, he said to Marianne: “Ah, pussy, don’t get worked up! You know you don’t mean that!”

Marianne looked at him, cooling visibly, and beginning to pout.

“Well, it’s only because he’s so mean to you, Honeyboy,” she reminded him, softening.

“Some champion, isn’t she?” Link asked, looking at Barbara.

“No, but he’s the most wonderful boy in the world, and his little girl is crazy ’bout him,” Marianne went on, supposedly to the others, but really only to Link, who looked foolish, pleased, and self-conscious at the same time.

“And *that*—” said Barbara to Barry, when in the mellow lingering twilight they were alone again, and were attacking the accumulated dishes and duties attendant upon a lazy, hospitable day—“*that*—save that butter, Barry, it’s perfectly good!—beats any mushy-gushy honeymoon talk you and I ever attempted! That ‘Honeyboy’ stuff! Every time she said it, I simply broke out in gooseflesh.”

“I can’t see why you criticize her—she seemed to me simple and nice and affectionate to-day,” Barry reproached her, stiffly and loftily.

Barbara, carefully storing bread and cream, changed her attack.

“You can see that it makes Major Mackenzie wild,” she said. “In the first place, he belongs to the generation that loathes divorce; and in the second place, you can imagine what a buzz there’ll be when the town gets on to the whole thing!”

“You haven’t said yet,” Barry began in a hurt tone, “that you think I was pretty decent to them, considering how I *despise* unexpected visitors, and that the instant you saw them you threw all our plans overboard. It didn’t matter to *you* that you’d promised to go down to the willows for lunch!”

“Well, I do think you were very nice, and I certainly was proud of the place, and the lunch, and the way you behaved, and everything!” Barbara assured him pacifically.

“Yes, but you didn’t *say* so!”

“Well, I say so now.”

“And last month, when I was so decent to your father, and put myself out to give him a nice visit——”

“But darling—Barry, hand me that bowl, will you?—but darling,” reasoned Barbara, pouring two pans of milk together, and holding each in turn under the running hot water, “I told you a thousand times that I thought you were an angel to my father.”

“You did when I *asked* you. I wish to God,” Barry grieved, “that you had *some* husbands! I try to do everything——”

Barbara glanced at him over her shoulder and was touched to see that he was dutifully cutting old potatoes, lettuce leaves, crusts of bread, into the pot that would simmer, on the back of the stove, with the chickens’ breakfast for to-morrow.

She went over to him and perched on the arm of his chair and said peremptorily and whimsically:

“Kiss me and stop your nonsense! I think you’re the most wonderful person alive. You were an angel to-day.”

Barry’s sulky face brightened and he tightened a big arm about her waist and drew down her cheek for violent kisses.

“Barberry Bush, there’s nobody like you in the world! You’re wonderful. I was so proud of you to-day, and the lunch and the place. I’ll bet it knocked their eyes out. You looked prettier—sitting there with your red hair and your blue apron . . .”

There was a long interval of this. Then Barbara could resume:

“Don’t you think it was a rather rotten thing for any woman to do, come into a community and call herself ‘Miss,’ when she really was married?”

“Rotten. But then she *is* rotten,” Barry said frankly.

“Oh, do you think so?” Barbara was pleasantly surprised.

“Certainly she is. It would take an innocent boob like Link Mackenzie not to see it!” Barry said scornfully, in his man-of-the-world tone. “She’ll lead him a dance before she’s through with him, believe you me.”

“Barry, don’t you think they’ll be happy?”

“Happy? With that near-Cleopatra reddening her lips while they are being married, and vamping the clergyman at the same time——”

Barbara’s delicious wild laugh rang out, and she leaned, in a very gale of mirth, upon the broom with which she was brushing the wide flags of the patio. The last of the sunlight was lingering on the spring grass, and the bowing plumes of the lilacs, and the blossoming white popcorn ball of the plum tree. A dreamy radiance, full of the promise of summer, of warm moonlights and shining, cloudless days, lay over the world.

“Kind of pitiful, his breaking with his father, Barberrry,” Barry commented.

“Terrible, really. It’s awful, to me, to see Link Mackenzie, who was always so cool and cheerful, excited and thin and so queer and quiet!” Barbara commented. “He seems a changed person. Why, Link Mackenzie would have shot anyone who called his father a close-fisted old tightwad a few years ago. He just seems mesmerized by her. He doesn’t seem so terribly happy, to me.”

“If old Major Tom really kicks him out,” Barry reflected, jamming the patio door on the swollen earth, and freeing it, and jamming it shut again, “they’ll be worse off than we are!”

“Well, really, they will.”

And Barbara, finishing her sweeping in the dusk, had an oddly satisfied feeling, only half realized and not at all understood. Life was evening the scores, after all. She—Barry’s wife—was responsible, burdened, and puzzled enough, sometimes, in the new duties that the new state demanded. But she was farther along the road than Link, somehow; she felt nearer Link than she ever had felt in her life before, better able to understand him.

He and Marianne had actually envied her and Barry to-day; envied them their youth and freedom to marry, their isolation from criticizing eyes, their love and laughter, Barry’s genius and the beginnings of success, Barbara’s capability, and the comfort and picturesqueness of their gipsy home.

More than that, Barbara felt dimly that Link had envied her the bright integrity, valueless through all his honourable, open boyhood, but strangely and newly appreciated now, when there had come a shadow on the name of the woman he loved, and when between his father and himself there was widening daily a chasm of distrust and hostility.

Marianne Scott a divorced woman! Not even that, yet: she was a woman who would attract another man even while tied to her husband. When Cottonwood knew that, a tidbit of gossip affecting the most prominent families in town, there would be talking!

“Barry, was there ever anything sweeter in this life than a spring sunset? These are the days to live for—this makes all the long waiting through the winter worth while!”

“I don’t see where you get your energy, my good woman. I ache from head to foot!”

“That’s just spring fever, that yawny, stretchy feeling. Look at our patio—isn’t it beautiful, all swept and nice again? Barry, let’s walk down to Abalone Rock and get the last of this particular day!”

“Well, wait—I’ve got a poem for you, I must have written it days ago, but I found it in my jacket pocket to-day.”

She loitered in the arch of the patio doorway, looking out across the paddock and strip of orchard that lay between them and the sea. The chickens had all gone to bed now, the barnyard was very still; the walls and fences were painted with pink sunshine, in strips and bars. And in the west the sky was reddened, and the sinking sun was framing little fleets of clouds with aureoles of pale opal colour.

Scent of lilac and acacia and turned earth and grass in the still soft air; Barry's strong fingers holding hers as they walked together down to the shore. There was a sort of languid sweetness in the twilight, after the long, warm, enervating day.

They walked past the blossoming plum tree, down a sunken lane, and came out on the cliff, opposite Abalone Rock. The bigness and blackness of it stood up boldly against the sunset, the seas volleyed and charged and surged against it, brimmed solemnly and evenly over the filled pools in the rocks, and withdrew, like a sweeping of satiny skirts, back to the measureless, restless levels of the dim wide ocean again.

The sun was gone now, but there was a clear, shadowless light upon the sea; water rocked and rippled ceaselessly; the tide was in. It spilled itself in fingers of snowy foam where the jagged teeth of a natural causeway of slippery, weed-covered rocks led out to the big sentinel outpost. Barbara, seated in the snug hold of her favourite boulders on the shore, looked at it with a fearful fascination. Not much chance for one—if ever one stumbled and fell into the rushing millrace of angry water under Abalone Rock.

"Remember you walked over to Tomas's house last week and left me a note?" Barry, ready to read his poem, was demanding eagerly.

"The day it poured so!"

"Yep. Well, this is what I wrote." And straining his eyes to see in the gloom, he read:

“They say that Hak'kei once so painted night
His canvas, being unrolled, filled the room
With moonshine, even though, in morning light,
The Emperor's cherry orchards were in bloom.

“So with your letter. Opened in the gray
Of tempest, under sombre winter skies,
It brought your laughter to my lonely day,
And sudden sunshine seemed to blind my eyes.’”

She did not speak. But she stretched her fingers to him and linked them tightly in his own; in the last waning light he could catch the flash of her blue eyes, and he saw that they were wet.

"I went over that rainy day," she said, after a long silence, "to ask Tomas's wife some questions."

For a few moments Barry made no comment. Then he said:

"What on earth about?"

Again Barbara was silent, and her fingers tightened in his.

"Marianne guessed it right away," she presently offered in a rather faint voice.

Barry sat up, staring at her incredulously through the gathering shadows.

"I don't believe it!" he ejaculated.

Barbara said nothing. But she got to her feet and turned her back toward the sea that was lead-colour now, and began to mount the cliff path.

Instantly he was beside her, extending a hand for her support.

“What makes you so sure?” he said.

Barbara was conscious of a desolated desire for tears. But she controlled it and walked on, Barry’s fingers tightly supporting her elbow now.

“Wouldn’t you—wouldn’t you be glad?” she asked guardedly, when they were at the patio archway.

She had been afraid he would fail her, and that she would have to remember always that, at this moment, he had failed her. But it was in a boyish tone of sympathy and wonder that he said mildly:

“Why, I—I would if you would, Barberry Bush!”

Barbara, with a sound between a laugh and a cry, put her arms about his neck, and her face down against his shoulder. It was delicious to feel his grip holding her tight; she felt oddly tired and cold and weak, and for a long time she clung to him blindly, and neither spoke.

Then they went into the kitchen and lighted the fire, for the evening was suddenly chilly, and a wind had sprung up from nowhere and was singing on the roof. Presently Barry had crackers and milk and a cigarette, and Barbara had thin tea and thin toast, both smoking hot, and she thought that she had never loved him so much, or the hacienda so well, or been so happy about anything as she was about the fact that the news had been told and he had taken it gently and kindly and without regret.

It had been fun having Link and Marianne here to-day, Barbara thought, still musing interestedly upon their problem, and the thought of old Major Mackenzie’s anger and Marianne’s divorce. They had liked her Spanish sauce, they had enjoyed their meal, and how beautiful the ranch had looked in spring sunshine, with the fruit trees one mass of bloom against a soft blue sky!

“See how you like this, Barberry Bush!”

It was Barry, at the centre table, with his pencils and paper. She roused herself from a half doze, blinked in the light.

“Listen, see how you like this start!” he said. He began to read scratched and altered lines:

“We spoke your name in the dusk to-night,
The sea gulls had gone to bed,
And the waves were leaden in closing light,
And the west was painted red.
We talked about you beside the sea,
In the world you do not know,
But that you shall know——”

He stopped, frowned. “There’s something wrong here,” he said darkly, scowling at his paper. And he began to scribble again.

Barbara fell again to musing. The mystery of it enfolded her like a garment, seemed to dull her senses. The life of a child, coming toward the old world. A child, bound whether he liked it or not, for the old hacienda, and for life with herself and Barry . . .

She felt frightened at the enormousness of it, somehow. She stirred stiffly, thought she would go to bed.

But Barry was deep in dreams. He had a new subject now; he was busy with it, and he was happy.

CHAPTER XIII

The Mackenzie children, Link, Lucy, and Margaret, had been motherless since Link's eighth birthday. Of them only Link remembered his pretty mother, giving them all ice cream in the grape arbour on hot afternoons, and pretending at breakfast to taste baby Margaret's cream of wheat, with great manifestations of enthusiasm.

"M'm'm! What *delicious* podgy," she would say. And Link would quite seriously taste his own, expecting it to be extraordinarily good after this description.

His grandmother, an invalid for years, had lived until some time after his mother's death; Link had been playing with a mechanical toy in his grandmother's room on the afternoon his mother died. There had been talk, in the family, of a new baby sister or brother, for some weeks previously, but, boy-like, he had paid small attention to it. It had been raining, raining, raining, and Link, running his trains along a window sill, had stopped to look down and see Dr. Bonner's muddy phaeton, sluicing water, parked in the side yard.

When his father came upstairs, he did not stop playing. He did not notice his father at all until he heard a hard, grinding, agonized voice that was still his grandmother's say, "Oh, merciful and heavenly Father, protect us!"

Then Link went slowly over to where his father was sitting, and stood puzzled and troubled beside him, now and then jerking his head up, as the weight of his father's arm about him and the heaviness of his father's head on his shoulder drew him down, to wipe awkwardly the man's tears from his own face, with the back of his free hand.

After that, he was his Dad's boy; indeed, Major Tom Mackenzie, in a troubled, tender, clumsy way, had lived only for his children since then. The girls he would have spoiled, if little Lucy had not been the busy, practical, capable type of little girl who promptly began to mother him, and her sister, too, and utterly refused to be spoiled. Link he made his companion and confidant.

It was easy for Link to grow to boyhood sweet, good, and sensible because everyone liked him, everyone expected great things of his father's son, and the entire social fabric of Cottonwood was such that, between the richest boy in town, who was indisputably Link, and the poorest, there was not much to choose, in actual dressing and eating, amusements and employments, after all.

Link grew grimy and rumped over long division and geography, as the others did; he had the gang in his backyard afternoons, unless they all went to swim on the shore, or were allowed by special privilege the ecstatic freedom of Fatto's father's lumber yard, or Jim Stephenson's mother's hotel.

The Mackenzie children had a pony cart one year, sent them by an aunt in the East, but it was not a success. Link and Lucy would gladly abandon it at any moment, to join their friends on a hay wagon, or nip rides on anything from the station bus to the hearse, and Margaret, left lonely in the pony cart with her nurse, would scream herself into spasms at being deserted.

So the pony grew fat and lazy in a paddock, and the cart was stored in one of the empty barns, and as both Fatto and Harry Poett somehow became possessed of motor cars at about sixteen, and Jim and a few of the other boys were skidding about town in disreputable cars even before this, and as Link's father, on principle, would not permit him to own one until his

eighteenth birthday, no invidious distinction in his favour was felt by anyone, much less himself, in this as in other matters.

Under the circumstances, he and his group developed slowly, as it was natural that they should develop. The neighbouring college of St. Whitsun was a small, friendly, well-endowed institution, where no disturbing new social ideals were apt to find a footing. Link and his girl friends played about cheerfully through the late teens, sharing dances and sodas and box lunches in their young manhood and womanhood just as they had in the seventh grade, occupied with so much tennis, croquet, swimming, so many walks, rides, and camping trips, such feverish periods of theatricals and minstrel shows, such rarebits, candy-pulls, and barbecues as might well delay the development of those sex instincts and spoiled appetites that a more crowded, effete, and extravagant life inevitably produces.

All this until Marianne came. It was not long before her coming that Link, enjoying the absorbing subject but somewhat puzzled, had sometimes quite frankly told this girl or that in his own group that he had never been in love. How did he know he hadn't? Well, darn it, you always did know that, didn't you? You knew that you were missing something.

Sure, he had said, with his friendly, likeable, homely grin, he would like to be in love. He wasn't trying to keep out of it; he just guessed he was an arrested development. Lucy and Otis, now, it was enough to make you envious to see what a kick they got out of it!

And suddenly, there had come to him several days of thinking, strangely and confusedly, of Barbara Atherton. It had almost made Link laugh to see how entirely unconscious Barbara was of any change in his attitude. But she was certainly the brightest and nicest of all the girls, spontaneous and fresh, unusually, arrestingly pretty, and Link had suddenly felt, quite dispassionately, that he wanted to marry Barbara. Nothing could be more suitable, everyone would be delighted, and all the details of the wedding and the bringing home of his spirited wife—"Gosh, she'd be my wife!" Link had thought innocently—would be "fun."

He had rather haunted her for a day or two, self-conscious, awkward, and excited, eager to break through his own troublesome limitations of uncertainty and constraint, and eager to arouse in her the responsive ardour that should carry them quickly and serenely into harbour. It would be the greatest "fun" in the world to be engaged to Barbara Atherton and have all the others congratulating them and giving them parties, Link had thought, with a queer, inexplicable flutter at his heart that had warned him that his imagination had not even begun to grasp the extent of the "fun."

But Barbara had not been able to meet him halfway. She had been puzzled, amused, a little angry, and a little disgusted by his overtures. At twenty-five, little as he knew of women, Link had known that the sleeping fires in Barbara had not been lighted by his attempted clumsy kisses, by his incoherent reproach, by his effort to persuade her that there was an enchanting country close beside her, a country of moonlight and whispers, stolen kisses and ecstatic vows, and that he was eager to find it and have her find it.

And turning disappointed from Barbara, he had found Marianne at his elbow.

Marianne was twenty-eight, three years older than he. She had told him at first that she was twenty-four, and Link had of course believed her. Not that it mattered, either way, very much.

When a telegram from her stepmother had come on her birthday, with the damning word "twenty-eighth" included in the message, his faint feeling of hurt and surprise that she should want to deceive him had made Link unhappy. But not for long.

Marianne knew all the rules of the oldest game in the world and how to break them. She had a beautiful, slim, boneless little body, beautiful tawny hands, and strange almond eyes, drawn up at the outer corner just a hint, like a Chinese girl's eyes.

In everything, she was the embodiment of feminine lure. Her hair was silky to touch, and delicately fragrant to smell. Her voice was low, her Oriental eyes were full of subtle flatteries. Her garments embraced her, in every variation of silky line and seductive curve; her stockings were transparent, her ridiculously small feet set off by a bewildering variety of buckles, bows, straps, and rosettes.

On the bathing beach she looked like a barearmed, bareheaded, barelegged pixie, smiling up with mysterious significance from under a barbaric sweep of bandanna. On the tennis court she had a red cap jerked down over one eye, and a little scarlet coat, in dangling soft panels of silk, set off her brief white skirt.

But the house was Marianne's hunting ground, cave, and setting. In the morning she fairly dripped Irish lace and peach satin ribbons cunningly backed with lemon. And she could quite absent-mindedly and impulsively fly downstairs in these intimate costumes, too, and eagerly greet Link Mackenzie, if Link happened to stop with a message, at the French windows that gave on the side lawn.

Under these circumstances, she was always deliciously confused, wrapping her insufficient draperies about her, doubling herself modestly into a porch chair, and scrupulously jerking down a scrap of lace to cover her bare ankles, whenever his eyes found them. Link had not known Marianne two weeks before he had had glimpses of her in her silk pajamas, with a saucy little silk handkerchief sticking out of the breast pocket, had seen her drying her freshly washed hair, and had even seen her in bed.

On the last occasion she had summoned him imperiously to the room where she and Inez were chatting over breakfast trays. Just one teeny second, she had pleaded, tucking the pink satin coverlet about her. Aunt Madge would kill her, of course, but Link *must* come in and let her see his face while she told him about Amy Atherton's engagement to that fuddidud Duffy boy who always smelled of ether!

And she had looked at him sidewise, with infinite provocation dancing in her eyes, under the disordered fluff of her dark hair.

"Link, do you feel very wicked, talking to us up here?"

"Oh, on the contrary."

Gales of laughter from the girls, and then Marianne, drawing her mouth down childishly and innocently, had said:

"Because you see I had to see you, *didn't* I, Link?"

"I'll say you did!"

"Aunt Madge," Marianne had continued, as the somewhat scandalized Mrs. Wilson had come in, eyebrows raised, "I really know I'm very naughty, and I really know I'll go to hell, and I really won't never, ever do it again—but I had to talk to Link, and I'm sorry!"

And she had bowed her black mop upon her raised knees, and hugged them with her round, slim arms, and abased herself penitently.

Everyone knew she wasn't sorry, everyone knew she knew better, yet it was somehow charming to them all to pretend that Marianne was just a mischievous, impish, irrepressible eight-year-old, and to scold her as one.

Aunt Madge scolded happily, half heartedly; she liked the atmosphere that Marianne brought to the house. It wasn't exactly conventional, but then youngsters did have such a good

time in these days, argued fat Mrs. Wilson, and somehow you couldn't stop them. Marianne's presence meant, too, that Inez had plenty of excitement and company, and was much less bitter and discontented than she had been last year. And finally, if that reckless little monkey Marianne, who seemed to have a positively uncanny knowledge of what drew men to women, really did catch Link Mackenzie, who was quite the richest and most prominent, as well as the nicest boy in town—well, nobody would have any criticism to make of Marianne after *that!*

The thought of the bedroom, in the summer morning, with its light tempered by awninged windows, and with the girls all lace and perfume and pink ribbons, over their silver coffee-pot and hot rolls, stayed with Link all day. How cunning she had looked as she tipped her little black head to one side, and asked, so naughtily:

“You see I did have to see you, *didn't* I, Link?”

He would walk through the summer darkness of the big gardens after dinner, to see her again. It was always a thrilling experience, going to find Marianne. Little, soft, perfumed, eager thing, she did not resist his kisses and his arms. With consummate ease she managed that they should have a few minutes alone together almost every night, before the fire, or that he should be the squire selected to drive her to a dance or theatre, or that Aunt Madge should consent to their walking out as far as the garage wall together, just to look at the moon.

Every waking minute of Link's day was consumed with the burning thought of her. Her flatteries, her soft kisses, her little fingers as soft and pulpy as a crushed poppy in his; these things devoured him. By autumn he was pleading with her to become his wife, begging her not to keep him waiting too long.

It was then, one cold evening when the lights in the sitting room were turned low, and when the voices of some older folk, over the card table in the adjoining room, were acting as a sort of chaperon, that she climbed into his arms, and lay there, like a quiet, grieved child, and confessed to him, with many a pause for kisses, and many a pleading little pressure of her fingers, that she was really another man's wife.

The revelation, with all that it involved, had staggered him for awhile. His passion for her, always a fire, had turned to an agony, and the days that the thought of her had made quivering and bright with strange, formless dreams, were dark with jealousy and pain.

His father, whose quiet acquiescence and consent to his attachment Link had construed into enthusiasm and sympathy, was adamant here. What kind of a woman was this, he had demanded harshly, who could win the love of another man while all the laws of honour and decency held her to the one?

But by this time Link's fury of loyalty to her had risen to the point where it could carry him through any crisis. The bitter breach with his father had been created without any violence, after all; the two men, alike in a sort of homely ruggedness, alike in their firmly jawed, sunburned faces whose very ugliness was attractive, had exchanged no unnecessary words.

“You mustn't marry her, Link. She isn't your kind.”

“I shall marry her.”

“Not as my son, you won't.” It had been said dispassionately and quietly, almost absent-mindedly, and the older man, saying it, had stared thoughtfully out of the office window.

“That's up to you.”

And then life was going on just as usual, father and son coming and going in the big Mackenzie mansion, speaking to each other, civil, considerate, well controlled. Margaret was away at school, and Inez Wilson ill; Marianne Scott was never invited to the house any more;

everything seemed rather quiet and flat, after the joyous excitement that had reigned all summer. But T. L. Mackenzie, senior, read his magazines and newspapers, went off for his golf or riding, and gave to his business the steady attention he had given it all his life, and T. L., junior, also pursued the usual tenor of his way, stopping in at the Wilson house on his way downtown every morning, and going there for dinner, or immediately after dinner, almost every night.

If Link's father thought of the past years, when the clumsy, long-legged boy had been his companion in golf games and fishing trips, when his greatest delight had been to wander out to the side garden on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon and watch the youngsters at their tennis or croquet, when his boy had made him laugh over every breakfast table, and had won him to animated discussion of political or social issues at almost every dinner hour, he gave no sign. If he remembered the still earlier days, the days when Link had grinned at him with two big front teeth missing, with the freckles actually confluent upon his high, boyish cheek bones, the days when the elder Margaret had been beside him and Lucy and little Margaret had worn white dresses just alike, when all the world had seemed as sweet a place as was the Mackenzie orchard, with the neighbourhood children playing under the trees, he suppressed the thought. The children were grown now, and the boy had made his choice of a mate.

Link remembered nothing. Everything in his life, before the advent of Marianne, was a negligible blank. Only Marianne, and her low, laughing voice, and her soft fragrant mouth, existed now.

It was a bitter thought that another man had called her wife, that she had loved and kissed before. But, after the first pang and shock, it had only made him love her the more. Sensitive, exquisite little Marianne at the mercy of a brute! Link burned to have her free, to be able himself to comfort and console her and make her forget that there was unhappiness in the world.

But he was not the first ardent lover who was to find the law's delays sickening and discouraging. Try as he might, he could not listen to her quite simple explanation of her legal difficulties without feeling a violent revulsion of sympathy, without having his teeth set on edge.

Poor little thing, she had been dragged through such gutters by that dog of a Scott, he reflected, that she used terms and expressed ideas quite foreign to her own nature. Probably, in the beginning, the fact of her husband's infidelity had been as shocking and as repulsive to her as it would be to any other fine woman. But she had had years in which to become accustomed to the idea, and in which to become familiar with all its repellent terminology.

"Don't dwell upon it, pussy, don't let's talk about it," Link would say, laughing uncomfortably, trying to win her back to the coquettish, mischievous moods he loved. But Marianne insisted upon constant allusions to her wretched first marriage; she wanted to convince Link, as she was entirely convinced herself, that the trouble between herself and Royal Scott had been in no way her fault. Her silver, her wedding presents, were still in Royal's possession, and she was anxious about them, and fretted because there were delays about regaining them. There was even a question of the cellar.

"My father sent me six cases of wine; they no more belong to Royal Scott than they do to you!" she said to Link, more than once.

Withal, she was irresistible, groomed and frocked and hatted to perfection, always the most conspicuous girl at any dance or gathering, always the woman men instantly noticed and flocked to meet. And even in the critical, impatient moods Link came somewhat to dread, and

always minimized as much as he could with good-natured soothing and chaffing, she maintained her imperious and yet babyish charm.

"I'm bad," she would confess, her scarlet underlip thrust forward, her black eyes winking, her whole babyish, flat little body curled up in a big chair, the shining little slippers showing under the crooked knees. "I'm the wickedest person alive! But come over here and love me."

Link couldn't help going over there, and couldn't help loving her. She was made for loving, small and cuddly and boneless and fragrant; she could make him forget, in an instant, the pricking trifles in her manner and attitude that sometimes made him uneasy, the hints of coldness or coarseness or selfishness that flickered sometimes upon the surface of what was so pretty and so captivating.

When Marianne told him how she managed to make both her father and her husband pay for her fur coat, somehow it sounded funny, sounded like the impish manœuvres of a mischievous child. When she told Link that everybody had always been nasty to her, and she couldn't help being just a little nasty in return, but that when he and she were married, and her big man was buying her pretty things, and spoiling her, and making everything nice for her, she was going to be the goodest, wisest, craziest-about-her-husband little wife in the whole big world, he believed her.

"Of course, supposing that you still like me when I'm really and finally divorced, Link," she would add conscientiously. For Link would never assume, even when they were alone, that they could consider themselves justified in any planning before that time.

"Being unhappy is awfully bad for me," she told him seriously. And Link answered her with a great shout of laughter that made her demure little face break into laughter, too.

After the day down on the ranch, with Barbara and Barry, she was especially affectionate and gentle for a time.

"You like Barbara, don't you, Link?" she asked.

"Oh, sure. She's a great girl. She and I have the same birthday, you know. We've always made a sort of joke of it."

"She's twenty-seven?"

"Oh, no, I'm four years the older."

An incredulous look from Marianne.

"Link! She's more than twenty-three!"

"Nope. I've known her since she was a baby—knew her grandmother, old Mrs. Bush. She's only twenty-three, but she's one of those queenly girls."

Marianne was dissatisfied with this.

"If you think she's so queenly," she commented, annoyed, "I wonder why you didn't fall in love with *her*?"

"Because I fell in love with you, pussy."

"I was only twenty-three when I married Royal!" Marianne stated irrelevantly. "I had beaus when I was sixteen."

She had a sudden and somewhat disconcerting way of referring almost any subject of conversation to herself, when it became a mere question of personalities. Dresses that she had worn, fashions of wearing her hair, effects of jewelled headbands or lace hose, were all treasured in Marianne's memory, and she loved to talk about them. Already she was planning, as Mrs. Link Mackenzie, to "run on" to New York every spring for her new frocks and hats.

Meanwhile, the present was satisfactory neither to her nor to Link. Marianne chafed at the legal delays regarding her divorce, because the relationship between herself and Link was a

constant anxiety and burden to her. They were not engaged, they were not free; to hold him at a steady level of devotion, through weeks and weeks of inaction, was beyond her power.

If she had been free, they would have been married in September, they would now have been man and wife for six months. But now it was April—May—and Marianne began to fear that only a sudden favourable turn in the tide would complete and secure her plans. If any break came between them now, it would be fatal, for Link naturally could not feel himself bound to a woman who was legally another man's wife, and indeed took great pains to impress her with the fact that, until she was actually unmarried from her first husband, he would in no way think of himself as her second.

Link's father had taken his position definitely. He disapproved of the marriage, he disliked the young lady, and he did not want her mentioned in his presence. If Link persevered in his plan to marry Mrs. Scott, his father would make ample provision for him and his wife, but there would be no further talk of a partnership for Link, and his father's fortune would be divided between the two daughters of the house.

All Marianne's resolute, charming battery failed on the older man. Her subtle flatteries, her attentions, her thousand little daughterly graces had left him cold and unresponsive, even from the moment of meeting the Wilsons' captivating young relative and guest, and when Link's feeling for her became evident, his father's distrust and dislike for Marianne deepened into a quite positive antagonism.

Marianne bore this airily and hardily, assuring Link he would change when once they were married. But the old man grew grayer, strangely gentler and sadder, as the summer wore away, and Link never knew a moment of real peace of heart or happiness, any more. He loved his father, he loved his sisters, and he loved, too, the old white-painted brick mansion under the big trees that had been his home for all the days of his life. But he knew now that he could not have these and Marianne, too. He must find a new home and a new business. And probably both would be away from Cottonwood. It would not do to have Link Mackenzie his own father's rival in the hardware or real estate field.

It was all the more distressing to him because, as was inevitable, he had had time now to see, in Marianne, some hints of the qualities that he knew his father and sisters had already discerned in her. She *was* cold and superficial and selfish, in some ways, poor little girl. But then she had had such an unhappy life! Perhaps happiness and peace of mind would soften her. Anyway, he loved her all the more for being imperfect. Everyone was imperfect! And even with the faults that he could not but see, Link was broad enough to deal patiently, in the humble conviction that he had plenty of faults of his own.

Marianne would get her divorce on a certain Monday, September fourth. And she planned to be married on the following day.

"I don't think it's nice to be married on the very same day!" she decided. "Do you, Link?"

"I hate all that part of it, dear. Let's not connect the two things at all, if we can help it!"

Her quick, resentful flush, as at a reproach.

"You've been talking to Lucy, I suppose?"

"Pussy, how sensitive you are!"

"I'm not sensitive at all. I *wish* you wouldn't always try to put me in the wrong, Link."

Sometimes, after a long, exhausting scene, he found himself wondering how one dealt with such episodes after marriage. Oh, well, when he and Marianne were once safely married, she would have less to be anxious and nervous about, she would be quite different.

He said to himself that it was a “funny” summer. His father was quiet and depressed, Margaret did not come home, but stayed in the East visiting school friends, and the elder Mackenzie went East himself for a few weeks, partly on business, partly to see his daughter.

Margaret was gone, Lucy was absorbed in husband and baby, Joe Dodge was married to a rich widow and living in San Francisco; Inez Wilson was ill, Barbara and Amy Atherton married and gone away, everything seemed changed, older and soberer. If there was a crowd now at Bartell’s, having sodas, on week-day afternoons, or if there were swimming parties on the Casino beach on Sundays, it was among the younger set, the girls and boys who had been in high school when Link’s group was enjoying these things.

There was no croquet. Usually on Saturdays and Sundays Link drove Marianne to the country club, ten miles away, and while he played golf with older men, she sat on the porch, beautiful and saucy and exquisitely gowned, and fought over bridge points with older women.

And so July and August came and went. Next month!

Marianne would be his wife next month. Well, it would be a relief to have it all over, to have the die cast. But already Link was looking back at his first feelings toward Marianne, at the days when he had trembled at her slightest glance or word and had been afraid—tremblingly, sickeningly afraid—that he would never win her, as a man might look back at the delirium of a fever.

The hot season passed, and the little cottages of the summer visitors were shuttered and closed until another long vacation, and the fruit trees and the big maples were bared. Yellow leaves drifted down over the Wilson house and the Mackenzie house, and the leaf fires were lighted again. And it was September; it was October.

But Marianne did not get her decree. She explained to Link that the “horrid old judge” had made difficulties, and Link, secretly relieved at the respite, asked no questions. Marianne had established a California residence and had made her complaint on the grounds of desertion, presenting her suit through a San Francisco court. Link only knew that she had gone to San Francisco, a few days before she expected to secure her absolute decree, buoyantly telling him that she would buy a few pretties, too, while she was there, “because twenty-four hours after my widowhood I shall be a bride, Link!” and that she had come back angry and disappointed, because unforeseen complications had delayed the granting of the decree until January at the earliest.

His sister had gone back to school. Inez continued to enjoy an invalided state. She had had three minor operations in one year and had at last found a filling and absorbing life work. She talked only of anesthetics, surgery, sutures, and trained nurses. And Link went over to the Wilsons’ every night and murmured with Marianne in the old-fashioned sitting room.

CHAPTER XIV

One day, a cloudy Christmas Eve, Link turned his horse's nose in at the collapsed old gate of the Du Spain ranch and stopped outside of the patio wall, with a call for Barbara.

There was no answer; there was no stir of life on the place, except that a few fowls, pecking disconsolately about the farmyard, avoided his horse's hoofs with loud squawks and plunges of fright.

A soft, mild winter afternoon, with a cool wind moving about like a moving wall, and clouds packing themselves grayly in a gray sky, above a pale gray, quiet sea.

The bare orchards were carpeted with yellow fallen leaves; there was shaggy yarrow standing brown and tall under the apple trees. The barns looked shrunken and dilapidated, a huddle of roofs and whitewashed weather-beaten walls and fences and sheds, with a low row of dead sunflowers bowing ceremoniously at each other, against one side of the long, low, shabby hacienda.

There had been unusually heavy rains, and the horse's feet picked up heavy clods and withdrew themselves from the mud with loud sucking and smacking noises. Link jumped down, and with the bridle over his arm and the old buckskin's face looking anxiously over his shoulder, he pushed open the patio door.

A slender woman, inside the court, was pinning baby linen to an improvised clothesline that crossed a corner at a slant. A tall woman, with her copper head bare and her cotton dress spattered and spotted with water. Barbara.

She looked a little pale; her hair was brushed carelessly off her forehead, and her hands were wet from washing. And for a few seconds she seemed bewildered.

Then pleasure lighted her tired face, and her colour came back. She caught at Link's hands eagerly and clung to them.

"Well, Link Mackenzie!" said her pleasant rich voice welcomingly, "what a wonderful thing for you to do. Are you alone? Here, Goldie," she added, to the horse, "I'll put you in the corral."

"Happy birthday, Barbara!" the man said, grinning.

"Happy——?" She had obviously forgotten it. Then her face lighted. "Link—you're wonderful! You never forget it!" she said. "Happy birthday to you, too! I'm so sorry Barry's not here. I expected him home to-day," Barbara, handling the horse and removing his bridle with the expert ease of the farmer's wife, went on. "He went up to San Francisco, and he intended to get back to-day. But he won't be here until to-morrow now—he would have come out with Tomas at noon, if he'd been coming. Well, Link! How *good* it is to see you. But you look tired—you look thin," Barbara interrupted herself in quick concern. "You've been working too hard?"

"Perhaps," he conceded, as they walked back from the paddock where his horse had been loosed. "Oh, finish them—finish them!" he added, with a nod toward the dishpan on the ground, still filled with the wet, wrung baby clothes.

"Well, I will—it won't take me a moment." She was instantly and expertly busy with them again, snapping them smartly to free them from dampness and wrinkles, holding the clothespins in her mouth. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, but the silent, sunless

day seemed to have no time element; sombre clouds moved overhead, and the windmill creaked intermittently. A cat, arching itself about Barbara's legs, uttered dismal croaking.

"No, you can't come in, Mitsy," Barbara told the cat kindly. "She has kittens in the barn, and she is always wanting to bring them into the kitchen—and I can't blame her!" Barbara explained to Link, as she briskly snapped and pinned. "Somewhere, in some story I once read—and I think it was Dickens, I think it was those adorable Kenwigs," said Barbara, "there was a mother who was afraid a cat would suck her baby's breath. Doesn't it sound like Dickens! And I never have dared let Mitsy into the kitchen with Kate."

"With whom?" Link demanded, enjoying her.

"With my darter, Kate. That's her name."

"It sounds so grown-up somehow—Kate."

"Well, she'll be grown up some day, and I don't want her to be blighted with Totty or Pussy or Bootsy, or any of those baby names. But come in," Barbara invited him, picking up the empty dishpan, "and see her. She's grand."

Link, bending his head a little at the low lintel, followed her into the warm kitchen, where a fire was crackling hospitably, and where, in a washing basket set on the floor, not far away from it, a tiny baby lay sound asleep in a nest of white blankets and snowy pillow.

The rest of the room he knew; the reading table and couch, the sink and stove, the small-paned little windows like portholes with their sills of wide cement, the soft old tiles set irregularly underfoot. The room was dimly lighted, for the larger windows had no panes, were simple open oblongs in the walls and were now shuttered fast against the cold.

Link noticed nothing; he had eyes only for Barbara, as, shabby and slender and exquisite in her young motherhood, she went on her knees beside the basket and turned her radiant smile from his face to the tiny face on the pillow. There was something in her aspect then almost too sweet to be borne by the man, who felt himself rough, crude, and ignorant beside her chiselled fineness and sensitiveness.

"Barbara, eyelashes!"

"Imagine your noticing them! But, look!" She put the transparent scarlet tip of a finger ball beneath them, against the infinitely soft little pulpy cheek, and glanced up again proudly. "Her eyes are black as *night*," added Barbara, in a tone with something of night's own mysterious darkness in it.

"And how old is she now?"

"Kate—was five weeks old yesterday," the mother said, computing.

"And you—ought you be——?" He hesitated, afraid of hurting her. But his little shrug indicated the patio, with its clothesline.

"Oh, but I'm gloriously well!" Barbara protested. And she laughed. "With Barry away, I have nothing to do!" she said.

"Is he wild about her?" Link was still watching the baby.

"We're both half-witted about her," Barbara answered proudly.

"And was she born here?"

"Right here in this room." Suddenly she paled again, and a dark shadow swept her beautiful eyes, like the shadow of a bird flying over still pools. Only an instant, and it was gone again, and she was smiling. But he had seen it.

"This woman Kate here," said Barbara, pursuing the subject serenely, "arrived a week before the date previous marconi-grams had indicated. Consequently, her mother had only time to summon Maria Bettancourt from the next ranch here. Luckily, Maria was at home, and

also her mother, Engracia Rivas. Old Mrs. Rivas came waddling over here instantly and enjoyed the whole affair enormously.”

The baby wakened suddenly and emitted a tiny acid cry. And Barbara stooped and gathered her to her breast, and sat down in a rocker opposite Link, beside the fire. The man, watching her intently, felt that something in the picture of this woman and her child, beside this lonely ranch-house hearth, was quite unbearable. The curves of her body, the tiny, downy circle of the unconscious baby head on her slender arm, the homely setting of the old kitchen all about her, and the firelight, painting her beautiful young cheeks red, and glinting on her copper hair, and striking a strange shining in her eyes, was poignantly lovely—possessed, indeed, that frightening loveliness upon which men dare not look too long.

“Barbara, what luck! Suppose you had been quite alone! Where was Barry?”

“Barry had gone off to Milo on an errand. When he returned and found the Bettancourts in possession, he promptly went off again.”

She had begun the recital whimsically, amusedly. But her voice thickened treacherously on the last word, and her bright head drooped a little, over the gold fuzz of the baby’s head.

He hadn’t left her here in the ranch house to have her first baby with only two ignorant Portuguese women in charge? Link asked himself in horror. She might have died, as thousands of women, in safer surroundings, had died at this time.

“Barry hates suffering and he hates fuss,” Barbara recommenced composedly, after a moment. “Everything went beautifully, and Dr. Bonner, who arrived here at about six o’clock, found Kate in the best of health and spirits, about an hour old.”

She would not let her thoughts stop here, she would not let herself remember the kitchen, painted with blood from a November sunset, angled and stabbed and rocking with agonies for some woman—not Barbara Atherton, but somebody else—a screaming, writhing girl on the couch there, with a frightened old Latin woman trying to hold her down.

Walls, floors, stove, windows, Maria’s face, all familiar, yet all metamorphosed into monstrousness and hideousness. Red sunset streamers merciless and sickening, creeping down from the clock to the window, stove-lids, glinting on the faucets. Red—was that sunset, too?—on Maria’s hands.

And then twilight and firelight and exhausted peace. No voice—it had been screamed away—no strength even to move languid eyes to the faces that bent over her. But peace. Her wet hair sticking to her forehead, and her head aching. But no more pain.

“Hello, baby. Hello, Kate. Stop that yelling, you’ve made enough fuss. Go to sleep, Kate.” This in a whisper. That purple little pugilist was the baby.

Dusk, painted by red and black shadows under the kitchen’s old adobe ceiling. Fire crackling, and Tomas whispering. And then professional skillful fingers at one’s wrist.

“Dr. Bonner”—one could still smile—“is she? Is she really a beauty? *I* thought she was.”

Hot tea. Delicious, heartening. And then Barry’s whisper at the patio door. Poor Barry, he had been crying. He came creeping, like a dog, to the side of the couch, he kissed the languid hand that hung there and broke into sobbing.

Five weeks ago yesterday. But Barbara could not quite happily remember it yet. It was shut in that new mysterious light in her eyes, it was a part of her now, with school days and measles, and her first sweethearts. Link saw what it had given her, the steady sweet flaming shine of it in voice and eyes and manner; he told himself that this was the young motherhood of the painters and the poets, the great miracle in a gray, tired world.

“And what took Barry to San Francisco?” he asked.

“Well—she’s off again,” Barbara murmured of the baby, but she did not put her down. “Well, it seems there is some queer old rich woman in San Francisco,” she explained, “who sometimes sends struggling geniuses to Paris or New York to study art or literature. And a man Barry knows up there has been talking about Barry to her, and she wanted to see him. So he went up on—let’s see, this is Thursday—he went up on Monday, and I expected him back to-day.”

“And you’ve been here all alone since Monday?”

“With Kate, Mitsy, the Bettancourts right on the next ranch, and the chickens.” Barbara would not play the martyr. “Now talk about yourself, Link,” she said. “You don’t know how lovely it is to see you. I went into town several weeks before the baby was born, to make arrangements at the hospital—this must have been in early October. And I’ve not been in since. Barry does all my marketing in Milo, and we are becoming absolute hayseeds. I had him telegraph the news to my father. Dad thinks that of course I was in Cottonwood when Kate came, and I’ll let him think so until he comes up in the summer. But go ahead—what are your plans? Have you and Marianne set your date?”

“Not yet.”

“And does your father feel any happier about it?”

Her face, lighted by the fire, was filled with sisterly anxiety and sweetness.

“No,” he said briefly, seriously.

“Too bad!” She made no further comment, and for a few minutes they sat silent, looking at the fire.

“I know Marianne loves me,” Link said presently, following his own obscure line of thought.

“People love differently,” Barbara answered unexpectedly. He glanced at her suddenly, in surprise. It was true, of course, but he had never heard it put into a phrase before. It was clever of her to see it. “I suppose,” she added, after a moment, “that, with your father, the stumbling block is the divorce?”

“The circumstances of it,” Link answered. “He thinks Marianne is principally interested in marrying well,” he went on a little awkwardly.

“You mean because of the money—you mean because you are rich?”

“*He* means that, anyway.”

Barbara was silent, glancing down at the baby’s head, looking into the fire. Suddenly she said unexpectedly:

“Link, money *is* important. I didn’t think so before I was married. But I see it a little differently now.”

“I don’t see you marrying for it!” Link smiled.

“No,” she agreed quickly, “I never could do that. And I don’t believe Marianne would. But it is nice to feel that one’s children will have a comfortable home—schooling—friends——”

Her voice stopped abruptly, and he saw the shine of quick tears on her lashes. She was biting her lip, swallowing hard, smiling, and it wrung Link’s heart to see her put her thin hand tightly over her eyes, and drop her bronze head over the baby’s head. For a long minute or two the tears had to have their way.

“The maddening part of a sharp sickness,” she presently said with an apologetic laugh, in a voice that steadied on the words, “especially when it is one’s first sickness, is that it makes one such a cry-baby. Nerves, perhaps. Anyway, don’t worry about it, for I cry at everything,

these days. I'm taking a tonic that looks as if it would put an elephant on its feet, so I'll soon be all right.

"These creatures," she added, drawing a long restorative breath and smiling down at the baby, "these creatures are great responsibilities. I would not be ambitious in my wish to wish myself much better but for Kate!" she said, with a significant smile for Link.

"Portia, eh?" the man said, grinning. "You were a great Portia."

"Funny to look back at it—it was eight years ago, I was only sixteen," Barbara said. "Harry Poett was Shylock—were you in that, Link? Yes, of course you were! You were the judge. Fun, fun, fun—school days," she added dreamily, as if half to herself.

"How different everything looked then," Link said somewhat obscurely.

"Well, didn't it? I have time to think it all over now," Barbara said, with a little laugh that indicated her surroundings, "and I often wonder what we'd think if we could look back at those school kids again, hear ourselves talking, ten years ago. In the first place," she went on thoughtfully, "I think we were all rather undeveloped—in Cottonwood, don't you? I never thought of marrying, or things of that sort, when I was eighteen and nineteen."

"Well, neither did I!" Link agreed eagerly, sympathetically.

"But I think the girls and boys nowadays do," Barbara submitted with a dubious glance.

"Oh, I *know* they do!"

"We must have been dumb," Link suggested, after a pause.

"I don't know. But, anyway," Barbara said, "we were all for picnics, walks, movies, and sodas at Bartell's, and 'intellectual games'—will you ever forget the 'intellectual games'? Speaking for myself," she went on innocently, "this much-discussed modern element of passion and—well, and sex, and all that, simply didn't enter my calculations at all!"

"Nor mine!" Link assented quickly.

"As a matter of fact," Barbara continued, with a faint accent on the last word, "Marianne seemed to be the one to stir us all up. Suddenly we were all excited because you were the best matrimonial prospect in town, and Fox didn't have enough to marry on, and Barry du Spain was the handsomest boy in town but didn't have a cent, and a lot of things we'd never thought of before!"

She put the baby carefully back into the basket and moved about the kitchen with the easiness of long familiarity. Quite simply and deftly she lighted two candles on the mantel, and smiled at Link over the big spoon from which she took her tonic.

"Glass of milk, Link?"

"I'd love it!"

The open pantry door emitted, upon a cold draught of air, the smell of stored apples and rotting wet wood, cheese and clean milk tins; Barbara brought the rich milk, topped with clots of cream, in two mismatched glasses, and closed the door again. The fire, roused by the current of air, sent the strong odour of wood smoke through the room.

"And would you have a piece of bread and butter?" Barbara asked her guest simply. "We have sweet butter to-day. No," she answered his quick glance with a laugh, "I didn't churn it! Maria did; she comes over to do heavy work twice a week."

Link thought of the girls in Cottonwood, of Inez's tea table, all silver and glitter, all damp little oozing sandwiches, ranged pastel-coloured peppermint tablets, and rich walnut cookies; of Inez lounging in lace and ribbons, and Marianne smoking cigarette after cigarette, and reddening her lips after every sip of tea. This was very different hospitality; he was hungry after his ride, and he felt its charm poignantly and surprisingly.

Barbara cut home-made whole-wheat bread; the big loaf was clumsy and amateurish in shape, but the crusty slice was delicious, and the feast had all the elements of perfection: good company, firelight, and appetite.

“How long were you and Barry engaged, Barbara?”

She smiled, glanced at him wide-eyed.

“Why, but we weren’t engaged at all, of course! That is, except from eleven o’clock on a Saturday morning until exactly noon, when we were married.”

“But you had had an understanding?”

“No. Barry and I fell in love with each other *after* we were married—we’ve often talked of it,” Barbara said. “Suddenly, that morning, there didn’t seem to be any reason why we *shouldn’t* be married—it was rather like the line of least resistance!” she confessed cheerfully. “Of course,” Barbara went on, laughing, “there was every reason in the world against it, but we didn’t know that then!”

“How do you mean every reason in the world?” Link asked, with his puzzled, honest frown.

“Why, financial reasons first, foremost, and always,” Barbara answered. “And then professionally, too. Barry shouldn’t ever have been burdened with a wife and child! And temperamentally, he is the sort of man who worries frightfully when the woman he loves needs anything, and yet who is too much of a little boy to go out and battle for her! But, however,” she finished sensibly and contentedly, “married he is, and likely to remain so, and there you are! *I* don’t think most persons think much about marriage before they’re in it,” Barbara added conversationally, finishing her milk with great satisfaction. “I don’t think they *can*. Things are bound to turn out entirely different from what one expects, and the main thing is—the main thing is,” she finished philosophically and in a whimsical light tone that did not entirely deceive him, “that there’s nothing so happy in the world as marriage, and nothing at all like having a bold girl, like Kate here, on the premises!”

“Suppose anyone, you and Barry, for instance, had been engaged a long time,” Link began, with a quite transparent attempt at generalities, “and suppose you felt that you would rather pull out of it. Would that be—would that be—a decent thing to do?”

“It would be a decent thing to do—it would be *the* decent thing to do,” Barbara answered promptly. “But if you’re asking *me*,” she added, “I would never have had the courage for it. I hate to face issues and take stands. And I should imagine that a lot of other persons—you, for instance, Link,” she added, smiling, “would be worse than I am about it! It takes character to manage, not only your own will—but your own vacillations!” she finished.

“Barbara,” Link said suddenly out of a silence, during which each had been staring thoughtfully into the fire, lost in the train of his own thoughts, “I’ll tell you. I don’t think Marianne and I care for each other—as we did—as we ought to. It seems to me that it would have been a terrible mistake to marry a year ago, when we first talked about it, before I knew about her first marriage.”

“Well, if you had married then,” Barbara suggested thoughtfully, and a little hesitatingly, “so many other emotions and experiences would have taken the places of all the—the love-making and engagement feelings, that you would be—“she groped for words—“that you can’t say you wouldn’t have been happy,” she said. “But long engagements are terrible. That first—that first wild excitement of discovery isn’t intended to last indefinitely,” she submitted.

“We quarrel,” Link confessed miserably. “And then, the minute we’ve parted, she writes me these frantic notes, begging me to forgive her.” He paused. “My sister Margaret and my

father—as I was telling you—think,” he added frowningly, and a little ashamedly, “that it’s partly because Marianne cares about money—is glad to be marrying where there is plenty of it —”

“And don’t you think there may be some truth in that, Link?” Barbara asked, studying his face thoughtfully, as he stopped short.

“Well, if there is?” he asked, almost a little defiantly. “I don’t blame her. I’m not so stuck on myself that I expect a girl to go crazy over the idea of cooking and washing for me for the next forty years! And that makes it all the harder to break it off,” he ended, scowling.

“You mean you really would like to break it off, Link?” Barbara asked straightforwardly.

“I think so, now—for awhile. Even if after awhile it all began again,” he admitted, distressed. “A man sounds like an awful cad, talking like this. But she sprang the news of her first marriage on me only after we were actually talking of being married immediately,” he went on. “I don’t blame her—she’s a nervous little thing, and she was all worked up and distressed and worried, she didn’t know what to do. But from then on—I’ve felt I was an awful rotter, engaged to a woman who really was tied to another man.

“That’s part of the trouble,” added Link, as Barbara, studying his face intently, was silent. “She loathes this bouncer of a Scott so, she’s detested the thought of him for so long, that actually she feels free. *I don’t feel she’s free. I can’t. And—Marianne’s different from other women,*” he argued, interrupting one troubled line of thought to follow another; “she has no mother, her father is married to a woman she hates. She’s affectionate. And for a whole year now,” Link finished, with an apologetic grin for his hearer, “I’ve felt that I was getting in wrong—more and more wrong—and yet I’m not the one to make the break.”

Barbara was silent for a long while, and Link mended the fire, whose crackling flames lighted the big room far more than the feeble candlelight could.

“Want the lamp, Barbara?”

“It’s not filled.”

“Well, let me fill it, then. Where’s the oil?”

She glanced toward the pantry, frowned faintly, and got up to put a candle in a more advantageous position.

“I don’t know that there is any!” she announced freshly and cheerfully, as if just making the discovery. “I don’t order it unless I have a really big order for the man at Milo, because he has to do all his delivering himself after hours.”

Link’s acceptance of the situation with a matter-of-fact smile did not betray him, but he felt something stir deep within him, as if his soul winced.

“Link,” Barbara said suddenly, back in her seat beside the fire.

“Barbara?”

“If—under the circumstances, you could steel yourself to take Marianne quite simply at her word, the next time you quarrel——”

She paused, thinking it out.

“Impossible,” he said. “The next morning, or the same afternoon, there is always a note. Once she came to the office.”

“You could go away for several months,” Barbara suggested, after thought. “Your father would certainly make it easy for you. Ben Judson, from your office, is always going to Kansas City or Los Angeles or somewhere. But the point is,” the girl added, smiling and shaking her head, “have you character enough, before you go, to tell her, and Inez and your father and Lucy, and so on, that it’s *over*—definitely done with. I shouldn’t have! I’d sneak away, leaving

everything half settled,” Barbara confessed, laughing. “And then it’d be all to do when you came back. And by that time she might have the date set, and the trousseau all ready!”

“I know,” Link agreed, with a heavy sigh. “It isn’t that I’m not fond of her,” he went on suddenly, “I’m awfully sorry for her, I think she’s had a rotten deal. She’s affectionate—or at least she loves affection——”

“And beautiful,” Barbara prompted.

“And beautiful. But—but this whole darned mess makes me feel so confused, as if I was acting in the dark, and being fooled like a kid,” Link confessed boyishly. “I don’t know why the Judge refused her her decree in September, I know I followed her up to town once, in August, I think this was, and found her having tea with Fox Madison at the Palace.”

“Well, no harm in that!” Barbara laughed.

“No, I suppose not,” he said discontentedly. “They said they’d met by accident, but afterward something she let slip showed that they’d gone in together on the train. I wish to God she wasn’t always scheming and framing up perfectly simple things that don’t matter a rap, anyway!”

“Why don’t you see her to-night?——”

“She’s in town. She went in yesterday,” Link interrupted.

“Perhaps she and Barry are having tea together to-day,” Barbara suggested, and laughed wholesomely.

The man looked at her quickly.

“Wouldn’t you mind?”

“Mind their having tea? Heavens!” Barbara said, and laughed again.

“You aren’t jealous, Barbara?”

“No. I trust people. But, perhaps,” Barbara conceded, “if I loved someone who was always deceiving me, and teasing me, and humiliating me before other persons—— I don’t mean Marianne, of course!” she broke off, in quick apology.

“But Marianne *is* something like that,” Link admitted gloomily.

“Well, girls of that type think that that shows their power over men,” Barbara explained quite simply. “They consider it a proof of being charming, I think. It always seemed to me silly,” she added. “I would just as soon annoy my father or mother, or Amy, as tease Barry that way. Listen!” she broke off suddenly, with a brightening face. “Here’s Barry now!”

The door opened, upon a draught of cold air, and muffled and coated, carrying a milk pail, Barry came in. Link saw her kiss him, her slender arms tight about his bulky wrappings, and caught Barry’s suspicious, hostile glance as Barbara took the pail into her own hands.

“Barry—what fun! You came down on the afternoon train! Here’s Link, in the gloom. We’ve been jabbering like parrots for an hour. You’re frozen, poor darling—wait a minute, I’ll make you a cup of cocoa or something.”

“I didn’t know you had asked Link down,” Barry said stiffly and displeasedly, his teeth chattering as he cast off his outer garments and sat lamely down by the fire.

“You sound as if you had a cold, dear!”

“Oh,” he spoke patiently, long-sufferingly. “I’m extremely *ill*.”

“Barry! Then you ought to be in bed.”

Barry looked with elaborate significance at Link. And Link immediately arose to go.

“Bad weather for colds, and it’s a rotten day, too,” Link said cheerfully. “Take care of yourself, Barry. You wouldn’t like me to ask Bonner to come down?”

“Please don’t trouble yourself, I wouldn’t drink cocoa in the state I’m now in if you paid me,” Barry said in an undertone to Barbara, choosing to let it appear that he had not heard Link.

“Good-bye, Kate—your Uncle Link thinks you’re a great baby!” Link said to the cradle. “Good-bye, Barbara. Love to Amy and your father when you write!”

“I will.” She walked with him to the door, composedly enough, but he saw that she was nervous.

“Doctor?” he asked, raising his eyebrow, just at parting.

She compressed her lips, raised her eyebrows, and faintly shook her head. There was even a cryptic smile behind her eyes.

“Shut it!” Barry shouted. And with something between a desperate laugh and a shocked and apologetic exclamation Barbara slammed the heavy door upon the patio. Link was mildly surprised to find cool winter daylight lingering among the shabby old whitewashed farm buildings and bare fruit trees; in Barbara’s kitchen there had been the darkness of early evening. A storm was gathering in rifts and curls of dark cloud across the southern sky; the sea was heaving like something that simmered rather than moved shoreward, little waves rocked in irresolutely, rocked out again.

The buckskin had come to the paddock bars and whinnied homesickly to his master. Link caught the bridle from the post where Barbara had hung it, and had it buckled in a matter of seconds. Mounting, he looked uncertainly toward the patio door; might she come out to the line of baby garments that were writhing and bellying like little ghosts in the cool, windy twilight, and say good-bye to him again? What was going on there, in the dark, low-browed old kitchen, with the sick, surly man beside the fire, and the tiny baby slumbering, and the girl who had been Barbara Atherton moving between sink and stove?

He lingered, watching. But the moments passed, and the windmill creaked, and restless gulls were blown, peeping, over the hacienda. She did not come to the kitchen door. Darkness and storm gathered, deepened, the winter night strode toward him like some fabled monster out of the cold north.

Link gave the horse his head, bent his own head to the wind, and rode slowly away into the dusk.

Left alone with Barry and the baby, Barbara was far too wise to precipitate a disagreeable conversation. She brewed tea, and buttered Barry’s favourite trimmed slices of bread, and placed a filled plate and a brimming, smoking cup close at his elbow. She washed two large potatoes at the sink and put them in the oven; it was not yet five o’clock, but there was no depending upon the stove in this weather.

It had been delicious to see Link, to hear all the town gossip, to feel one’s self shaken up and interested and a part of the world again. Barbara felt the happiness, the lightness of her changed mood in everything she did, in every step she took, felt it, indeed, written upon her face. But Barry was the immediate duty, and she took care that he should have no cause to suspect that she was thinking of anything else.

“God, I’ve had a frightful day!” Barry presently burst out aggrievedly.

“You missed your train?” Barbara was merely assisting the conversation, but Barry stopped drinking his tea, and looked over his cup with a sort of patient sneer.

“Oh, no, I got it of course!” he said.

Barbara said nothing to this, being not so much angry as bored by his rudeness, and not surprised at all.

"I missed it by one minute, the street car got into a block," he resumed presently, drinking and shivering elaborately, and interrupting himself now and then to permit his teeth to rattle. "Now what's the matter?" he broke off, in exasperation. "What have I said?"

"I don't think you're very polite," Barbara said, hurt, sitting down and taking the wide-awake baby into her arms. "She's going to have the blackest eyes in the world, she'll be a terror!" Barbara thought, with satisfaction.

"Polite? Because I said I'd caught the train? Oh, for the Lord's sake!" Barry raged. "I come home—just to be with you, I miss my train, just because I can't afford to take a taxi, I get a lift on the Milo school bus and ride down with a pack of dam' kids, instead of taking a taxi from Cottonwood, I walk through Tomas's place and get your milk for you, when I'm as sick as a dog . . ."

It went on and on, up and down. Barbara nursed the baby, a scarf drawn over the full, blue-veined white breast, and the soft little head. Her eyes went dreamily from Kate's furiously working mouth to the fire.

Presently Barry was still, except for the sound of angrily swallowed tea. The smouldering, sulphurous silence that repression and anger create began to widen between husband and wife. Barbara was weaned unto death of that silence.

"Come on, now, Barry, be sweet and talk to me. I'm dying to hear all the things that have happened to you!"

Silence. Barry went to the stove and poured himself another cup of tea.

"Now you know," Barbara began persuasively, "you know we'll be friends again in a few minutes, and that this is just a waste of time!—Pour half that out, and fill your cup up from the kettle," she interrupted herself to direct him. "You can't drink it strong like that!"

"I haven't been fighting," Barry said sulkily, obeying her instructions carefully.—"How much sugar do I take?—I came home dying to see you, it seems to me that *that's* perfectly evident from the fact that I came! Never in my life—except that I feel ill—have I been any gladder to get home than I was to-night. And then to find you had company here, you and Link Mackenzie having a grand time, and his dam' 'Uncle Link' to the baby—I loathe that trick of kids calling the doctor and the ashman and the minister 'Uncle' this and that."

"Well, now, darling, it's all over, and there's nothing to quarrel about—except that you were terribly rude to poor Link."

"How do you mean rude? I was sick and exhausted—I couldn't be expected to dance and sing for him, could I? He with his horse and his airs, and I carrying in the milk pail."

"But, never mind, you're better, and he's gone, and I'm dying to hear about your trip," Barbara persisted resolutely, touched by the thought of the romantic Barry seen to such disadvantage.

"Well, then, kiss me, and don't be a devil to me on Christmas Eve!" Barry pleaded, in a meek little penitent voice. And he put down his cup, and came across the kitchen, and knelt down beside Barbara, and encircled both her and the baby with his long arms. His tired pale face was beautiful with love and compunction; he dropped it against her own warm cheek, and shut his eyes. "My God, I love you!" he murmured wearily.

"Look at her, Barry, with her bad bold eyes open!" Barbara adjured him suddenly.

He roused from drowsiness, looked at the baby.

"She's a cute muggins!"

"Feel her little fingers grip, Barry. Give her your fingers."

"For the Lord's sake!" he whispered, struck, and with a boy's foolish, abashed grin.

"Here, you sit here, and hold her," Barbara directed him. He obeyed her contentedly, and she put the bundled baby into his arms. "Lean back—be comfortable," Barbara said. "There—now your Daddy's got you, precious. See that she doesn't kick her feet free—don't *do* that, Kate!" she scolded, as the baby indeed brought a pair of squirming bare little extremities into view. "You *must* see her get her bath to-morrow, her first Christmas!" Barbara told Barry radiantly. "She's getting too cute! I'm going to hang up her stocking with ours to-night!"

"Gosh, that hot tea went to the spot, Barberrry. I was regularly sick when I came in!" Barry said gratefully. He rocked slowly, gently cradling the staring and wriggling baby in his arm. "Say, she's a regular pug—she seems twice as old as when I went away," he commented, amazed.

"Well, isn't she? She raised her little head up like a turtle to-day, when she heard my voice," Barbara stated proudly. She had been running a mental gauntlet between all possible and impossible puddings, in the last half-hour, but it would never do to let Barry suspect it. Men were useless when the planning of meals was in order; Barry would only say "not for me," no matter what suggestion she made, and no matter how disappointed he would be if there were no dessert. "If I had three figs, or four dates," Barbara's thoughts ran. "Baked potatoes, turnips, the abalone heated up—and what? Corn-meal pudding, bread pudding, rice—tapioca—cornstarch—we're out of cornstarch and vanilla, too—French toast, he's sick of it, baked apples he's sick of, squash pudding—squash pie, he adores squash pie. But it's too late to go out to that freezing barn and grope about and find that squash. I'll get it to-morrow.—Oh, *joy!*"

With the last mental ejaculation came a sudden access of energy. Four cheese balls with cream, four toasted soda crackers, and Link's delightful, novel, exciting box of taffies—forgotten until this instant. There was a dessert for a king.

She began dinner preparations happily. The kitchen was warm and comfortable, and the angelic baby lay wide awake, staring, or seeming to stare, with an eerie interest that captivated both parents, at the red and black shadows that lapsed and swelled in her little world.

"Tell me about your old lady, Barry. Did she burst into tears and say that you looked like the boy she lost in the Civil War?"

"She did not! She's an awful old pill," Barry answered frankly.

"Oh, and there's no New York in it for us?"

"*Us!* That's the trouble. She won't have anything to do with married men. She says she never helps anything but young fellows with no families."

"Well, did you ever hear the like of that!" Barbara exclaimed, busy now belting, strapping, and pinning the baby, who lay on her back on the table, in complicated layers of blankets and garments. "We don't care, do we, Kate?" Barbara went on hardily. "We consider the source, and we give loud, rude laughs at ladies like that. Do you know I think she has an awful nerve to say that to you!" she added, straightening Kate's wrappings, and winding her little doublegown warmly about her feet. "Just put your hand out here and steady her, Barry, while I make up her bed."

She was on her knees, patting and shaking and tucking at the microscopic couch vigorously; presently she laid the baby, still staring, like a little sausage within it, and covered her, and grasping the handles of the basket, bore her away to the darkest corner of the room.

"Are you awfully disappointed, darling?" she asked.

"I am not," said Barry. "I never had much faith in the old girl anyway, and if *Napoleon Third* is taken, we can thumb our noses at her! I don't see that twenty old fussy women could

give me more than I've got at this moment.”

“Plus a little kerosene oil,” Barbara suggested, as he paused. “This dimness is terrible to me.”

“I'll get some to-morrow. Have we any money?” Barry asked, with simplicity.

“We have four dollars Tomas paid me this afternoon for the calf. It's there in the box. And a week from to-morrow's New Year's, and he'll owe us fourteen for the cows.”

“Then,” Barry summarized it, “I'd say we are on Easy Street!”

“Well——” She gave a forlorn and yet joyful laugh.

“Was I a dirty dog to Link?” Barry presently said.

“You were.”

“But I did you a poem this afternoon, Barberrry, for a Christmas present. I did it coming down in the train. I got to thinking what a wonder you are, and how I love you, and—I've got it somewhere here.”

She caught it eagerly, the face that Link had seen pale and tired that afternoon shining and rosy; she carried it to the candlelight.

“Barry!” she said thickly, adoringly, reproachfully, when she read it. And in her exquisite voice she began to read it again:

“ ‘You gather all the things I love in one,
I have no mirth but you are mistress of;
The skies I love, and the warm stars I love,
The sea, and the white beach it breaks upon
Are mine because you give them . . . ’

Ah, Barry,” Barbara cried, interrupting herself, and tucking the paper into her pocket, “you do love me?”

“Love you?” he echoed, shaken. And he stopped her in her busy way across the kitchen, and prisoned her shoulders in his big hands, and crushed his own mouth against her sweet, protestant lips. “Is that for dinner?” he asked appreciatively, eyeing the abalone.

“Yes—I had put it away out in the woodshed, to be sure to keep it for you to-morrow, but now that you're here we'll have it to-night. Tomas got it, yesterday, on Abalone Rock.”

“Gosh, there is no place like home!” Barry muttered, sinking into his favourite chair. “I'll get you oil to-morrow, I promise it—even if I have to walk to Milo myself and bring it back.”

“She's asleep. Is that a good baby or *isn't* it?” Barbara, after an expedition of inspection to the corner of the room, asked triumphantly.

“She's a wonder. This is a happy time, isn't it, Barberrry?”

“This is lovely.”

“This,” said Barry, as he so often said, “is the Kingdom of Heaven!”

CHAPTER XV

The clock struck nine, struck ten. And still Link Mackenzie sat before the fire, in his dimly lighted bedroom, his jaws set, his half-lidded eyes fixed on the flames, his big fingers loosely linked, thinking.

The luxury, the beauty and order of his own home had struck him with a sharp sense of pain after his long ride back from the ranch. A man at the stable to greet him cheerfully when the buckskin trotted into the box stall; a smiling maid to open the side door to Mr. Link. Fires everywhere, flowers everywhere. Massed button chrysanthemums in the halls, violets, big double white violets on jointed stems, standing on his desk; this last was Lucy's touch, she never let a day pass without some similar little evidence of affection for her big brother.

His own room seemed to-night a very palace of ease and beauty; there was a coal fire burning in the old-fashioned rodded fireplace, the window shades were drawn against the winter night, his books were waiting, his night light and his big white bed, his favourite leather chair and reading lamp, all in order. And in the bathroom lights were blazing white in the mirrors, and reflected in little pools in the enamelled tub and washstand; his towels were fat and white, his soaps and powders delicately perfumed.

His father was dining at the Roaches', where he would play bridge afterward; Link had old Martin bring him up a tray with his dinner, and went over his mail, as he absent-mindedly disposed of the meal Tilly had taken pains to make unusually inviting.

And all the time he thought of Barbara. Somehow her material disadvantages worried him bitterly to-night. Barry was an ass, of course, but she had married him, and she must love him—girls did love such men.

But the dark kitchen . . . The little baby whose crib was a big washbasket. The wet garments being pinned to a clothesline in the afternoon wind. The loneliness, the silence, the desolation of the old hacienda. No lights, no luxury, no bathroom and reading table for Barbara, no kindly efficient service and delicately cooked food. Link remembered the smell of mice, mould, cheese, and apples that had come out in that cold draught from the pantry; he remembered her plain kitchen dress, spattered with water.

"What hell she's been through!" he muttered, half aloud. "Married, and with a baby! Barbara—let's see—she isn't twenty-five yet. What'll become of her, I wonder? For she surely can't go on like that."

There was a fat letter from Marianne among his other letters; he kept it for the last. She always wrote him exhaustively when she was away; pages and pages of large sprawling handwriting, almost illegible, as was the fashion of her generation, arrived almost every day.

Link read this letter, sent away his tray, lowered the lights, and flung himself into his leather chair. And here he sat—while the clock hands moved from eight to nine, and nine to ten, thinking, thinking, thinking—thinking.

It was after eleven when he heard his father coming softly upstairs and, going to his own door, called to him.

"Dad, could you come in here a minute? I want to talk to you about something."

Major Tom, blowing and rosy from his recent encounter with the cold night air, was instantly concerned.

"Feel all right?" he asked anxiously, coming in. He put his overcoat, cap, and muffler on a chair, rubbed his cold hands together, and approached the fire with a long "ah-h-h!" of satisfaction. "Roach keeps his house like a vault!" he observed. And then, with a keen, dissatisfied look at his son, as he sank into the leather chair Link had just vacated, he asked again:

"You're all right, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Link said boyishly, miserably. And he took the chair opposite his father, planted his elbows on his knees, and bowed himself far forward, his big hands rumpling his hair.

"Why, what is it?" the older man asked tenderly. And there was breaking, was expectation, as well as sympathy, in his tone.

"I don't know what to do!" Link confessed, throwing his head back and smiling unhappily at his father.

Tom Mackenzie took a large handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose, put back the handkerchief and rubbed his hands. His heart shook with a fearful hope as keen as pain. He had prayed for this hour. But he gave no sign.

"What's matter, Link?" he asked briefly, in a businesslike tone.

Link was silent for a few minutes, first glancing quickly and appraisingly at his father's face, as if he meant to estimate the older man's mood, and then returning his gaze to the fire. Presently he drew and expelled a great breath.

"Well, I think I'm in wrong, and I want to get out!" he said simply.

His father felt his heart stop. But instantly he knew his rôle. He looked at Link, pursed his lips and elevated his eyebrows. There was a certain timidity in his aspect, a suggestion of a shrug moved his broad shoulders. He dared not speak. The wrong word now——!

"It's Marianne," Link said then. "I think—I *know* that I don't want to marry her."

His father eyed him seriously, patiently. His voice was mild. But his pulse hammered.

"Well, I'd be very glad if that was the case, Link."

"The trouble is," Link added impatiently, "that I don't think she—that is, I think she is kind of counting on it."

"Yes," said his father promptly, unemotionally. "I suppose she is." And again he fell silent.

The room was very quiet; only one lamp was lighted, but the shine of the fire found angles and bright lines everywhere, and the violets sent a heart-piercing sweetness through the soft, warm air. Link's mother, painted at eighteen, with roses in her bright hair, looked smilingly down at him, from the mantel. Above the thick little gold oval that framed her, two old swords were crossed, the one her father had carried at Manassas, the one Link's Mackenzie grandfather had worn at Gettysburg. And the epaulettes that had decorated the blue uniform and the gray with their heavy bullion fringe tarnished and their colours long forgotten, held the reconciled swords in place.

Warmth, quiet, peace, in here. But a nagging little wind was fingering at the windows, and Link suddenly thought of the hacienda, swept by the winter gales and the sea fogs, dim in candlelight, scented with mice, cheese, and rotting apples. He brought his thoughts back to Marianne.

"Dad," he said, after a long silence. "What can a man—a decent man, do?"

His father pursed his lips again, considering. But Tom Mackenzie was not really thinking of the immediate problem—it had been heavy on his spirit for a whole long year, it had worn his heart thin. The significance of to-night's attitude, on Link's part, was that at last there

appeared to be a loophole—a chance, that he might really hear, really understand at last. And slight, and utterly unexpected as that opening was, it made his father tremble with hope and fearful joy, it made him afraid to speak, afraid to be silent, lest the precious opportunity be wasted or be spoiled by some impulsive word from himself.

“She’s legally a married woman, ain’t she, Link?” the older man, with that favourite grammatical lapse of the business man, asked presently.

“Yep,” Link answered. “But not any more married this minute than she has been since I met her!” he admitted. “Or rather, since she told me she was,” he amended after a pause.

His father looked at him, perplexed.

“How do you mean?” he asked simply.

“Well,” Link began. And in his voice there sounded the deep relief of being able to discuss the matter, in anything like a sympathetic atmosphere, at last. “I fell in love with her before I knew she was married,” he explained. “And then we—we were engaged.”

“How could you be engaged? She knew she was married, if you didn’t!” his father reasoned promptly.

“Yes, I know—but she was—sort of—carried off her feet,” the boy elucidated, somewhat lamely. “She’s a funny little thing, impulsive and unreasonable, and all that, and she knew then that she meant to divorce Royal Scott, and she just let things drift.”

“H’m!” the old man muttered, pondering. “And then, when she told you that she wasn’t free, there wasn’t any talk of an ‘engagement,’ then, eh?”

“Oh, no, there couldn’t be. She was horribly nervous for fear that her husband would find out she was in love with me,” Link said. “She made a claim of desertion, you know, and all he had to do was to rejoin her, or try to rejoin her, at any time during the year to have the whole case thrown out! So she was pretty careful——” He paused. “But of course it was understood that we would be married when she was free,” he added, his tone becoming troubled and doubtful again.

“You wrote her letters to that effect,” the father asked unemotionally.

“Well, not after I knew she was married!”

“Didn’t, eh?” There were relief and pride struggling under the voice the older man tried to make dispassionate and calm.

“No, sir.”

“I’m glad of that,” Major Tom observed mildly. And after a pause, during which Link scowled, and stared down at the rug, he added: “What makes you think you’d like to be quits?”

Link looked up, shook his head, and shrugged.

“Done, eh?” The elder Mackenzie could hardly believe his own words, wondered if this was only a dream wrought of his anxious thought.

“Yep,” Link said again.

“Well, if your feeling toward her is changed, my boy, you certainly mustn’t marry her,” his father said gravely. “Women take these things very seriously—you can’t deceive ’em. She’d know you didn’t love her, no matter what you said.”

“I’m not sure,” Link began, squeezing his palms together, and fixing his distressed eyes upon his father, “I’m not sure it *would* make any difference with Marianne. She—it matters to her that I’m—that——”

“Rich.” His father supplied the word quietly. “I see,” he said. And for awhile father and son sat silent, thinking.

“You see,” Link began presently, in a troubled voice, “we quarrel now terribly. She—she does a lot of things that make me feel mad,” he confessed, with a shamefaced grin. “She flirts and hurts my feelings and all that—she thinks it’s funny. But she always makes it up, and she always talks—she always *talks* about being rich, and building a big place here some day. She said to me last week that she wanted me to give her a roadster for a wedding present, said she’d picked it out.”

He laughed awkwardly, and his father smiled, too, and pursed his lips.

“I have this feeling,” Link recommenced. “If I could make the break now, while she is still waiting for her decree, then I could get away with it, because she couldn’t make any fuss about it. Even though,” he added doubtfully, “I don’t think she would ever have applied for her divorce if it hadn’t been that she wanted to marry me.”

“And when does she get this decree?” the other man asked.

“About the third of February.”

“That’s a little more than a month,” Tom Mackenzie mused heavily.

“Exactly six weeks. But the provocation,” Link said, touching the folded sheets of a bulky letter he took from his dressing-gown pocket, “the provocation could be this.”

“Ah-h-h!” his father said, his eyes lighting. “What’s all that?”

“This is a letter she wrote me from San Francisco yesterday,” Link said, ruffling the pages. “She went up there day before yesterday, to see the Judge. And in this letter she explains why her decree was delayed last September. If it hadn’t been,” he added, “we would have been married three months ago, at least. But it seems there were circumstances of which I was entirely ignorant.”

“More mystery!” the father commented.

“Yes, she—she loves mystery. She writes me here that after she filed her suit for divorce, and after she and I had had our understanding, her husband came to San Francisco and sent her a telegram, here to Cottonwood, that he wanted to see her. She went right up, in a horrible state of nervousness, of course.”

“This was when?”

“This must have been late January, a year ago. She didn’t say anything to anyone, but she went up to the hotel, and they dined together, and had a sort of reconciliation, I imagine. Anyway they registered as Mr. and Mrs. Royal Scott, at the hotel, and stayed there two nights.”

“My God, what a woman!” Tom Mackenzie said, in disgust.

“Well, she’s funny,” Link had to admit. “But, anyway, on the second day she says they quarrelled.” He touched the letter. “I know, I know, it’s awful,” he agreed, in answer to his father’s look. “But she’s an undisciplined child. They quarrelled, and Marianne, shaken by the excitement, the emotion, and the general wretchedness of the whole business, went back to her lawyer and told him to go on with the suit.”

“What did you think of all this, Link? This doesn’t sound to me like a very honourable way to settle things,” the old man protested.

“I didn’t know anything about it! I never even suspected it until to-night. She writes me about it in this letter. It seems that, when she went up to get her decree in September, there was some delay. Whether Scott had been to the court, or his attorney appeared for him and raised an objection—she doesn’t make that very clear—but, anyway, the Judge refused the decree, and she came back here heartbroken. We were to have been married the next day.

"But she never told me anything. She just said that there was a technical hitch, and that the divorce would go through a few months later. And I never asked her, God knows I hated the whole business!"

"Well, Link," his father said, when the bitter young voice had died into silence, "the point is whether you've got nerve enough to split, now, and character enough to stick to it when you do split. She's a mighty seductive woman to a young fellow like you."

Link heard Barbara's voice, on the same phrases. "It takes character," she had said, "to manage not only your own will but your own vacillations!"

"But it's what I've got to do," he said to his father soberly.

"You do feel it so, Son?" the other man returned, after a long, shrewd scrutiny.

"Yes, sir. It seems to me," Link smiled forlornly, "it's now or never," he said. "I've been an awful fool about it, but that doesn't mean that I want to go on being a fool."

"Well!" his father said, after another study of Link's agitated face. "Well! I admit that this takes a—considerable—load from off my heart. But she'll try to get around you," he added, suddenly anxious.

"I was wondering if I could go away. In Ben's place, say. His wife has got a young baby; he'd like to be let off the spring trip.

"Yes, but that's—but that's—well, I think we could find you something else than that!" his father said.

"No, but that's what I'd like—that's what I'd like!" the boy said eagerly. "I'd like the hard work, and I don't believe it would do any harm to have a member of the firm meet our customers in that region—it would be a good thing all round."

"Yes, I know. But you'd be gone several weeks, Link—months, maybe."

"The longer the better! I want," said Link, "to get the taste of the whole thing out of my mouth."

Major Tom Mackenzie sighed a long, tearing sigh of relief and exhaustion, and, taking out his big handkerchief, quite frankly wiped his eyes.

"Then I think that's the thing to do," he agreed. "And I think day after to-morrow is the day to do it. When does she get back?"

"Day after to-morrow, in the afternoon; she and Mrs. Wilson and Inez went to town for Christmas."

"I think you ought to be out of the way, Link."

"I want to be. I'll answer this—" he glanced again at the letter—"to-night," he said. "I'll tell her that she hasn't been frank with me, all the way through, and that married affection ought to be based upon confidence."

"Don't say too much. Just so she gets the idea. To-morrow, go over and tell Lucy and Otis, have Christmas dinner with us—and make it a point to tell a few other people, by the way," the father advised, pondering, with a knitted brow. "Then early the next day come down to the office, and I'll have your itinerary and your trip planned for you, and you can get off on the one o'clock train." The older man fell silent, fingering his lip.

"And some day, after I get back," Link began with sudden self-consciousness and awkwardness, "maybe I'll thank you for being so generous to me about it."

"That can wait," his father said, embarrassed. "You've given me a pretty happy Christmas as it is!"

They sat silent a few moments, both staring at the dying fire, father and son strangely alike in the mood of deep abstraction that suddenly possessed them.

“Did Mother look like that when you first met her?” Link asked, after awhile, looking interestedly at the portrait over the mantel, as if he never had seen it before.

“Yes. No—well, yes, she did,” his father answered. “But that was painted by an uncle of hers, when she was only eighteen, as I remember the story, and I didn’t meet her until she was twenty-two. I had gone East to see my grandmother, in Connecticut; I was a lot older than your mother. My father and I had been in the business here, for years, and he took a sudden notion to go home and see his folks. Your mother, Lucy Swann, came over to the house the first night I was there with my cousin Lizzie, who had married a Swann. Your mother was just about the prettiest thing I ever saw in my life, I thought then. Well,” Tom Mackenzie added, grinning, “I don’t know as I ever stopped thinking it. Lovely woman—lovely woman. She had on a high white stock, and a white skirt, and her hair was parted in the middle.

“Her family thought a lot of her,” he added musingly. “I was thinking, awhile back, that this summer I’d go on and get Margaret, when school closes, and take her up there, and see some of the folks.”

“It must have been fun, bringing her West,” Link mused, still looking at his mother’s portrait, “and settling down here! I don’t know, Dad,” he went on a little confusedly, “here’s something that kinder gets me. There’s always been a lot of nice girls in this town, but I never wanted to *marry* any one of ’em until Marianne came along. And then I didn’t exactly think about marriage and kids and having a home and all that, I just thought of having *her*.”

He stopped, conscious that he was expressing himself awkwardly and obscurely.

“But, now,” he added, “I see the whole thing differently. It seems as if, having been so crazy about *her*, I get a different slant on the rest.”

“She waked you up, perhaps, Link,” his father suggested.

“Maybe. But I wish to God,” Link said, with sudden violence, putting his head in his hands again, “I wish to *God* something had waked me up before!”

“I wouldn’t say that, Son. If you’d married her,” his father said mildly, “you’d have had to make the best of it, like a good many better men have done! As it is, she’s the kind of woman who isn’t going to die of a broken heart. She’s deceived you all the way along, and she wouldn’t have stopped, as your wife.

“A woman like that,” he added, as Link was silent, “can certainly play hob with a whole town!”

“You wonder,” Link confessed boyishly, nervously, “what would have happened if we *had* been married?”

“Just what’s happened to a lot of smarter and older men than you are, Link,” his father assured him mildly.

The clock struck twelve, but neither man moved. Link continued to sit deep in his low chair, his hands fallen between his knees, his troubled, absent gaze straight ahead. His father rested placidly in the chair opposite, his bald head comfortably thrown back, and his hands spread on the chair arms.

“She liked the idea of a brick house!” the older man said presently, in affectionate satisfaction.

“Mother?”

“Yes, sir. She loved this house. My father had built it about ten years before I was married. The idea was that your mother and I were to have a place of our own, where I built little Lucy’s house, a few years ago. But Lucy liked this place, and my mother—she’d been ailing

for years—she was tickled to death to have us settle down in here. You children came right along, and we never moved. We built the garage, and the sun porch—sorter fixed things up.”

He fell silent, dreaming.

“I’m older than my father was when he quit,” he said suddenly, “and I don’t know but what I’ll step down, pretty soon now, Link. You and Otis have been running things pretty much your own way this year, anyway. I’ll take a long vacation. Margaret wrote me the other day—I showed you her letter? I sent it over to Lucy, I guess. Says, ‘If you don’t take me to Europe pretty soon, some other good-looking fellow will volunteer for the job.’ How’d you like to be president of the works for awhile, Link?”

Link looked up with a worried smile.

“Just about long enough to get up here to this room and cut my own throat,” he answered fervently. “My Lord, Dad, I have no judgment. There’d be a hundred things a day I couldn’t decide.”

“You’d have Ote,” the older man reminded him, in the pause.

“I know. And Ote’s darned smart. But, my *Lord*——” Link protested again.

“Well, well,” his father soothed him. “I’ll probably be one of these interfering old men who hang around the office long after they’ve worn out their usefulness. I’d be on your advisory board, maybe. But you useter think you could kind of run things, Link,” he suggested, with a shrewd smile in the gray eyes he narrowed upon his son. “When you first came home from college, you didn’t seem to have any of these misgivings about running the business.”

“Well, maybe I’ve learned som’p’n’ since then,” Link said briefly and bitterly, not to be laughed out of his dark mood. “I’ve made a fool of myself,” he added, “and no matter what I do about Marianne, I’ll feel like a skunk! She doesn’t love me, I don’t think she ever loved anybody, but—I don’t know——”

“Maybe it’s a case of having to act like a skunk now, or having to act like a skunk later, when you’ve got a couple of kids,” his father suggested.

Link laughed scornfully.

“There never would be any ‘couple of kids,’ ” he answered positively. “She—well, I don’t suppose you can get a slant at all on a girl like that, Dad, what she wants out of life, and how she goes about getting it.”

“I can give a pretty good guess,” the older man answered drily, sending a swift, half-humorous glance at his son. “Now here’s the whole point, Link,” he added, in a brisk and businesslike tone: “you’ve reached a sort of crossroads in your life. You’ve got to turn one way or another. And I thank my Maker,” added Major Tom, with an upward glance of genuine piety and faith, “that you haven’t found all this out too late!”

Link got to his feet.

“I’ve got some notes to write,” he said, in a determined and clear voice. “And I’ve got some packing to do. I’ll be out of here by one o’clock the day after to-morrow, and by the time I come back the whole thing will be over. For the sake of Inez and Mrs. Wilson she—Marianne, I mean—won’t make any fuss, and later on, sometime, I’ll tell her that I’m sorry for the whole thing.”

“Well,” said the older man, also on his feet, “I’m glad things have taken this turn, Link, I can’t say more than that.”

Link laughed gruffly.

“I’m glad, too.”

“Want any help packing?” his father asked, with a touch of the old nursery attitude toward the children.

“Oh, no, thanks. I don’t need anything but a big suitcase, Dad,” said Link, in a changed voice, as if he spoke against his own will. He did not look at his father, his elbow was on the low mantelpiece, and he was staring down at the fluff of pinkish-white ash and the last red embers of the fire. “Marriage is a—an irrevocable sort of thing, isn’t it?” he said awkwardly.

“Pretty serious,” his father answered, a little puzzled, very grave.

“Hang it,” Link said boyishly, wretchedly, putting his elbows on the mantel, and burying his face in his hands, “I could have had Barbara Atherton! I know I could. I saw her to-day—I was riding down that way, we have the same birthday, you know. So pretty—so good—cooking for that ass and caring for his child! She always had the loveliest laugh in the world.”

His father was silent. There was utter stillness in the room.

“Well, too late for that now!” Link said. He rubbed his eyes, sighed, and faced his father again with a philosophic smile.

“Too late for that now,” his father agreed gravely.

And in the pause that followed, the little wind whining about the shutters of the brick house seemed to bring a message from the old hacienda down on the flats by the sea. Too late.

CHAPTER XVI

In October and November of the following year there were exactly forty-three days of hard rain. Barbara du Spain counted them, desperately, doggedly, stoically.

Her household was late in getting started every morning, partly because little Kate was a croupy baby, and often kept her parents awake until midnight, partly because the mornings were so dark and dreary that there was no special incentive to rising.

Barry slept alone in the large, damp, plaster-scented room next to the kitchen now, and Barbara and the baby shared the big couch in the kitchen itself. No need, Barbara decided generously, to have both Barry and herself constantly disturbed by the little third member of the family. The kitchen was the only warm place in the house, and little bottles, blankets, and garments could be dried and warmed there most easily.

Sometimes Kate slept in her basket, so close to the couch that her mother's hand could touch her from the bed. Sometimes, as she grew bigger and stronger, she was fenced into the corner with pillows, and spread herself like a little star-fish on the bed.

Either way, Barbara liked to know that a matter of inches, and not walls and door, separated her from her child.

Often the hands of the kitchen clock stood close to nine when she awakened, and stumbled up, in fatigue and sleepiness and chill, to set the machinery of the household in motion. The room would be scented with stale ashes, and very cold, even in October.

Barbara, barefooted, with her tousled braided hair in a loose rope over the shoulder of her flannel nightgown, would kneel at the hearth, pile slender logs upon leaves or crumpled papers. As the first flames sprang up, she would go to the patio doorway, and peer out at the dripping eaves, the packed wet leaves about the old fountain, the dark sky, and the subdued chickens, hunched under the shelter of the wall. Great pools lay everywhere now; the roads were mere riverways, the cattle's hoofs sank inches into mud. On the apple trees and the lilac bushes the last yellow foliage rustled and shook agitatedly in the continual steady downpour.

After the hearth fire, the stove fire was the first duty; it was made with kindling, and short stocky logs of madrone and oak, furiously hot when they once began fairly to burn, but often so damp that they dismally succumbed two or three times before reaching this point.

When this happened, Barbara must open the stove, pick out the smoking dull wood, find paper somewhere to make a fresh start, and go through the whole business again. Meanwhile, she would be shuddering with the cramping cold, ready to cry with the general dampness, darkness, and chill of the room.

The ordinary routine was exacting and troublesome enough; it was exasperating beyond words when any delay occurred. Barbara would go to the dark, cold stove in a sort of fury, slamming the lids about, streaking her bare underarm with soot.

"Oh, my *goodness*, have you gone out again! Oh, *botheration!*"

The cereal, still merely water and grain powder, would look at her with a cool, lifeless eye; sometimes a little rain of ashes fell upon it, and Barbara would feel absolutely savage as she skimmed off what soot she might, and recklessly stirred the rest into the mixture.

Cold stove plates, cold oven, and cold kettle, the big rambling kitchen dark and chilly, and outside the windows rain falling—falling—falling, on the fuchsia bushes and the shabby, dirty plumes of the pampas grass and the dim red tiles on the patio wall.

Barbara would approach the couch a dozen times to look with a thrill of utter pride and concern at Kate, sprawled luxuriously in the blankets, face down, with a mop of dark curls tumbled over a flushed little velvet-soft cheek.

“You gorgeous darling!” Barbara would whisper, kneeling on the bed beside her, with a hand planted for support on either side of the baby, and her own face lowered to touch the little unconscious one, “you beautiful angel—you!”

And she would return to her work refreshed, as if from mere contact with the baby she drew a mysterious elixir, as indeed she did.

The fire burning noisily now, and a heartening crackle answering from behind the stove plates, the cereal boiling with a satisfactory smacking “blop-blop-blop!” and the milk for Kate’s breakfast showing a fine, silky wrinkle in the very centre of its creamy expanse, Barbara’s own soul would warm with the perceptibly warming air. Her cold hands would become usable again, and the fresh draught of cold air from the quickly opened and closed pantry door be actually welcome.

When the toast was spread on the detached half of an old broiler over the stove it was time to call Barry, for he had only to tumble out of bed, and slip his arms into an old dressing gown, to be ready for breakfast. He would appear with a face still flushed and swollen with sleep, his magnificent mane dishevelled and his opening words torn by yawns.

If it was to be a happy day, he would devote himself first to Kate, rolling and tumbling her until she awakened, with all the fresh, clear-eyed, instant rallying of forces characteristic of a baby’s waking, and selecting one of her own much-washed, colourless little blankets in which to wrap her snugly for breakfast.

His own big bare feet he would chafe upon one another, as he ate, if the morning were chilly. It was not until the meal was over that he made any toilet for the day, and Barbara did not always do it then. No use scrubbing and brushing and dressing one’s self with all the housework still to do: pots to scrape and soak, crumbs and rubbish to sweep into the fire, dishes to wash and wipe, beds to make, and Kate’s laundry work waiting. Everything in the kitchen would be as dirty, as disorderly, and as entirely wrong as possible by this time, and strength and energy were needed to set it right.

One of Barbara’s most treasured possessions was a pair of heavy lambskin slippers, lined with the untouched wool, and stitched into clumsy shape, in a single piece. She had bought them at the Milo store, in early days, and she wore them all morning long, on her bare feet, and sometimes in the evenings, too.

To sweep the wet, dirty tiling that connected the kitchen with the patio, to make flying trips to the rubbish box, to penetrate to the ice-cold pantries and storerooms, the slippers, dirty and shabby now, were her comfort and stay. Barry had a pair of heelless rattan Chinese slippers, which he lost over and over again.

Sometimes Barbara merely put a skirt and sweater over her nightgown, and worked about the kitchen until nearly noon; leaving the dishes to minister to the baby, stopping on her way back to the sink to put the couch in order, remembering the necessary soaking of beans or stewing of prunes, and delaying once more to attend to it, feeding the fires, rushing out into the blowing rain and wind to give the chickens their hot breakfast, stopping there to clean a water dish or gather a few warm brown eggs, and returning breathless to the kitchen to find Kate whimpering aggrievedly in her home-made high chair and the deserted dishes cooling and half done on the sink.

Whenever Kate whimpered, everything else had to wait, and Barbara loved the moments that gave her any excuse to gather the delicious little draggled armful of baby and doublegown and silky curls into her arms and drop into a chair for a few exquisite minutes of mothering.

A shuddering cold session in Barry's room, and another out-of-doors trip, when a basketful of wet wash was pinned to dry in a big empty hay barn, and Barbara would realize, with a pang of dismay, that the clock said twelve. Noon! And Barry always came out of his writing den behind the chimney at about one, ravenous, and often impatient.

Still in her nightgown, sweater, skirt, and lambskin slippers, she must clear the way for lunch. The kitchen was in fair order now, couch neat, washing out of the way, sink cleared. But lunch would spread disorder again.

Lunch! And an inspection of the cold bowls of congealed food in the icy pantry. She knew them all so well! Mashed yellow turnip. He said he was sick of it. Boiled onions, glazed and transparent and oozing gray water, it was too soon to have them again. Soup with cold islands of fat floating on it—well, they could have soup. But no use taking those baked apples into the kitchen; Barry hadn't touched a baked apple for weeks, and as for the remainder of the pot roast, standing dry, brown, and splintery on a heavy chipped dish, denuded of the gravy, carrots, and potatoes that had once graced it and that Barbara had scraped away for other uses, it didn't look like food at all!

She would sniff at it ungratefully. As meat, as possible nutriment and sustenance, it could not conscientiously be thrown out.

"Aren't you ever going to sour?" Barbara would ask it disgustedly.

Soup. What could she put in the soup to make it interesting? Her mind would travel over all her jars and boxes and shelves. Rice was always good. Toasted strips of bread were always good. And then she could have the tea upon which she had come actually to depend, and Barry could have a fried egg sandwich.

"Summer—it's six months to summer," Barbara would reflect, appalled. "Why can't we have corn and tomatoes and melons all the year 'round?"

At the best of times, feeding Barry was a problem, for a part of his unreasonableness and inconsistency was displayed in his impatience with monotonous or limited bills of fare, and yet he would neither encourage Barbara to experiment with her own original ideas in the matter, nor recognize the fact that their extremely uncertain financial standing was the real trouble, after all.

Barbara herself felt a certain instinctive gallantry in the matter. She could not bring herself to reproach Barry for their constant state of bankruptcy; she had married him; he was doing the best he could, and he was only a dreamy, crazy, irresponsible boy of a poet, after all.

"Barry, you always say you admire the peasants of southern Europe so much. And *they* have one-dish meals!"

"They're different."

"I don't see why they're different. I'll bet you that, if we cut down our menus, had just macaroni or rice, with sauces and bread, the way they do, you'd enjoy your meals much more."

"Don't be silly, Barbara. I'm working hard, and I've got to eat. I need meat and potatoes and coffee and puddings."

"But, Barry, you don't *enjoy* them!"

"I didn't enjoy that dam' prune shortcake yesterday because I'm sick of it. You give me onion soup, and then prune shortcake, and I say that they're all right, they're fine, only we've

got to have fried potatoes and chicken, or something else hearty, too.”

“Barry, in that soup, and that dessert, with our cream, there was enough nourishment for a prize fighter! Heavy yellow cream, and biscuit crust, cheese, toast and onions in the soup—

“But, of course, he doesn’t get really hungry,” Barbara would add to herself, when he had flung himself furiously out of the room. “To a man who was really hungry, Kate,” she would inform the baby, “onion soup and prune shortcake would be a *feast!*”

Sometimes she got angry in her turn.

“Well, look here, Barry du Spain, if I could buy grapefruit, sand dabs, and crabmeat I’d do it; I’d get cakes at the Women’s Exchange, and mayonnaise and asparagus, if I could! I do the best I can. I’ve killed every chicken we can spare—they’re all layers, now, every one of them, and we can’t get along without eggs, to say nothing of raising pullets in the spring. I put up fruit last year until we couldn’t afford another ounce of sugar, and I put up corn and tomatoes until I nearly had sunstroke, working in this boiling place day after day! I do every bit of work, and all the washing—”

But when she was roused to this rare exhibition of feeling, she was the first to appreciate its futility; Barry could always carry off the victory; he was impervious to influence, he neither listened to her nor assimilated her meaning, and when she paused for breath he would say:

“You’re an ungrateful, unappreciative woman. All you have to do is take care of *one* room—one single room, for nothing is ever done in the bedroom; you have milk and eggs and fruit and vegetables right from your own place, and I’m always here to bring in wood and do anything you ask me! Dam’ few men would work around their wives’ kitchens and play nurse to teething kids the way I do! Now I’m trying to sell my first real play, the New York producers are waiting for it, they sent it back for me to make some changes, and you begin to raise hell because you can’t buy canned asparagus. . .”

It would hammer her down, it would exhaust her, there was no end to it. He was all right, she was all wrong. He had given her a million evidences of tenderness and devotion, she had crushed them under her heel. He hoped to God that she and her kid would get out and leave him alone, and let some other man take hold of her, and beat her to death when she treated him that way!

If his accusations led her to counter attack, only time and energy were wasted. In the early months of their marriage, a simple sense of justice had sometimes tempted her into fierce retaliation. And there had followed long, bitter silences between the two.

Barry, under the circumstances, had suffered much less than Barbara. He felt all emotions, joy and sorrow, love and hate, violently but briefly, and Barbara used to marvel sometimes, telling herself that quarrelling actually seemed to refresh him. He would plunge into a dispute easily, readily, passionately, and when he had raged himself breathless, he could sulk and be silent for days, if he willed it. But it never kept him awake at night or deprived him of his appetite.

It was Barbara who lay wakeful, hour after hour, analyzing and pondering the situation, crying in despair; it was to Barbara that food became tasteless and repellent.

And after awhile she learned that silence was her only weapon, and that if she could school herself to let him rave and storm, hurl at her one ridiculous accusation after another and finally slam himself out of the room, a blessed calm would follow, and an interval of reflection on his part, in which to his bewilderment he would realize for the first time that she had not given him a provocative word or glance.

Then it was that he would come to her, at first suspicious and sulky, then placating, finally apologetic—last of all he would become her penitent little boy, his beautiful face pale with sorrow and contrition, his devotion and affection and service only waiting to be poured out for her, in restitution for the pain he had given her.

In this mood he would want to plan something elaborate by way of thanksgiving: a whole day on the shore, or a superlative banquet, quite half of which he himself would prepare.

Barberry Bush must make a cake, he would stuff tomatoes and cut the sandwiches; they would go far down the shore—they would have a divine day. No use to protest that she had meant to do some washing that day, or burn the brush. This might have meant his complete return to yesterday's or that morning's black mood.

So they would go off to the shore with a luncheon and their books, and the beautiful blue hours would drift lazily above their heads, while Barbara stared at the sea and dreamed, and Barry read to her, or laid his head on her knee and let her fingers stroke his dark hair while he told her how passionately he loved her; more than any man had ever loved any woman in the world before.

The baby might naturally have complicated these idyllic sequels to controversy, but by the time Kate came, Barbara had somewhat learned to manage Barry, and occasions of unpleasantness were few and far between. Indeed, before the second winter in the hacienda shut down upon them, she was confronting serious problems, and had reached the point, in her own secret heart at least, when she appreciated that Barry would not now, or at any time, be of the slightest use in helping her to solve them. Barry and his tantrums didn't signify—*couldn't* signify as all-important now. There was Kate to think of, and there would be another baby when June came round, and they had no money at all.

This had always sounded a great joke, during the days when Barbara's father had paid the household expenses, when she and Amy had had good salaries, and when Barry had been regarded as a sort of luxury in the household, a delightful reader of poems and player of games.

But now it was the burning anxiety that haunted all her waking and sleeping hours. Not enough money. Not enough money!

Weeks ago they had sold to Tomas their cows, all except the one for which Barbara now cared, in their own barn. Kate was the least exacting of babies, but she had to have her first boots and first coat, after all; some money, not much, was owing to Maria Bettancourt and her mother, for nursing and housework during Kate's first weeks of life, and there was a modest doctor's bill still owing to Dr. Bonner.

What could they do? Barbara asked herself desperately, over and over. Money was needed every day, all the time; nobody in the world could get along without a little money.

With Kate and with the old hacienda to manage and Barry's meals to cook, with the cow and chickens to keep, she could not possibly go back to Cottonwood and to her old job. Barry said comfortably that he would sell a couple of poems, and he did sell one or two, modestly. But the return from these was less than fifty dollars, and three persons could not expect that to last long.

In the spring there would be one hundred and eighty-three dollars to pay for taxes; there was talk of road assessment, there was a premium to be paid on insurance. They might let the insurance lapse; not much that could happen to batter and bruise the old place had not happened, in these neglected years, but there were always fences. If Barry did not fence, and

stray cows wandered upon his property, and fell into the old creek culvert, for instance, Barry might get into trouble with excitable Latin neighbours.

Barbara, with Barry's reluctant help, painted a neat sign: "This Ranch for Sale," and they nailed it to the highway fence. But theirs was a little-travelled road, and no tourist car, flying by in autumn's scented brown dust, or in the summer's wreathing fogs, ever came to inquire about it. It was heavily mortgaged anyway; on the day they had gone into Cottonwood to buy Kate's shoes, lamp wicks, a new cullender, typewriter ribbons, and curry powder, they had stopped in at the Bank, to speak, laughingly and carelessly, about a second mortgage. But old Miller at the Bank had told them that it was out of the question. Bad year for property in these parts.

Kate had been very winning, on this occasion, beaming at everyone indiscriminately. Her little shoes had been adorable on the fat brown feet that for nine months had gone bare, and Barbara had felt almost weak with the excitement of being in real streets again, with real shop windows to look into, and all the familiar bustle and noise about her, after so many isolated, quiet months.

Every one of Barbara's own old crowd had evidently gone to the rodeo, but Miss Mitchell in the Post Office was eager to come out and see the baby, and on all sides there had been half-remembered acquaintances, clerks and neighbours, the big policeman near the Park, and various mothers whose children Barbara had taught: enough friendly faces and voices to make Barbara feel that she belonged here and was home again.

At the Post Office there had been a check for Barry, whose mail had never been forwarded to Milo, and that had spread an atmosphere of real triumph over the day. They had driven home in the August sunset light delighted with the whole adventure. The old surrey, borrowed from Tomas, had creaked somewhat, but Kate had slept the sleep of social exhaustion on her mother's lap, and Barry had been deliciously facetious with Stella, the mare.

That had been in August. But when September came, and October, Barbara's heart somewhat failed her. She was physically miserable, she felt unequal to the demand of the long, wet, dark days, with Kate more and more imperiously in need of care, and the prospect of the cold winter months all ahead. Fifty dollars a month—twenty-five indeed, would have made all the difference between uneasiness and discomfort and comparative security. But that fifty, that twenty-five, they did not have.

A sense of failure began to gnaw at Barbara's very soul. They never should have married; they were mad to have married. A man like Barry was never intended for any woman's husband.

Granted. Granted. But now that the mistake had been made, what must she do? There was some way out. They were not, presumably, to remain on the ranch for days and weeks, and to starve together in a dismal heap.

She wrote Amy that she was learning so many things, and changing so fast, that she suffered from growing pains. The sharp realities of life, the bitter necessities, developed her painfully, bewildered her sometimes, as if they had been a succession of blows.

To write her father, and ask him for money? But she couldn't do that! Her father had a small pension, and the rent of the bungalow in Cottonwood. But he was not a young man now, and of late he had been spending odd intervals, between lectures, in a sort of hotel sanitarium in the south, which was sunshiny, comfortable, and beneficial indeed, but far from cheap.

"It sounds so easy, when other married couples do it," Barbara mused. "I've heard fathers and mothers say that Mary or Tom had written to ask for money, that things had gone wrong

with them. But I can't! Not just for bread and sugar and soap. If it were to tide us over some crisis——

"It sounds so easy," she mused, in another mood, "to say: 'They're going to have another baby!' But what it means—*always*—to some woman. Two children—why, that's nothing! Women used to have fifteen and sixteen. But when it's *yourself* that has to face it—that's different!

"Perhaps women in Cottonwood are talking about me, now," she reflected, as her thoughts took still another turning, "perhaps they're saying that I didn't marry very well, that he's not much of a provider. And how little *that* used to mean when they said it of some other girl! I remember Lorraine Carter, who threw herself away, everyone said, on the boy whose father had the victrola agency. They lived in a little cottage down near Chinatown and I never even went to see her—poor Lorraine! She had four babies and did her own work. Only somehow I never realized it, then. They used to say—the old women who sit on porches and talk used to say—that Lorraine looked so old and shabby and worried.

"Well, I suppose we women will do it, and go on doing it, until the end of time, when we fall in love!"

And then the inevitable question: "But did I really fall in love? Did I ever love Barry? Did I know anything about it?"

But that Barbara could not answer. It was of no consequence now, anyway. She was married, and she loved her bad, old, exacting, unreasonable Barry dearly, and Kate was the very core of her heart. What did preliminaries signify? The one wise thing now was to make the best of what was, rather than to speculate about what might—or might not—have been.

And what could a strong, healthy woman of twenty-four, with a small baby in her arms, and another baby coming, do to help out the family income, or rather do to create a family income, to begin with?

Nothing, at a distance of twelve miles of country road from the nearest town. Under the circumstances she could hardly open a hotel in the hacienda; without a bathroom or electric lights or gas she could not even take a boarder. And to get into town every day meant a car; even if the winter roads had been passable, or Barbara's health, or Kate's age, at all suitable to a business career.

Patience was the only thing now, and Barbara strove for it with more steadfast, determined courage than she had brought to any previous crisis in her life. The event must be approaching her steadily, the change, the solution, and she must have faith in it, and in herself, and above all in Barry. They would look back upon this time some day with amusement and pity.

But it was hard to have him so cross, so bitter and hopeless. He seemed bewildered and overwhelmed by the increasing responsibilities he had assumed, and it was galling to Barbara to realize, far more clearly than he did, that just at present she was far more of a liability than an asset. Her cheerfulness fell flat, her bright confident dreams of their future only deepened the annoyed and impatient cloud on his face, and his despondency increased day after day.

One evening in early November he came in late for supper, but showed so unusually jovial and contented a mood that Barbara knew it must have some definite explanation, that the change had never been caused by one of his long walks on the cliffs.

It appeared that he had gone into town, walking the highway at first, later been given a lift by a kindly tourist. He had seen old friends, and even stopped in for a little while at the moving picture theatre; he had had a late lunch with the Wilsons. Inez was not well, was going to have another operation on her throat, and was delighted to welcome him, and hear the news

of Barbara and the baby. Her cousin Marianne was still there; he hadn't seen Marianne, but Lucy Barnard had a new baby. Link Mackenzie had been away almost all summer, but was back now, and everyone said that Dr. Bonner had sent for Ward Duffy, to ask him to come share his practice with him, and that in that case Ward and Amy would of course live in Cottonwood. And, finally, Barry had had another lift all the way home.

Barbara was delighted and excited by the unexpected event. She cross-examined him about everything and everybody, and exclaimed joyously a hundred times about the rumour that concerned Amy. Think of having Amy and Ward back!

It seemed to promise better things somehow, that Barry was happier, that the Wilsons had been so hospitable, that there was no immediate talk of a marriage between Marianne and Link, and that, above all, darling Amy, whose position as a merely prospective mother made Barbara feel herself centuries older than her older sister, might be back here in Cottonwood, where Barbara might often go to spend the day with her.

"And, Barry, we could have Amy down here for a real visit in summer! Imagine that, I haven't seen her since before her wedding. And that was almost two years ago."

"Sure we will," Barry conceded graciously. Barbara had waited to share her supper with him, and his long drive had made it seem a delicious supper. Now, in lamplight, her satiny cheeks were blazing, her shining bronze hair loosened, and her dark blue apron set off her white skin and high colour to perfection. "I wish you always looked as pretty as you do at dinner," he said significantly. But his face clouded as a resentful expression came into her eyes.

"Cleaning up, and washing for Kate," she countered, displeased, "feeding chickens and raking out the barn!"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, fight about everything!" Barry said viciously, jerking away from the table and from the fingers she instantly extended.

But she would not let him escape. The tale of his trip to Cottonwood was not half told, and she must cross-examine him again.

"Ah, don't—stay where you are! I only meant that I'd love always to be dainty and pretty, if I could. But I get myself into old boots and sweaters because the work is so dirty. Tell me, did you happen to see Fox or Harry?"

Barry, mollified by her apologetic tone, readily began again, and Barbara, with Kate drowsing comfortably in her arms, listened and questioned him from beginning to end once more. The dishes cooled, the fires burned low, and a soft wind cried about the roof of the hacienda. And Barbara, enthralled with the details of what had been to her only the everyday lives of commonplace and uninteresting neighbours a year or two ago, thought that Barry was more like himself to-night than she had seen him in months, and that it was a fortunate impulse that had taken him toward town to-day.

"And Link and Marianne didn't make a match of it, after all?"

"No. They say that's all off."

"She *did* get her divorce last spring, I know. It was in the paper."

"Well, I don't know why they didn't, but anyway, they didn't get married. Lucy told Inez the other day that she thought Margaret and her father were going abroad, after Christmas, and that Link'll be president of the whole business. Crown Prince stuff."

"Oh, I don't know. He's been working with the firm, awfully hard, ever since he left college—four or five years now!" Barbara reminded him leniently.

This was the first time. But when, in a few days, Barry went to town again, and again had an exhilarating and absorbing afternoon with old friends, Barbara felt an odd sense of being hurt—of being slighted.

The third time, again only a few days later, he stayed away all night. Barbara waited for her supper until about eight o'clock, ate it philosophically with a book propped before her and with Kate's sociable gurgles from the centre of the couch keeping company with the eternal soft drip-drip-drip of the rain on the patio tiles.

But, philosophical or not, she did not like it. Barry got home, in the morning of the following day, rosy and soaking wet, cheerfully apologetic and matter-of-course. He brought a breath of fresh, cold air into the kitchen, was rapturous over the baby, and sat chatting with his wife in an unwontedly friendly and pleasant mood. Barbara, fighting inner resentment, went on with her preparations for lunch and her general straightening of the kitchen, and tried to display only her usual manner.

"You weren't worried or anxious last night, Barberrry Bush?"

"Oh, no. I had Kate, I was all right."

"Everyone in town was asking about you."

"That was nice." She heard the lifelessness, the uninterestedness of her own tone; but it couldn't be helped. To speak honestly now would be to reproach him.

"I stayed with Fox—Harry was there, and we played rummy. I've not played rummy with those boys for years!"

"I thought you loathed Harry Poett." She couldn't help saying it; some ugly impulse stronger than herself spoke in her place.

"Harry? No. He's nice enough. I've always been fond of Harry!" And the maddening thing was that Barry believed what he was saying. Barbara told herself that she should be thankful that he was outgrowing his prejudices against the Cottonwood folk.

He made himself charmingly companionable and useful on this particular occasion. He brought wood and carried away ashes, swept the tiles of the patio vigorously, and was ravenously and appreciatively ready for lunch. He was, for an hour or two, in fact, the old, silly, happy Barry, the Barry she had lost for dreary, struggling months. But it was a part of Barbara's dark mood that she resented this, too. He *could* be gracious and helpful, when he wanted to, he could control his temperament, and make life agreeable for her. The trouble usually was that he did not care to make the effort.

It was hard to listen to him interestedly, smilingly, to agree with him over and over again that his visit had been most fortunate.

Yet what else could she do? To insist that he remain down here at the hacienda beside her, idling, fretting, quarrelling, just because she was unable to accompany him into town, was to put herself into the ranks of the jealous, narrow-minded women who acted the part of dogs in the manger with their men. No, he had his life and his interests, and she must shape her own independently.

True, she reflected, forcing herself to calm and amiability, she might remind him that his work needed him. But Barry quite innocently deprived her of this argument by plunging into the re-making of his play with great zest, exulting that his holiday had rested and refreshed him, had given him quite a new point of view on *Napoleon Third*.

And this weapon he presently took from her hand to use in his own. A week later he complained of being jaded, and began, with quite obvious diplomacy, to speak longingly of the stimulus the visit to Cottonwood had given him.

He thought he would take a long walk. Perhaps would take the highway, and if he did get into town, did Barbara need anything at the dry goods store or grocery?

She was too proud to protest. They were lingering at the luncheon table, at about two o'clock, when he introduced the subject skillfully. Barbara made no comment. She went on carefully feeding baked potato to the rapturous Kate.

"Goog!" said Kate emphatically, working her rosy little mouth.

"By golly, she said 'good!'" Barry exclaimed, with exaggerated enthusiasm, grateful to his daughter for the diversion.

Barbara raised heavy eyes. She felt sick, despondent, beaten.

"Oh, yes, she says 'good' now!"

"She's going to be a beauty," Barry commented, staring at Kate absorbedly, and choosing to affect that he had forgotten the other unimportant topic. But Barbara would not let him off.

"If you do go into town, Barry, will you be back to-night?"

He assumed an air of casual surprise.

"Oh, I may not take the highway at all! I'll tell you," he added, with the manner of an air of thinking it out, "if at any time I'm not here at seven—I don't mean to-night, or any special night—but if I'm not here at seven, go ahead without me!"

"I see. No more—*aw* gone!" Barbara said to the baby, exhibiting the empty spoon and plate. Kate's wide baby eyes roved the table reproachfully, she liked potato. When Barbara presented her with a spoonful of apple sauce instead, she put her little cherry of a lower lip forward, and tears brimmed her eyes. "Bad!" she said.

Regarding Barry's movements there seemed to be nothing to say. No reason why he shouldn't take a walk through the heavy, muddy fields and roads, if he liked, no reason why, if he got a lift, he shouldn't go into town, and no real reason why he should not stay there overnight.

The one real argument against all this, love for his wife and child, and the need and desire to be with them, apparently did not enter into the matter at all—knowing Barry, one would know that it could not enter in. Barbara was not well, now, she was overworked and worried, physically handicapped, and made a prisoner by Kate's needs, and Barry, in the heavy winter weather, found no special amusement at home.

He made a great show of bringing in loads of wood, of helping her in quite unnecessary ways. Kate played placidly with clothespins, the clock struck three, and the first sunshine that had found the ranch for weeks broke from a lemon-coloured streak of clear sky, under the black, woolly clouds that were assembling and moving in the southwest. A wind, warm and wet and noisy, went over the world like a sail.

Suddenly Barbara became aware that Barry was watching the clock. He meant not only to get away, but to get away at a special moment; he was keeping an appointment with someone.

When he had put on his muffler and coat, and pulled down his cap, when he had kissed her affectionately and remarked with elaborate carelessness: "I may be back in half an hour!" and when she was left alone with the baby, Barbara, obeying a sudden impulse, went up the patio's outside stairway, packed with wet leaves, and entered one of the dark, damp bedrooms above.

Through the slits of its shutters she could look out across a flat pasture to the east, where, a quarter of a mile away, the Bettancourt cabin stood under some dismal plumes of eucalyptus, and the highway wound between two shabby lines of fencing.

There were pools in the fields to-day, the trees in the garden were still dripping. But over all the world the yellow sunshine poured in a sparkling flood.

On the road near the Bettancourts', a muddy car was waiting: Fox Madison's Ford. And toward it the figure of Barry, in his shabby overcoat, with his cap pulled down, was making its way.

"Well, what of it?" Barbara asked herself hardily, returning to the dark, warm kitchen that smelled of potatoes and sour milk. "What of it? I suppose that, in his place, I'd do the same thing! And after all, I'm not Barry—I'm me. The thing for me to do is work my own way out, not his!"

She bundled Kate warmly, buttoned on her own sweater, and climbed into her big boots. A fuzzy tam-o'-shanter finished the costume; Barry and Fox had not gone a mile upon their way before she and the baby were busy in the farmyard, raking, singing, splashing about vigorously.

The exercise brought Barbara's brilliant colour back to her face, she felt better than she had felt in weeks. The baby, just a year old, had found her own feet now, and staggered and tumbled about delightedly, tottering after fowls, spattering in mud with a kitchen spoon, and making Barbara laugh with her incoherent jabber of conversation.

"Dabber-dabber-dabber!" she responded, kneeling down upon a freshly swept tile to wipe the small nose firmly and kiss the red little mouth that was never still. Kate, a fat little eager woollen sausage, was getting to be a real companion.

They made a glorious bonfire, Barbara bringing armfuls of dry hay from the barn to get it well started. The smoke, rising in thick blue columns from under strips of wet matting and masses of wet leaves, rose in wild banners on the fresh, sweet winds.

Maria Bettancourt picked her way across the spongy fields, three of the seven little Bettancourts hopping, slipping, and plunging along beside her.

"Make fire, huh?" Maria said superfluously, slinging her babies over the fence expertly, and climbing it stoically herself.

"Oh, I'd have opened the gate!" Barbara called hospitably.

"Is nize, the sunshine," the Portuguese woman commented admiringly with the long whine that finished all her sentences, on the last syllable.

"Nice!" Barbara echoed, laughing. She told herself that she had almost forgotten that there was a sun. But conversation with Maria was necessarily limited.

The babies toddled about together; the two women companionably raked and swept and ordered the little farmyard. Useless to do only this, of course, Barbara reflected, as she had so often reflected. Useless to clean only this tiny space, among all the shabby barns and corrals and paddocks, fences and outhouses and sheds.

Yet it was pleasant to be out in the yard in the winter sunshine, pleasant to see her baby for the first time an independent person among other persons; shouting at the rooster, and dragging valiantly at the rope upon whose other end the Bettancourt baby was dragging with equal determination.

And Maria had a letter for her; the real reason for the call. It was from Link Mackenzie. Barbara rested her rake against the side of the chicken house, wiped her muddy hand upon her sweater, and opened it with a little thrill of pleasure.

DEAR BARBARA:

Would your baby like an Airedale puppy? Queenie surprised us with four beauties a day or two ago—all males. If Kate would like it, I'll bring it or send it

down. I hope you farmers like this weather; everyone here is sick of it. See you soon.

LINK.

That was all. But it seemed to make the whole world bright and happy for Barbara. It was like Link to think of this, and to remember her baby's name.

The warm pleasantness of it remained with her all through the quiet lonely hours when Maria had plodded home again, and when the winter dusk had come. Barbara milked the cow, raked her down some hay, and carried the milk pail into the kitchen, with Kate balanced and kicking vigorously on the free arm.

The wind had died away, the air was much colder, and there was a clear yellow sunset across a quiet, lead-coloured sea. A milky mist, low on the wet ground, indicated that there would be frost; the milk must stand in the inner pantry. It was good to shut the heavy doors to-night, to pile wood on the fire, to feel that the old hacienda was a veritable fortress against the weather.

Barbara had forgotten Barry for the moment. But after a serene supper, shared by the animated Kate, whose beautiful eyes shone like stars in the soft evening lights, and after a placid night, and the unusual luxury of a bath before breakfast, Barbara was angered and agitated again—and was distressed to find herself becoming so—by the chance discovery of an opened envelope in the wood box.

It was from the office of *To-day's Verse*, a little magazine whose editor was a great admirer of Barry. It was dated ten days earlier; and within it was a brief, cordial note. Mr. du Spain would please find enclosed a check for eighteen dollars, in payment for his sonnet, "The Bad Baby."

Barbara stood with the note in her hand, absolutely transfixed with anger and surprise. Then she burned it and went slowly about her morning work again.

But not in the bright mood in which the sunny, clear frosty morning had first found her. She was sick with a sense of helpless resentment and shock. He had gotten a check for eighteen dollars and had concealed it. He was spending it now, perhaps, on a poker hand. And she and the baby—and the new baby——!

"This is bad for me!" she said aloud, as gusts of uncontrollable rage physically shook her. What did it matter, eighteen dollars? No life was either made or unmade by eighteen dollars.

"Barry, why did you deceive me about that poem that *To-day's Verse* took, and about meeting Fox Madison in the road yesterday?" she burst out suddenly, hours later.

She had borne all she could bear since his return; she had been amiable, friendly, and interested until she could put a force upon herself no longer. Barry had appeared at about seven o'clock, once again vivacious and sweet-tempered, full of town gossip, and eager to be of use. Again he had heaped her wood box and praised her cooking; he had looked well, and had been full of his own peculiarly charming animation and high spirits.

He appeared unruffled, but she saw the colour creep up under his clear skin at her first questions.

"I forgot the check," he admitted. "But where did you think I got the money to buy you the new meat-chopper and Kate the little hot-water bag?" he added reproachfully. He had brought them both gifts; Barry was wonderfully sympathetic in his choice of presents. "I owed Tomas three dollars," he went on, and Barbara knew from his tone that he felt he was making his case

and was gaining confidence, “and yesterday, walking over to his house, to pay it, I saw Fox in the road.”

“Waiting!” Barbara supplied bitterly.

“Waiting nothing, he was stuck in the mud. I helped him get loose, and he drove me into town—that was all!”

She did not believe it, but there was no way of proving anything.

“How could you give Tomas three dollars out of an eighteen-dollar check!” Her tone was still hostile and distrustful.

“I thought Tomas could cash it.”

Barry had her on every point; she was quite helpless in his hands. And the dispute had only served to rouse him to a sort of smouldering ugliness. He was waiting, now, for the opportunity for trouble.

“Gee, you have a high opinion of me!” he muttered, wiping a lamp he had just filled. “My golly, I go into town once a month, and sit in a little baby game of poker with a couple of men friends, and you ride me for it as if I were a thief! I was going to tell you anyway, because I picked up a little money last night.”

Barbara, like many an older and wiser wife, could not resist this good news.

“Barry, did you win?”

“Yep. Not much. But I won about seven dollars.”

And quite simply and boyishly, as was customary with him when he had any money, he began to go through his pockets, and meekly surrendered his very last cent.

She did not like to take it, she loathed the position of the sharp-eyed wife who quarrels about money, but, as so often in other ways, he forced her here—she *must* have it, if the crazy bark of their matrimonial experiment were ever to make port at all.

The rest of that week went well; in the mornings Barry worked hard and happily, and he and Barbara were out of doors, farming with the baby, in the cold, sharp, sunny afternoons. Professor Atherton sent his daughter twenty-five dollars, to buy Kate something for Christmas, and Kate’s parents joyfully appropriated the money and thanked the unconscious, beaming baby with great ceremony.

CHAPTER XVII

On Sunday Harry Poett came down, to be delightfully friendly with Barbara, charming with the baby—Barbara noted that Barry made no objection to the customary “Uncle Harry” here—and full of a new scheme for Barry.

She listened, at first skeptically, then eagerly, serving her eggs suzette and her tapioca pudding. Harry ate ravenously and praised everything, and talked all the time. He wanted Barry and Barbara to move into Cottonwood again, Barry to take a half-day job with his own real estate firm.

“You don’t have to work mornings!” Harry assured him enthusiastically. “You can write poetry, mornings. And in the afternoon show people the Manor Farmlets—they sell themselves, I tell you! Barbara’d be among her old crowd—they tell me Amy and Ward are coming up . . .”

The girl’s heart soared at the idea. Oh, it didn’t matter how plain a cottage they had to take, how poor they were, how many opportunities the gossips were given to say that Barbara Atherton hadn’t made much of a match of it, that she was pretty “small potatoes,” these days! Just to be back among voices and people, electric lights and telephone bells, sidewalks and gas stoves again! Just to get a daily paper, to have one’s eggs delivered in a box, one’s milk in a bottle once more!

“Barry’d get eighty-five,” she mused.

“Yep, to start with. But commissions, Barbara!” Harry answered eagerly. “He’d make a lot on the side.”

“We’d have to pay twenty-five rent,” Barbara mused.

“Well, yes, you’d have to pay that,” Harry admitted. And Barbara saw that he secretly had thought that they would have to pay more.

“That’s what Mrs. Ossler pays, down near the Union High School,” she continued.

“Well, yes—if you’d live there, Barbara,” Harry said doubtfully, in the tone of one who would not.

“Oh, in a minute!” she answered, with a confident laugh.

“Well, then!” Harry said, brightening. And immediately he added, to Barry, carelessly: “You couldn’t come into town with me now and see Holliday? He’s always at home, Sunday afternoons, and you could have a little talk.”

“Why, I don’t know—I hate to leave Barberrry Bush all by herself,” Barry answered hesitatingly.

Fired with brighter hopes than she had known for two long years, Barbara, however, insisted upon their both departing at once, without an instant’s delay. Leave the dishes—she could do the dishes, she had nothing else to do!

“And, please, please, Barry darling, talk as if you were a Napoleon of finance,” she pleaded, with her final kiss. “Make Holliday think you can sell seven lots a day!”

“If Barry sold seven lots a day he’d make about—let’s see, he’d make about fifteen hundred a week,” Harry told her.

“Harry Poett, he would not!”

“He would, I tell you! Where do you suppose people like the Mackenzies pick up their millions? Old Tom Mackenzie plotted the whole of the Wilkinson tract twenty years ago, and

you know they practically owned Las Haciendas. Barry'll be on easy street, if he'll just get into it now—at the start!"

"If you hear a proud, lordly honk outside the gate to-morrow, it's me returning in my Royce," said Barry. Barbara's happy laughter followed them on their way.

She attacked her housework in a very whirl of high spirits, when they were gone. What mattered it how she and Barry made their reappearance in Cottonwood, so that they were there? The ignorant girl who had been Barbara Atherton might have had her silly ideas about social standing and desirable neighbourhoods, but Barbara du Spain was entirely cured of any such superficial notions. Just to have a sunny dooryard for her babies, neighbours, a grocery at the corner, a bookstore and public library down the street, would be enough for Barbara du Spain for a long, long time.

Suppose Marianne and Inez *did* come to see her, and found Mrs. Ossler's cottage, with its modest sign "Modes," on one side of Barbara's house, and Jean Charpentier's glass-roofed nurseries on the other? Marianne and Inez mattered to her no longer; they were rich, they might have their own standards and luxuries if they would. But they could not keep Barbara from happiness, from sunshine and friends, from studies and books, from an occasional lecture and concert and play.

She visualized the cottage; those cottages had about six rooms apiece. Two bedrooms, study, parlour, dining room, and kitchen—why, although the hacienda had many rooms, some score or more, that would be much more space than the Du Spains were using now!

An old-fashioned cottage with bay windows and side porches, with cheap wood in the floors and china door knobs. But never mind, if Barry was making a definite eighty-five dollars a month in real estate, and perhaps more from poems and commissions, that plain little wooden dwelling, with the paint chipping, and the cheap frame of strips of coloured glass about the front door, would be Paradise itself to Barry's wife.

And then, if Amy were there, with the baby who was expected in April, and if the sisters could be together every day, in the dear old fashion, and if the little cousins could be friends

"Oh, my God," Barbara prayed, stopping short in the middle of the kitchen and covering her face with her hands. "Oh, my God, if this could happen! If this could happen!"

And she knelt down by Kate's chair, and after the inevitable preliminary of wiping Kate's crust-daubed face, kissed her soft little hands enthusiastically.

"I don't know anything about your brother, Kate, or about Aunt Amy's baby. But if our family, or any other, ever produces anything as gorgeously beautiful as you are, I'll immediately force you to take the veil—you hear me, now!"

Kate said "mom-mom-mom" something more than a hundred times, adding a type of gurgle that was new. The probability of her being cloistered appeared remote; Barry's extraordinary beauty was reincarnate in her creamy skin, apricot cheeks, and silky mass of dark curls. But the big eyes, with their upcurved fringe of heavy lashes, were as blue as Barbara's own.

"You," said Barbara aloud, studying her, "shall have milk toast and prunes for your supper. And I'll have toast and tea and prunes. And to-morrow Daddy'll be home, to tell us all about moving into Cottonwood, California!"

But when Barry came home the next day he brought a guest with him, and there was no more talk of real estate, commissions, a move into town, or the little cottages down near Mrs. Ossler.

The guest was named Schofield; Barbara never heard him called anything else, and never knew whether it was a first or last name. She had heard the name often; he was one of the Bohemian group that sometimes entertained Barry in San Francisco. He was a small, weedy man of perhaps forty, a poet, in a small way, himself, and foremost among Barry's admirers.

Schofield had come, by a coincidence, to Cottonwood, on this same Monday morning, in the hope of getting in touch with Barry du Spain. And upon disembarking from the train, his eyes had fallen upon Barry.

Barbara gathered that they had spent what remained of the morning together, talking, and had lunched at the cafeteria. They had walked all the way to the ranch, still talking. They were in high spirits, and Schofield proved a comfortable and informal guest; Barbara's first apologies were thrown away on him, as even Barbara perceived. He helped intelligently in the kitchen and made an instant conquest of the baby.

"Are you a married man, Mr. Schofield?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've got to call this girl 'Barbara,' Barry. Old enough to be her father!"

"I wish you would!" Barbara invited him cordially.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm a married man, and I have four of these people." Schofield indicated the baby, sitting serenely in his arms. "I've got a married son," he admitted, "and a girl in college. The little ones, two girls of fifteen and fourteen, are with their mother. My wife," he added casually, "hasn't lived with me for ten years. She has a position in a library in Berkeley. She was a great woman," he finished thoughtfully, "for dusting and having meals on time! My Lord, what that woman could do with a broom and a bucket of suds!"

Barry laughed joyfully, and Barbara, although not without a secret impulse of sympathy with the unknown Mrs. Schofield, laughed, too.

Schofield stayed with them for four days, and they were happy days for everyone. He made no secret of his admiration for Barbara as well as for Barry; he found the old hacienda a place of enchantment, and with his friendly talk and companionable help, the housework seemed nothing, and the hours flew. Even Barbara's clear vision was blurred by his eager, convincing attitude, and it was not until the last day that she appreciated fully that it was really to Schofield that she owed Barry's complete change of attitude toward any regular work in Cottonwood.

To Schofield, Barry du Spain was the great poet of the century, the new Keats. Schofield pointed out to husband and wife that for Barry, the unknown, unheralded Westerner, to have achieved the place he had already made for himself among the younger American poets, was proof of what he claimed.

"Why, my dear girl, look at Dovely and Mattson and myself and lots of others in San Francisco, and a score like us in every city in the Union—glad enough if the daily papers will print our stuff for nothing! And this boy here, this kid, only has to send it to the most exclusive—the most exacting—of the Eastern magazines to have them jump at it!"

"Yes, I know," Barbara had conceded proudly, with shining eyes. "But the most exclusive, the most exacting of the Eastern magazines don't pay much!" she had submitted, half timidly, half playfully.

"Pay! My God, who's talking about *pay*! If the magazines that pay take your stuff, you can be mighty sure it's rotten!" Schofield had almost shouted.

"You're right, Schofield," Barry, listening to this conversation from the side lines, had put in here, nodding.

"But poets' wives and children must eat, Schofield," Barbara argued, one morning when she and her visitor were with the baby in the kitchen, and Barry had disappeared to do some work, in his own eyrie.

"My dear Barbara, that doesn't sound like you! Let's not talk in the terms of rotary clubs!"

"Ah, but, Schofield, one *must*, when there's a child to consider. Nobody could have greater faith in Barry's genius than I have. I agree with you that he is entirely out of the ordinary—more," said Barbara, kneeling at the oven of the clumsy old range, and gently drawing a rice pudding toward her, to stir its creamy depths carefully, "more, I'd even admit that Barry's the type that never ought to marry," she said, smiling, "although goodness knows that he is absolutely irresponsible, and if any man ever needed to have a woman look out for him, Barry's the man! But the fact remains that he *is* married, and he has a child, and there you are."

"This San Francisco woman—this rich old freak who likes the idea that she is a patron of the arts," Schofield persisted, returning to the argument he never forced, and yet never abandoned, "wants to send Barry to New York. She doesn't usually bother with married men. But she's making an exception of Du Spain. He could meet his own kind of people there, he could get the recognition he needs to spur him on, and—above all!—he could probably place his play. Now, you and I, Barbara, who love him more than any other two persons in the world, we know that he ought to go—that this is the psychological moment when he *must* go."

"She offers him his trip and one hundred a month," Barbara summarized, now busily scraping carrots at the sink. "He'd need every cent of it there, wouldn't he?"

"He needs—freedom!" Schofield stated.

"If he could send me twenty-five," Barbara mused, "I'd make it do." And in her anxious thoughts she added: "Even for hospital and nurse, and some arrangement for Kate while I am ill, I'd make it do. Perhaps Amy would take Kate."

"I doubt if he could manage on seventy-five—that isn't the point anyway," Schofield reasoned. "We want him to be *free*, you and I, don't we? We want him to have his chance! He mustn't go on there with picayunish worries and cares about his family on his mind. It'll kill him, if he attempts it. He's nervous and excited enough now."

Barbara laughed, shook an obdurate head.

"Next year, maybe."

"Next year this old lady may be dead!"

"Yes, and next year I may be dead, too. No," Barbara decided cheerfully, beginning to fold a basketful of Kate's dry clothing briskly, "no, it isn't possible now, Schofield, delightful as it sounds. He'll have to take care of us this year, and stay at home, and write his poetry, and finish his play, as best he can, here! And some day he'll have another chance, and that time he'll be able to take it!"

"People are apt to have so many chances of this sort in a lifetime," Barry, who had come into the kitchen unobserved, said quietly and bitterly. Barbara, carrying a pile of clean garments to the bedroom bureau drawers, resolutely avoided meeting his eyes.

Schofield left that afternoon, he and Barry starting out to walk the twelve miles into town at about one o'clock. Barbara did not expect Barry to return that night, but she was surprised that he made no allusion to the possibility of his remaining in Cottonwood. It was already taken for granted, was it, his occasional absence overnight?

When he came back it was three days later, and in his darkest and most despairing mood. The weather was bitterly cold and wet, and life in the dark, damp old smoky kitchen came

nearer to being actually unendurable than Barbara had yet found it. Between the rains, there were frosts; the north sides of walls and clods of earth, barns, and fences were rimmed with icy white beads, the chickens were miserable, and the windmill creaked and splashed and complained all day and all night.

Under all Barbara's desperate effort to keep the domestic atmosphere dignified and serene ran a bleak current of anger, an abiding resentment that the life they had agreed so gaily to share should have brought her so heavy a burden, leaving Barry free. The beautiful child she had borne him, and that other child that the slow, painful months were bringing to her, were surely his responsibility as well as her own?

Yet it was for her to grow daily less and less comfortable, to step daily further and further down into the valley of physical disability and mental distress, while he raged and sulked about the kitchen because he could not go, eager and carefree, to the Bohemian life of another city. She must pay not only her own supreme tax in this matter, but bear his humiliating and galling contempt as well.

For his attitude was growing to be more and more impatiently contemptuous. His few comments upon the situation, in these days, were filled with superbly disdainful allusions to "women," and their stultifying effect upon the lives of men. "Women" weren't happy unless they had the house cluttered up with children; "women" were always thinking about the neighbours; "women" cared more about money than they did about anything else in the world.

Barbara was beyond mere noisy altercation now. Even while he fulminated one angry phrase after another she was thinking—thinking. They must get away from the hacienda, and if Barry would not support her and her children, then she must turn wage-earner again. No use fighting, and multiplying angry words. No use reproaching him; that only made matters worse. Somehow, as women had lived through the unendurable before this, she must manage to live through the next six months. After that it would be easier, and she might begin to construct and look ahead.

One noon, a few days before Christmas, she put the situation fairly before Barry.

"Dearest, we can't keep this up—you must see that. We simply cannot stay here. No matter how simply and humbly, we'll have to go into Cottonwood and make a start. That's the only way to work our way up."

"My taking orders from Harry Poett, I suppose," Barry suggested, lighting a cigarette, a sneer lifting the corner of his mouth.

His tone antagonized her; but she felt too tired and discouraged for a scene. Barbara forced her tone to good-nature and patience as she answered:

"It wouldn't be taking orders; you talk as if you'd be his valet! It would be a start."

"Yes," Barry muttered, making a long arm to reach for a magazine, "it might be. But excuse me from that kind of a start!"

Barbara automatically gave Kate a napkin ring and the china cover of the sugar bowl with which to play, and began to scrape and pile dishes.

"A man ought to support his family, Barry. Doesn't it occur to you that I ought to have some say in the matter, as well as yourself, Barry?"

She discarded both openings, as they phrased themselves on her tongue, and was, with some difficulty, silent.

"They'd love it," Barry admitted, "they'd love the idea that I was selling shoe clerks and telephone operators homes in the new development. Meat for them!"

“But, Barry, you’d have your mornings for your poetry. Harry distinctly said so. It’d be really only Saturday afternoon and Sunday—and just to report at the office, every afternoon, in case they needed you.”

“Yes, exactly,” Barry assented drily. “Kindly excuse me.”

Barbara, nettled and puzzled, was silent. Presently she said:

“Well, something must be done, dear, and why not that as well as anything else?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather not discuss it. Harry Poett never has meant anything in my life, and I object to his being drawn into it.”

“But we *must* discuss it, Barry!”

There was a silence.

“I don’t know,” Barry said then, in a peculiar, cold tone. “I don’t know that we *must* discuss it. I could discuss my going to New York, having my chance, if it came down to that! I notice you dismiss *that* plan very easily, there’s no particular discussion of that. When it comes to *your* comfort, your way, your plans, then we must discuss it! When it comes to mine, it’s a very different thing. ‘Oh no, Schofield,’ you say then, ‘unfortunately, it’s out of the question! He must stay here, and live in a swilly little pen of a cottage down near the dressmaker’s—he must take orders from Harry Poett.’ ”

His voice went on and on. Barbara dried saucers, dried hot glasses, dried knives and slipped them, jingling, into their drawer. Kate awakened with a shout from a nap, and was her most fascinating self.

Presently Barry exhausted his arguments, grabbed his cap, slid into his overcoat, and was gone. The steady rain spattered and fell, dripped from the dim patio roofs, blew over the flat farming country in gray sheets, like smoke. The fire sputtered, light gusts of ashes puffed over the room, settled again. It was three o’clock.

Four o’clock. Five o’clock. Dark was at half-past four now, in the shortest days of the year, and by seven Barbara felt that she was sitting up all night. She went to bed, the hot-water bottle comfortingly at her feet, a lamp at her elbow, Kate spread face downward within reach, and a good book waiting.

Outside, the rain had stopped, there had been a cold hard sunset, and the frost was snapping in the branches of fruit trees, and the sea fell with noise of scythes on the rocks. Silence, the bound silence of the black winter night, and then the slithering crash of the salt, cold water, or the ominous snap of twigs in the orchard. Now and then a log answered from the fireplace, with a sleepy soft sound of splitting and a gallant, brief upspurting of flame. And now and then a mouse’s teeth could be heard in the pantry, busy against wood, gnawing, gnawing, gnawing, and still again.

Nine o’clock. Barbara put out her light.

Barry did not come the next day, nor the next. The third day was the eve of Barbara’s birthday, and of Christmas Eve. It was a soft, foggy day, with a warm wind bringing in great banners of weaving, undulating mist from the ocean. A sort of hush lay over the ranch, the barns were hidden from sight, behind layers of milky veiling, and the cow, suddenly shouldering her way into Barbara’s neighbourhood from the paddock, appeared menacingly close and large, like a spectre cow of heroic size, out of the strange, enveloping whiteness.

There was a tipsy old table on the tiles outside the kitchen door, and here was an offering, waiting. A loaf of Mrs. Bettancourt’s sour, delicious bread, rolled in a tea towel, and a letter that was lying face down.

Warm-hearted little Maria, making a neighbourly gift, as if she did not have ten hungry mouths to devour her bread! Barbara put her milk bucket on the table, put Kate down on the kitchen floor, and turned her letter right side up. And then with a tightening of fingers about her heart, and the taste of salt water in her mouth, she saw that it bore a San Francisco postmark, and that it was from Barry.

No need to read it. She stood staring at it dully. She knew what it must say. He was going to accept the offer of this rich old patron of the arts, this Mrs. Wicherley or Winderby or Wilkinson, or whatever her name was. He was going to New York.

MY DARLING: [ran the letter, penned in Schofield's quarters in the Bohemia of San Francisco]

I've got to go—for both our sakes. I can't stand it, the dirt and cold and darkness, the damned boiled onions and apple puddings. When I can give you servants and pearls and fountains of crystal—things that fit your red hair and white skin, I'll come back—I'll come back, Barberry Bush, and we'll be happy fools again. Napoleon and I are going East together, to seek our fortunes, for you and the winkle. For God's sake, don't cry. . . .

There was more in the same strain. But she put the letter down, chilled and nauseated. She could read no more. The falseness of it, the conscious dramatizing of her agony made her feel ill.

She stood perfectly still, in the centre of the kitchen, staring into space with narrowed, unseeing eyes, her lower lip bitten, her nostrils flickering, her breast rising and falling rapidly.

He had left her. Her man had left her. She was the sort of woman who could be deserted by her husband, who could be left to all the agonies and humiliations of readjustment, with the eyes of the world watching her, and the skeptics of the world laughing, and the women of the world whispering behind their hands.

"Oh, Barry!" she said aloud, in anguish, "why did you do it—why did you do it! Together, we might have gotten out, somehow. Now, you've spoiled it all—you've spoiled it all!"

The shock made her feel weak and dazed. Automatically she took off the child's wrappings, and automatically put her into her high chair. And then suddenly she seized a piece of paper, and scribbled a telegram. Tomas must take it into town on his milk route to-morrow—at any cost to her own pride and dignity, Barry must not be permitted to throw aside his own name and honour in this way.

Barbara's whole worldly fortune consisted of eighty-five cents and fifty-five of these must be spent on the telegram. But, no matter, she had no choice.

She stood panting, deliberating, looking at the baby. If she left Kate here, of course Kate would roar like a mad bull for all the twenty-five minutes it would take Barbara to run across the half-mile space that separated the hacienda from the Bettancourts' cabin.

But to carry the baby all that way, in the rapidly deepening dark, would be to double the difficulty and danger of the trip, even if Barbara did not lose her way and lose time in the fog. She took a last survey of the kitchen, gave Kate a cooky, remarked, "Mom-mom coming *right* back," in an encouraging tone, and started out at a wild run.

Over the fence, over last year's dry, flattened yellow grass, and past the row of spiked and fluted thistles, standing high and brown, and delicately beaded and made fairylike in the fog, through the Bettancourts' pasture gate, where lumbering, terrified great shadows that might

have been elephants, but that really were only the everyday cattle, galloped awkwardly to left and right . . .

There was enough light left to keep her general direction, and behind her the steady crash and suck of the unseen sea was a guide.

And only halfway, what luck to come upon Tomas himself, lazily rounding up the cows that would be safer in the barn this bewildering milky-white night, what a relief to cram the telegram and money into his Indian-brown hand, and be speeding back to the baby again, only ten minutes absent in all!

It was when the sobbing Kate was safe in her arms, and she herself panting and sighing great recuperative sighs in the rocker, that she could first begin to think out the new situation and try to grasp exactly what it meant to her.

“Return at once, I must see you,” she had said in her telegram, “will expect you Thursday night.”

This was Wednesday night, he would receive the telegram to-morrow morning, incidentally the morning of Christmas Eve and Barbara’s birthday, and he would take the one o’clock train for Cottonwood. Reaching it at half-past two, he must be at the ranch by six, even if he walked. If he got a lift, as he usually did, he might be home a full hour earlier.

And she must take a stiff tone with him now. She must forbid him—yes, forbid him exactly as a mother would forbid a little boy—to think of leaving her until after June, and until she and her children were established in Cottonwood.

Who but a selfish, blind, unthinking boy would leave a woman in her position, anyway! But it was in that way that she must think of him, just as a boy—a boy who was oddly, also, a genius. Plenty of the world’s immortals had set him his example.

Strange scheme, that yet gave that boy the power to take unto himself a wife, to become the father of helpless babies who needed a man—a protector. Well, strange or not, that *was* the scheme, and from now on she must see clearer—she must have strength for two, she must no longer permit herself to be a burden on him, nor permit him to dictate the terms of her life to her.

In ten years, in five, perhaps, if she was fortunate, she would be smiling at the memory of these bitter, disillusioned days of their early marriage. She must keep that ten-year, that five-year goal, always before her eyes.

She resolutely put away from her any thought of resentment or anger. These were bad for soul and body, now. Women got through times like this—they didn’t die, and later the world merely said casually: “She has two children, I think. She has a position in the Post Office—or the Library—or she sells real estate and he’s somewhere in the East.”

That was all. Nothing sensational about it. One heard it every day. The women who sold gloves and waited on tables were perfectly willing to talk about it.

“Sure, I’m married—I’ve got a girl of eleven. My husband went off with another woman, I had to go back to my father—I almost died over it,” they said. Or, “I call myself ‘Miss,’ but of course I’m really ‘Mrs.’ I got the wrong man; he treated me something terrible. He left me before my baby came.”

One didn’t think, placidly trying on fabric gloves, or ordering salad and tea, of the tragedies behind the simple phrases, the tears, the agonies, and agitations. Other women’s problems always seemed so simple and so remote.

Well, God willing, hers would seem so, too, some day. She would keep her own counsel, preserve, for their children’s sake, the outer shell of dignity that Barry broke so carelessly, and

build, instead of the happy, carefree, gipsying life of which she had dreamed beside him, the soberer, sadder, wiser life of the woman who must stand alone.

Twenty-five years old to-morrow. Barbara crept in beside Kate, in the warm darkness at eight o'clock, and put her hand across the sleeping baby, and cried as if her heart would break.

The next day the world was still mystical and strange with creamy fog, the sea invisible, and the ranch only a little circle of flat dry grass and hazy blotches of fence and barns. Mist pulsed softly in the patio, now and then the horn of a bewildered and anxious steamer droned regularly from the ocean, moved upon its way, and was gone.

Barbara felt as if she were living in a cloud. There was a stillness, an unearthly effect of blanketing and dulling about the day; all her horizons were lost, and no voice but her own and Kate's broke the long, slow hours.

Her housework absorbed her: ashes, dishes, buckets, and pails. She made the kitchen spotless, made Barry's favourite chocolate custard for supper. She heated the great coppers, full of cold well water, and managed a comfortable bath, brushed her bright hair and bound it trimly about her head, hung a crisp fresh apron on a nail.

After luncheon she and Kate tried a walk. But the fog was too confusing. Twenty feet from the fence or road one was completely enveloped, lost in pearly spaces, stumbling on clods that might lead north or south, or east or west, alike. And to keep to the road meant merely to move in the same bewildering circle of rough wheeltracks, stiffened with frost, until one tired of the chamber of mist and turned about to go back.

All day long, Barbara followed in her thoughts the progress of her telegram to Barry. Now he was receiving it, now he and Schofield were impatiently discussing it. Half-past twelve. He would be turning toward the Townsend Street Station. Two o'clock. Now he was well upon his way.

Their walk brought them back to the cow yard, where Sooky was standing disconsolately, her jaw resting on a low fence rail, a low, breathy moan pouring through her wet, freckled, shining pink satin muzzle. Barbara gave her crusted flank a slap, and led the way to the hay barn, where there was a dimly lighted empty space between the two high mows. She took her milk pail from a wooden peg, and seated herself with her forehead against Sooky's silky flank.

"It's only four o'clock, Sook," said Barbara, milking. "But you don't mind being a little early? The days seem ten years long."

Kate sat flat upon the adobe floor that was carpeted an inch deep in chaff and loose hay, and argued in a delicious baby gabble about the fog. She had seen fog before, but not so often but that she greeted to-day's unusual mistiness with a hopeful, "Moke?"

Barbara had explained that it was not smoke. As she sat milking to-night she let her dreamy fancy play with the idea of an enormous fire, in the west, and banners and columns of actual smoke blowing over the land. The sun had set the world on fire, and there would presently be tongues of pink flame lapping through this sea fog, and everything and everyone would be enveloped in it.

"I hope I'm not going crazy!" she thought, carrying milk and baby through the silent, white-fuming paddocks and yards into the patio. Fog pressed against the hacienda, the trees were only phantoms through the waving walls of tulle. The fountain was a dull blur; beyond the fountain the roofs and galleries had vanished, they were swallowed into the fog. "We're fogbound, Kate," Barbara told the baby. And she stopped at the patio door, listening.

From far out toward the west a faint, desolate sound was coming, repeated over and over again. The short pathetic plaint of a steamer whistle, as the vessel beat her way up the

dangerous coast. She did not know where she was going, poor thing. Barbara pictured the anxious man in the crow's-nest, the straining eyes of the lookouts trying to pierce the fog, fancying all sorts of dangers hidden behind that impalpable, rising and falling wall.

She waited where she was until the sound had slowly moved from south to north and had vanished into the gathering shadows that were beginning to reinforce and thicken the mist. Then she picked Kate from the tiles, picked up the milk bucket, and turned toward the house again.

CHAPTER XVIII

A sound behind her made her whirl about and brought her heart into her mouth. A voice?—Now?—and here——

Out of the fog a man's figure had suddenly materialized; a thin, shabby, unshaven man, terrifyingly close and unfamiliar.

"Good-evening!" he said.

Barbara regained her breath, swallowed with a dry throat, managed to find her voice.

"Good—good-evening. You startled me. Oh, good-evening, Slinder," she said, recognizing in the caller the ex-convict who had been occupying the place when she and Barry had come down to it, more than two years ago, and to whom Barry had elected to talk and listen almost all his wedding night.

"Good-evening!" he repeated, with an oddly sly glance. "You didn't reckonize me, seems?"

"Not—not just at first." She hated his twisted smile. "But now I do!"

"Where's the mate, eh?" the man asked.

"The—the mate? My husband, you mean. He isn't—he isn't here *just* now," Barbara answered, her tone suddenly becoming definite and confident, as she grasped the significance of the question, "but I expect him any minute."

"Got a baby, huh?" the man said.

Barbara hated to see Kate's delicious fat brown fingers in his oily, strangely weak-looking ones.

"Yes, but she's a big girl now, she's more than a year old," she answered uneasily. Horrible to have this undesirable guest suddenly materializing; what did he want? What was he doing down here on the lonely seacoast on this bleak winter night?

"What I was going to ask him was about the chances of my getting a night's rest on the hay," Slinder said, with his sidewise glance.

Was that merely whining confidence in his tone, or something like an easy and unhurried menace? She could not decide, her heart was thumping heavily, and her brain seemed strangely flurried. Who was near? Who would help her? She could not think.

The wreathing mists, mingled with twilight now, circled and sank and rose again over the barnyards and the fields; the sound of the sea, crashing, crashing, crashing, could be heard in the unearthly winter stillness.

"I think your chances are very good!" Barbara told her unwelcome caller, with an air of commonplace hospitality. "I'll call you, if you like, the minute Mr. du Spain gets home."

"Du Spain! That was the name all right," Slinder commented. But he did not move toward the barn; he remained resting lazily against the deep adobe curve of the narrow patio doorway shutting her off from the yard, smiling, and looking boldly at her with his insolent eyes.

The darkness was gathering fast now, great folds of gray were lapping against the lighter gray; Barbara, looking at him, could hardly see the man's weak and vicious face.

"I don't suppose he leaves much money down here in charge of his dear wife?" Slinder asked deliberately.

Barbara's heart gave a thick, slow throb, as if it turned over within her.

“No, he doesn’t leave any money at all!” she answered quickly and sharply. “There’s no objection to your sleeping in the barn if you want to, and I’ll give you some supper. But we’ve no money here!”

“That’s what *you* say, my dear,” Slinder said silkily, leaning toward her. As he lurched, losing his foothold a little, for the first time she caught the odour of liquor on his breath.

Obedying a blind, terrified impulse, Barbara, the milkpail still in her right hand, the baby caught under her left arm, turned like a flash, crossed the pavement of tiles, entered the dim, smoky kitchen, and slammed the heavy door.

Kate she tumbled unceremoniously on the bed, and springing back to the door she dropped the heavy iron bar that reinforced its solid thickness. There she stood for a moment, panting, listening.

Not a sound came from without. The dark kitchen was absolutely silent, except for Kate’s interrogative “Mom-mom-mom-mom?” from the bed.

Barbara’s eyes, mad with blind instinctive terror, searched the room. The south pantry had no window, it was merely a black box. The north pantry door, like the patio door, had a heavy iron bar, on the kitchen side. The garden window had been barred like a prison window with iron rods, against the liquor-seeking revellers of old carnival times, perhaps, when even the hacienda kitchen was not safe from the roving keepers of the fiesta.

There remained only the door into Barry’s bedroom, and the danger of the bedroom itself. Beyond lay a long hallway, punctuated with doors. It was the door into the bedroom that she must guard, for the bedroom was accessible from a dozen entrances, and half the old doors did not hold.

All this rushed through her mind as quickly as light. Not daring to delay even long enough to find lamp and matches, she shoved against the bedroom door the heavy old trunk she and Barry used for a seat.

The door opened toward the kitchen; it would be a strong man who could force it, with the weight of the chest against it. And Slinder was not strong.

But he had been drinking, and he might be angry. Barbara went close to the door that opened on the patio. There was a slit, intended for just such reconnoitring, cut in its upper panel; a slit some two inches wide, covered on the inside with a movable flap.

She did not open the flap, but she moved it enough to give her eye a match-wide crack through which fearfully to inspect the patio.

For awhile she could see nothing but fog, dusky walls of whitish-gray that blotted out the fountain and the galleries, that dimmed the very pavement. Then suddenly she saw Slinder, lying flat, face down, his body partly extended through the patio gate.

While she watched he raised himself to a sitting position, and began to talk to himself. He muttered indignantly, and getting to his feet, he came straight toward the kitchen door.

Barbara’s heart turned to water. She closed the flap, and went to the bed, and took the baby into her arms.

“Oh, my God, save us—oh, God, send Barry home!” she whispered.

There was a knocking on the panels, followed by a silence. The kitchen was dark, except for sleepy red firelight. Barbara tried to see the clock’s face, but there was not enough light. It must be about four—Barry might easily come home at any minute now, especially if he had chanced to get a lift out from town.

“Oh, my God, save us! Oh, God—God——”

“Open up, Missis!” Slinder shouted.

He hammered again, frantically, and Barbara thought that she would go mad. But she held herself rigidly silent. It was only for Kate—it was only for Kate she cared. He should not touch, he should not frighten her baby.

Quietly, tremblingly, she set the baby down and went to the mantel. She groped for matches, lighted the lamp.

The shadows leaped and swelled and sank again, and the reassuring light filled the room. The garden window was barred, the bedroom door barred, at least as far as the chest could block it, the pantries were shut off, and at any minute Barry's voice might sound blessedly through the fog. It was all she could do.

The hammering and muttering continued at the patio door, but he made no attack. If he took a beam and crashed it in, of course the wood might give. On the other hand, it was old wood, seasoned and tough, and swollen tight into its frame.

"Well, anyway, while he's banging there he can't be in the pantry, too," Barbara muttered. She opened the south pantry door, although her heart stood still with fear as it swung open upon the blackness within, and brought bread and meat and potatoes out to the kitchen, in a single breathless rush, before she barred it again.

"Gimme twenty dollars and I'll go!" Slinder shouted. "You got it—you know you got it! You're rich—you can't tell me!"

He hammered on the door again. Barbara stood still in the middle of the kitchen, watching with dilated eyes the spot whence the noise proceeded.

The Bettancourts were half a mile away, far out of hearing on this gloomy, fog-shrouded afternoon. But why didn't Barry come?

Oh, to hear his voice calling, "Barbara, what is it?" To hear his big boots falling on the patio tiles! To have him catch this drunken bully by the collar——

She went to the door and shouted: "We have no money, I tell you! If you'll go out of that patio I'll put some food out for you! But I have no money."

"Gimme twenty dollars!" came back the stupid, heavy demand. "You leave me come in, and you betcher I'll find it. You won't keep it from me long!"

The subsiding of her first wild fright had given her an interval of feverish confidence and activity. But now panic seized her again.

All very well for a few moments, perhaps, this barricade of the kitchen doors and windows, this fortress in her own living room. But suppose he had more of the foul stuff he had been drinking there, and suppose he grew furious? He would not be the first man to butcher a helpless woman and a baby on a lonely farm, and make his escape days before the discovery of his crime set the law on his trail.

And Barbara felt her mouth grow dry again, and her heart beat slowly and thickly, and again she whispered, in the lonely kitchen, "Oh, my God, what shall I do?"

And then like a pulse beating madly in her heart the blind, suffocated prayer again: "Oh, my God, oh, my God, save us!"

He was crashing on the shutters with something—a rake handle, perhaps, or a stout plank. The shutters rattled agitatedly but the iron bars held. Barbara could hear him raging as he battled with the old window.

"You give me twenty dollars and I won't hurt you!" she heard him shout, again and again. And after awhile he added, "You think you can keep me out, don't you?"

Afterward followed a long silence. Barbara wondered if he was going to climb on the roof and block the chimneys. Could he do it? Perhaps they were too wide.

She gave Kate her supper, looking fearfully about as she measured the careful spoonfuls, stabbed to the heart by the baby's serenity. Unconscious little Kate, with the first frightful danger of her life just beyond the door! At seven o'clock Kate was soundly, splendidly asleep, and Barbara, sitting beside her, watching and waiting, held in her hands a cup of smoking coffee and hot milk. She could not eat, but the hot drink put courage into her, and after it, she settled herself for her vigil with a stern, pale anxious face, and tired, alert eyes. Barry must have stopped for dinner in town. But he would come!

Again the rattling on the window shutter, and again she watched it apprehensively, her bitten lip murmuring wild prayers. Suddenly Barbara's eyes lighted strangely, and getting to her feet she went to the stove, and with a fearful look kept always upon the shutter, she mixed a pitcher of coffee and sweetened it, and heaped fried potatoes on the plate that held the meat.

The bottle of ipecac that was always ready for Kate's croup was on a shelf. Barbara poured it into the coffee, and tasted the mess with a knitted brow. The label said "poison," and was marked plainly with an antidote, but she was desperate now.

When the shutter behind her was shaking unmistakably, and its rattle was accompanied by Slinder's less and less intelligible threats, Barbara quickly opened the patio door, and put the plate of food and the steaming pitcher of doctored coffee on the little table outside, in the patio. The cold night air rushed at her, the fog still hung over the world like a pall, but there was no other menace.

Yet Barbara was trembling from head to foot as she slammed the bar home again, and she went to kneel for a minute beside Kate's bed, and hold the warm little hand in her own, as if to reassure herself that matters were at least no worse than they had been.

Then she went back to the shutter, and putting her face close against it, she shouted: "Mr. Slinder! I put your dinner beside the door."

Perhaps it would sober him, perhaps it would pacify him. Perhaps, of course, it would kill him.

He came round to the patio door, and with her ear close to the tiny slit she could hear him wolfing his food, gulping his coffee. Suppose she had poisoned him? Then she would be a murderer, and tried for manslaughter, perhaps.

The minutes went by in deathlike silence, and there was no other attack. The clock ticked, and ashes fell in the fire, but outside silence reigned.

Was the pantry door shaking? Barbara, brought suddenly to attention, looked at it fearfully. She whirled about, sickened suddenly with a horrible feeling that the man had at last succeeded in broaching the garden window, behind her, and that his sinister face was smiling triumphantly at her, from its frame.

But firelight and lamplight only showed the peaceful old adobe walls of the kitchen, the barred shutters, the closed doors. Her books in a row on the old ramp that protruded like a wide shelf all about the room; had she ever been so free and peaceful in body or spirit as to enjoy the imaginary adventures of books? Were there women in Cottonwood to-night, bored, comfortable, protected, tucking themselves luxuriously under satin covers, reaching idle white hands for books?

Oh, if morning ever came and brought with it—by some miracle!—Tomas or Barry, if this hideous, half-crazed visitor were put safely out of the way, with what utter gratitude and thankfulness she and the baby would escape from the ranch, would make their way back to Cottonwood, there to beg, or to borrow, or to work their way somehow to a simple life of their

own, a tiny inconspicuous niche where they might eat and sleep and toil humbly, in blessed nearness to voices and human faces for all the rest of their lives!

Perhaps Barry was not coming. The endless black hours of the winter night were ahead. She must face them somehow; she must not go mad, she must live until morning.

Eight o'clock. Deathly silence outside. Had she killed Slinder? She could imagine Barry being everything that was kind and concerned and sympathetic, at her trial. His beautiful face agitated and pale, his voice hoarse with agony and pity, what a figure of sympathy and despair he would be. He would put his head down and sob out: "Gentlemen, I am far more to blame than she is!"

But she, Kate's mother, and expecting another baby in early June, would be the murderer. Barry would be quite safe. "For God's sake, Barberry Bush, don't cry!" he would entreat her. "It kills me to see you cry!"

Her thoughts drifted to and fro dreamily; perhaps she was dying of fright? There seemed to be a dwindling and sinking within as if the forces of her being were ebbing out through a wound in her heart.

To be back in the little kitchen at home with Amy, on a soft summer morning, how wonderful that would seem now! Amy making coffee jelly, one of her few culinary accomplishments, and Barbara doing one of a hundred happy, unimportant things, grating cheese, polishing spoons, or writing notes, and both girls chattering busily all the time.

"Amy, don't you think it would be stunning to get some of that regular nigger print at Berning's, blue and black and yellow, and pipe it with turkey-red, and make straight, plain dresses with wide collars? I think they'd be awfully smart."

"They'd be stunning! And I'll tell you, Babs. You could get a small hat frame and cover it with the same stuff. . . ."

Hollyhocks outside the kitchen window, and down the street; through the warm, scented morning stillness, under the big trees, the sound of a fish-horn.

"Babs, there's Tony! Let's see if he has crabs."

She came to herself with a jolt. That wasn't the familiar old Friday morning fish-horn, that horn was the voice of a ship, off the coast. She was down at the hacienda, twelve miles from town, on the foggiest winter night the world had ever known. She was alone with her baby in the barricaded kitchen, and at large somewhere on the place was a demented, intoxicated convict who would kill both if he could.

The trembling began again, her teeth chattered, and she swallowed with a dry throat. Half-past eight o'clock. The night would never end.

"Oh, God, save us. Oh, Barry, come back to us! I can't stand it—all this terrible night long!"

Suddenly there was a sickening crash behind her; Barbara was on her feet, her fingers bunched against her lips, her starting eyes fixed upon the garden window.

Under a violent blow from outside, the stout old solid shutter had split, and through the splintered gap Barbara could catch a glimpse of a face—Slinder's face——

The iron rods, buried deep in the old masonry, only a few inches apart, were no nearer to yielding now than they had been for more than a hundred years, but Barbara did not think of that. She saw the wood spatter and crack, and heard it give, and she heard her own frantic screams, ringing through the kitchen.

Again and again she screamed, quite without effort, quite without consciousness. The room echoed with the hideous sound, and Kate awakened and burst into terrified uproar.

It was when she saw the first evidences of fright upon the baby's exquisite little face that Barbara came to her senses. Instantly she was still, and her voice, as she dropped on her knees beside the bed, was exactly the voice Kate knew, tender, crooning, reassuring.

"My darling—no, you mustn't be frightened—did your mother scare her little baby? Here's Mother, Kate. I'm taking care of you, my precious!"

And in the next second there was a furious, sharp rapping on the patio door, directly opposite the window where the blows had been crashing a few moments ago, and at last—at last—at last, the voice of someone—someone there to save her!

"Barbara—open it! For God's sake, what's the matter?"

Her knees would hardly hold her as she ran, she had no voice, her fingers fumbled helplessly at the heavy latch.

"Barry—look out for him—behind you—oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, wait—wait—I'm doing it as fast as I can—I'm trying to open it——"

And then the door opening, and a blessed great figure coming in out of dark, writhing veils of fog, and herself crying, sobbing, tight in a man's arms, trying to speak, trying to drag his big arms closer—closer about her. . . .

"Oh, my God, I'm so grateful—you got here in time! Oh, God—*God*—I thought he would kill us both, me and the baby! He's been here—hours—hours—threatening me—he's drunk——"

"Where's Barry, Barbara?" Link Mackenzie said loudly, harshly, wild with bewilderment and amazement. Without losing his firm hold of her, he flung a hand backward to shut the door, got her to a chair, and knelt down beside her, working her suddenly cold hands in his own, anxious, puzzled eyes on her face. "For God's sake, what is it?" he muttered.

Barbara leaned her forehead against him, gulping, spent, her brow wet.

"Oh, Link," she whispered, "I'm so glad you came!"

"Don't be frightened, dear," he said tenderly, "I'm here. I'll take care of you."

Her eyes were shut, she rested against him like an exhausted bird.

"I know you are—I know you will!" she panted, utter peace in the white face that shone with sweat. And for a moment she could say no more.

"What frightened you, dear?"

For answer she brought a heavy, uncomprehending look to his own.

"Give me the baby, will you, Link?" she whispered.

He brought her the child, and she bent her head weakly over Kate's rich silky curls, breathing hard, like a runner.

"Link—what brought you?"

"Why," he smiled pitifully, humouring her, "our birthday, Barbara."

"So it is." She pushed her hair off her forehead, looked about the room, brought her eyes to his face. "Did you see him?"

"See who, dear? There's no one here."

"Oh, yes, there is! Look at that shutter there—he broke that. He might have killed us!"

"Tramp?" Link asked quickly, kindling horror in his glance.

"A convict—Slinder's his name. He was down here a couple of years ago—stole from Barry. He—" she began to tremble—"he threatened me, Link. He's been raging all about—he's drunk, too."

"Where's Barry, Barbara?" The man asked it quietly, but there was a strange note in his voice.

“Link, promise me something—promise me that if I faint, if I’m ill, you won’t leave Kate and me here to-night! *Promise me—*”

He saw that she was already ill, her hands icy, her cheeks blazing.

“I promise you, dear—on my oath. When I go back to Cottonwood, I’ll take you both, and you’ll never come down here again! I swear it, Barbara. Never mind the man—we’ll get him. Never mind anything, except that I’m here—Joe Miller’s waiting for me in the car, right outside here, and we’re going to take you and the baby back. We’re going to take care of you, and see that everything’s comfortably settled, and you’re going to have a long rest!”

“It sounds—” she faltered, crying, “like heaven!”

“Can you get hold of Barry, and we can get out?” Link asked. “Let me talk to him. This is no place for you—too lonely, and too much work to do. A scare like this——”

“But he’s in San Francisco, Link. Barry’s not here!”

She said it simply, almost apologetically, watching his face.

“In San Francisco!”

Barbara nodded.

“You were here alone?”

“Oh, for several days now. And to-day—to-day got on my nerves!” Barbara confessed, shaking.

“My *God!*” Link said forcibly. And his kind, rough, homely face darkened ominously. “What’s he doing in the city?”

“He—” Fool that she was, she was thickening and trembling into tears again—“he’s left me, Link.”

A silence. Then Link said, in a stupefied voice:

“*Left you!*”

Again the girl nodded, smiling through brimming eyes. Hot tears splashed on the baby’s curls.

“Why, he *couldn’t* have,” Link began, in the tone of one trying to understand. “Left you? What did he think——”

He stopped short, bit his lip.

“Did he say so, in so many words?” he asked gently.

“He wrote it. He had had the blues,” Barbara explained with simplicity, “and he had a chance to go to New York——”

“To *New York!*”

“Yes. A rich old woman who does things for men without family ties. And Barry was worried—depressed. You see, there’s going to be another baby in June,” Barbara added, a little awkwardly, “and he hates all the fuss——”

She stopped, distressed eyes upon Link’s face.

“I’d had that letter,” she resumed, “and I wired him. It made me feel—horrible, of course. And then to have this man turn up and want money—and Barry not come back—when I *needed* him so——”

And she began to cry, childishly wiping her eyes with the back of her thin, work-scarred hand.

“Well, the best thing to do is to get you out of this,” Link said abruptly, irrelevantly. “Tell me what you need—what the baby needs——”

The practical aspect of the move revived her. She opened bureau drawers, brought out Kate’s cap and coat; it wrung the man’s heart to see her stop, now and then, in her slow, half-

stupid moving about, and wipe her eyes, with a sort of patient bewilderment.

“Now that I’ve started crying, I don’t seem able to stop!” she said.

Link called in Joe Miller; the lights of the car wheeled like a fan through the fuming mists of the patio. The two men talked in low tones, inspected the shattered shutter, tramped with a heartening noise and nervelessness to and fro.

“Guess he’s got away, Barbara,” said Joe Miller.

She only smiled wearily. She moved as if very tired.

“Go by-by?” said Kate.

“Go by-by, darling.”

“Better make a report on him to-night and have him rounded up—he’s got a record. A man who would scare a girl that way would do anything,” Link said, in a low tone.

“Oh, he would have killed us!” Barbara said, overhearing.

Link chose not to enlarge upon it.

“I’ll bet you would have put up a pretty good fight!”

“Oh, I would have—I even thought of the ax. For Kate’s sake——”

“You look like you were going to come down sick, Barbara,” Joe Miller said concernedly. A square-built, kindly man of fifty, whose friendship for her dated back to her actual babyhood, he glanced vaguely at the kettle. “Oughtn’t you have a cup of tea or something?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she said gratefully. But her face was ashen white and she tottered on her feet. “I want to get to houses—voices—streets,” she whispered.

“Yes, and we’ll start!” Link said, giving her an anxious glance. “Wrap that blanket round the baby, Joe. He knows all about handling them, Barbara—he’ll not drop her. We don’t have to lock up here, I’ll send someone down to-morrow. Lean on me, dear.”

“Ah, you’re so wonderful, Link. You’re so kind—so wonderful to anyone in trouble,” she said drowsily and heavily, “so terribly kind . . . it’s so good to be taken care of.”

Blanketed, secure, she was on the front seat. The fog was clearing now, the night air was sharp and fresh. In the dark, the sea made a dishing sound on the rocks.

“Want your baby, Barbara?” the cheerful, friendly voice came from the back seat.

“Safe with you, Mr. Miller. You’ve had three to practice on. And I’m——” her voice suddenly flagged, weakened—“I’m so tired,” she said.

“Just stick it out for another fifteen minutes,” Link urged, with an oblique glance.

“Oh, yes. I’m all right. I’m trying,” said Barbara’s sweet, weary voice, as they started upon their way, “I’m trying not to think what might have happened if you hadn’t come, Link.”

He turned into the highway; they could see the lights of Cottonwood, lying like a band of sparks caught in gray gauze, miles away. Lights—houses—blessed companionship.

“Had to come for our birthday, Barbara!” Link said lightly, affectionately.

“You never forget it,” she said unsteadily.

“And I had Kate’s puppy—he’s in the back seat there, and also a proposition Joe and I meant to make to Barry—about the place. But, Barbara,” Link reproached her, “you oughtn’t to stay down there without somebody.”

She was Barry’s wife. She would not say that she had protested, that to-day’s terrible solitude had been no part of her plan.

“I know——” she admitted weakly. And then the fingers of her left hand grasped his arm, and she felt her whole body flex and relax against him. “I’m so sorry—the hospital——” she muttered. “I’m so sorry——”

He freed his big right arm, put it tightly about her, spared an instant from the irregularities of the road to look at her sharply.

“Keep it up just a few minutes, dear—you’re all right!”

The drowning blue eyes, picked up by a street light, shone into his with their old brave radiance. Then they darkened, and he heard her inextinguishable, rueful laughter in her shadow of a voice as she said:

“I’m dying, Link. What a—what a way to behave on—on one’s birthday!”

CHAPTER XIX

Consciousness was a red spark of agony, in a whirl of hot darkness. In the infinite blackness there was peace.

Blackness—velvety and obscure. To get back into it—deeper into it—not to be the fiery particle so hideously separated. The spark existed, somehow, but the blackness was nothingness.

Something existed, twisted and tortured and bewildered—something struggling not to exist. Something wet and writhing and nauseated and moaning; through the blackness shot with showers and showers of sparks there was a frightened screaming going on. “No—no—no!”

And then darkness, heavenly darkness again, and the pressure—whatever it was, subsiding, subsiding. . . .

Time was not, space was not. But after awhile a troubled sense of place and being began to pain, an added pain to the fearful and familiar one in someone’s head. “Yesterday, yesterday,” said a whispering voice, screaming a jagged tear through the pain. “Yesterday—yesterday—yesterday,” a senseless babble began, “yesterday—yesterday, yesterday.”

“She heard you——” There was a sense of movement, waves of soft movement, like the sea.

She was somebody, listening. Voices were horribly loud and jarring, and to open her eyes would mean that something split—hideously—into fragments. But she could listen.

“I’d try it.” Why should people shout so, especially when their shouting was inside of one—a part of one—a hurtful part of one, not to be torn loose. . . .

Showers and showers and showers of red sparks, wheeling over the pit of the dark. It was agony to be only a spark. . . .

She was that frightful thing, the largest spark, forcing her way, shrieking and screaming, through the others.

“Back——” She wanted to go back, not to be a spark any more.

Something tinkling on glass; a delicate little tinkle. She would wash the dishes as soon as her head was better, as soon as she could force open her blazing eyes.

“Babs—my dearest——”

This meant nothing at all. It was merely vaguely distressing.

“Dearest, don’t you know Amy? Babs——”

She must open her eyes. The jagged lightning tore through them and through her, and then came the familiar slipping—the delicious plunge back into the dark.

Long spaces, centuries, æons, intervened. She understood everything now; life was all one. That was why things hurt so.

“Life is all one,” she heard a voice say thickly and loudly. But this caused such a raw dragging pain in somebody’s throat that it stopped abruptly.

Then there were more movements; very guarded and soft, and some talk about somebody coming around.

“She was trying to speak then, Doctor.”

Who was? Somebody named Barbara. They were all murmuring and brushing about in a light place, talking about Barbara.

“Did she know you?”

“No, but she was conscious there for a second, Miss Ryan thinks.”

“She’ll know you when she wakes up again.”

Whoever she was, she hadn’t known Amy. She might know Kate. Perhaps she would like to see Kate, perhaps she would know Kate.

Ward. Amy. Kate. “Babs, dearest—*dearest*—this is Amy. Won’t you look at Kate?”

Who ever Babs was she evidently didn’t look at Kate—whoever Kate was. For whoever Amy was, Amy began to cry. Silly to cry. It only made Barry mad.

“Barry—you can’t go away now——” Whispering, this was. Her head ached. Why was she whispering this so busily, when she was so tired and weak that even whispering hurt? “Barry—you can’t go away now.”

Poor Barbara Atherton; it was boiling hot in the kitchen—she had to hurry, hurry, hurry—get the wood in—feed the chickens—pin out that wash—or the man would be kept waiting! Hot—hot—hot—nothing to breathe anywhere, and one was going to be frightfully sick. . . .

“Sick——” She was crying weakly with pity for whoever was so sick. “And he *did* hit my head——”

“Her head aches, Doctor. She keeps trying to move it.”

“What did she say then?” These were not whispers; mere breaths of clear voices.

“I couldn’t get it. Something about her head.”

One’s eyes were half open, it appeared, for there was that brass scroll that held the electric light, and a clean angle of curtained window. Daytime, for the light was out, and the window bright. No, night again, for there was a paper shade pinned about the light, and nurses whispering. No, day. Someone was saying, “Good-morning, Doctor.”

Fingers were quietly holding hers. For a long time she could not think what that warm, steady, soft pressure was. Then she remembered, fingers. Suck—slap—suck—slap. That must be a window shade sucking and slapping gently, like a sail, on an opened window sash.

“No headache.” She said it distinctly, faintly, without opening her eyes.

An instant, fragrant stir near her. A voice, rich with tenderness:

“No headache, my darling? Is it a relief?”

“It’s—*heavenly!*”

Then, after a long silence:

“Amy?”

“Yes, my dearest!” But why was Amy crying so hard? Her voice was thick and shaken with tears.

Then Ward Duffy’s voice. Where could they all be, anyway, that Ward Duffy should be here?

“Amy—you mustn’t, dear. You ought to be laughing, now.” And then clearly, after a space of silence. “Bad for your darling baby, Amy!”

Somehow one knew one must say that. But why? Did it matter? Yet now that her head had stopped aching, she liked to speak, in this heavy, droning voice.

She heard the flurry among them, felt the nurse’s clever fingers at her wrist. Her eyes opened wide, and a shock of frightful pain went through her temples, and was gone.

Amy—two Amys steadying to one; one little blue velvet hat on Amy’s head.

“New hat, Amy?”

“New——? What did she say? Oh, new hat? Yes, dearest.” How gentle their voices were. As if words—sounds—could break her!

And then suddenly memory and understanding. And those who watched her saw the intelligence come back into the violet-ringed blue eyes, and with intelligence, fear. Barry—Slinder—the fog—the ranch kitchen, and the little figure in the draggled doublegown——

“Amy! Kate——?”

“Lie down. Kate’s fine. She’s at our house with Ward’s mother.”

Barbara sank back on the pillows, panting, her eyes shut again. When she opened them Amy was still there, watching her with a tender, loving look.

“Is there another baby, Amy?”

Amy slipped to her knees beside the bed, put her lips against Barbara’s languid hand. And Barbara felt her sister’s cheek wet.

She did not open her eyes. But those who watched her saw tears slip down from the shadow of the dark, lowered lashes on her ivory white cheeks.

“No—no little brother in June?” she whispered, tasting salt.

“If you knew how proud we are to have gotten *you* out of it so beautifully, Mrs. du Spain, you’d feel fortunate!”

This was the nurse. Barbara opened her eyes, and Amy, in tears herself, gently dried them with a handkerchief.

For a long time the pleasant white room was very still.

“You had a close call, darling,” said Amy.

“I suppose so.” Barbara lay thinking, her hand in her sister’s.

“And you have Kate, the most delicious baby I ever saw, everyone is wild about her!” Amy added, more cheerfully.

“The darling!” Barbara smiled weakly. “Could I see her?” she asked, her eyes filling again, but more from the effort of speech than from any conscious emotion.

“Any time now!” the nurse assured her warmly. The invalid smiled weakly again; it was something to look forward to, that first glimpse of Kate.

“Is Barry here now, Amy?”

“No, he was on his way East, you know. We sent him messages, but, of course, when you’re away,” Amy began to explain carefully, “you *don’t* realize what people are going through at home.”

Barbara’s eyes moved to her sister’s thoughtfully; she slightly bit her lip, wrinkling her brow. But she made no comment.

“If you will drink this and then try to sleep, you might have a caller this afternoon,” the nurse interposed skillfully, and Barbara obediently emptied the glass.

She was smiling as she went off to sleep, with the window shade still making a pleasant, yacht-like sound—suck-slap-suck-slap—and Gertrude Ryan, pretty in white and blue, still gently chafing her hand.

“I suppose I’ll be well again, some day, Amy?” This was later.

“Suppose, Barberrry? Why, my darling, the whole town’s talking about the rapidity with which you’re getting well. Peritonitis, or something awfully near it.”

“I remember Link arriving at the ranch, Christmas Eve——”

“Don’t think about that, Babs.”

“Oh, I can think about anything, now. Lying here, just loafing and dreaming, with no chickens and cow and lamps and dishes and laundry to worry about, and just enchanting trays and flowers——”

Amy was in the rocker with Kate, sound asleep, in her arms. Sweet January sunshine was filtering through the spotless curtains and, with the warmth from the radiators, giving an illusion of summer to the peaceful, orderly room.

“But I can’t remember getting sick,” Barbara mused.

“It was that very night, the night Link and Joe Miller went down, it was while you were driving home in the car with Link that you had a sort of chill.”

“I don’t remember it at all!”

“Well, anyway, it was probably Mr. Miller who saved your life. Link was going to take you to his house—that would have been exciting, and confusing, naturally, telling his father all about it, sitting up half the night. But Mr. Miller—and it was a funny thing for him to do, too, for he’s such a quiet old fellow!—Mr. Miller told Link that he didn’t like the chill at all. Much better to get you right into good care. It was only about ten o’clock, you know, Christmas Eve. So Link took you to the hospital, and then went for Dr. Bonner and told him you’d had a shock and a chill.”

Amy shook her head, shuddering.

“By that time, I imagine, you were all off,” she resumed, turning a little pale. “Link says you called him ‘Barry,’ and seemed to think that you were going to New York. Just feverish, maybe. But the minute they got you in here they put you into bed, and Dr. Bonner came, and Ward.”

“Ward? Was he here?”

“That was a part of the whole mix-up, Babs. Ward and I had come up that very day to surprise his family and spend Christmas with them. We were going down to see you on Christmas Day. Ward’s to be here, now, with Dr. Bonner. I wrote you all that.

“They got you up to the surgery that night,” Amy added, after a silence, in which she had smiled down at Kate, and Barbara, lying weak, sweet, and utterly at ease among her pillows, had smiled at both. “And then, on the twenty-ninth, something went wrong and they had to operate again. And that—” Amy finished, with a great breath, and a desperate glance heavenward—“that was the time we thought it was all up!”

“I haven’t the faintest recollection of it,” Barbara said, frowning faintly, narrowing her eyes, trying to remember it.

Nothing but vague shadows returned. She seemed able to recall infinite fatigue, and a thick, smothered sensation of being hurt, suffocated, held down, and hot pains. And the bewildering wheeling of day and night, day and night, with the eternal fretted sense that they were not easing her agony. And then sweeping, draining, sinking weakness upon weakness. . . .

“Don’t think about it, Barberry Bush!” Amy pleaded, watching her uneasily.

“Not for awhile,” she agreed, shutting her eyes. And after awhile Amy was gone—and day was gone—and night was gone—and the queer circle recommenced again.

Presently she began to feel anchors beneath her, to talk with her nurses, to smile appreciatively at her trays. One day Link Mackenzie came in, with a box of white violets from the Mackenzie garden—no other garden in town had quite such violets. They were snowy, rough balls, like popcorn, the scent of them drifted through the orderly white room. Barbara’s thin, languid hand lay happily among the wet, jointed stems.

“They feel like the spring, Link.”

“Well, spring’s due in a few weeks now.”

“I can’t believe it. Any mustard yet?”

“Mustard all over everywhere. And acacia in bud down our drive, and iris commencing—all out the Mountain Charlie road the place is blue with iris.”

“I always love this time.” But he saw the shadow back of the beautiful eyes that grew so dreamy. She was remembering days when she and Barry hunted down the iris and the acacia, and came home from river walks weary and dirty, laden with delicate fragrant blooms. And although Link could not exactly place her thoughts, he knew where they must be.

“Link dear,” she said, her voice clear and tender in the silence, “some day I’m going to—to thank you. But it makes me cry, now.”

She smiled at him, and he smiled back, a little consciously. The fingers of her nearest hand were in his, he rubbed his thumb gently to and fro, across them.

“That’d be silly.”

“I know. I cry so easily, now!” And she made her word good by blinking blue eyes that suddenly brimmed.

“That’s just weakness,” Link said encouragingly.

“I know. But I seem to stay weak so long! That was Christmas Eve—our birthday. And now it’s almost February—it’ll be February to-morrow.” She lay still, two tears on her cheeks.

“Link, would he have killed us? Slinder, I mean.”

“No, I don’t think so. You’re so strong, Barbara, that, even if he hadn’t been drunk, you’d have been a match for him.”

“No woman,” she said thoughtfully, “ever thinks she’s a match for a man.”

“Yes, but you would have done it for Kate.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I might have done it for Kate.”

“Shut your eyes, Barbara. It would make a good deal of character for me in this hospital if you’d just go to sleep.”

She did shut them, but not before a delicious crinkle of laughter met his own; there was a half smile on her white face as she lay there, peaceful and still, her left hand touching the violets, her right still safe in Link’s fingers.

The white room was very still; the spring sunshine had moved away from the window, but Link could see tree-tops outside, already enamelled in scarlet tips, and stirring gently in the spring wind.

He looked at Barbara, lying back, with eyes closed, the umber shadow of her rich, thick lashes falling on her thin cheeks. The top of her blue pajamas buttoned with a Chinese cord and frog, her beautiful throat was bare, and the loosened rings of her coppery hair lay like little drakes’-tails of bright wire against her white forehead.

Link looked at her for a long time; he imagined the mouth smiling, speaking, the eyes looking at him. He watched her breast rise and fall evenly, with the quiet beating of her heart.

Once she opened her eyes quite widely in faint alarm, and looked anxiously about her. But immediately she saw Link, patiently sitting beside her, and with a child’s confident look she dropped her shadowed, blue-veined lids again.

“What a good sport she is!” Link thought affectionately. She had had a hard fight and she was winning. He liked to think that he had been important to the victory.

Barbara had come back to life with one fixed conviction, and it was one he naturally shared, and one that all Cottonwood shared. Barbara Atherton had had an awfully close call, down there on that God-forsaken ranch of the Du Spains, and if it had not been for Link Mackenzie’s providential arrival at the critical moment, she might not be alive to-day.

The entire town was praising Link. Link had brought her up to the hospital, Link had summoned the doctors, Link had magnificently made himself responsible for everything. Nothing half-hearted about his way of doing things!

“Heavens, what a friend!” said nurses and doctors, smiling and shaking admiring heads. “Well, I guess this girl owes you her life, Link,” said the doctor.

Amy carried on the chorus.

“Barbara, you’d die at Link Mackenzie! He’s simply determined that you’re going to get well, and that you’re not to worry.”

“He’s perfectly wonderful. But that’s Link; he does everything like that,” Barbara said languidly, smiling.

Her first outings were in Link’s roadster. Carefully bundled, she sat beside him on the low front seat and cried for joy because the bridal wreath and mock orange were beginning to bloom. Her first dreamy inquiries into ways and means were answered, once and for all, by Link.

“Barbara, I’ll tell you what I’ve done. I’ve paid everything, on the nail, and kept a most careful account——”

“You have kept an account?” she interrupted, raising blue eyes and tightening the fingers that lay in his.

“Every cent.”

“You’re a wonderful brother to have, Link.” She quite innocently thought of him so; she could not praise him enough, talk about him enough. “I’ve always known that Link was the kindest person alive,” she told Marianne, upon the occasion of Marianne’s first call, “but you have to be in trouble to know exactly how important kindness is!”

“Don’t you?” said Marianne. “And Link has a sort of complex, now, upon leaving no stone unturned in the matter of your getting well,” she added. “He wants to talk to everybody about transfusions and anæsthetics.”

“I suppose so!” Barbara said, with an indulgent smile. “I don’t know how Barry and I can ever repay him!” she went on simply. Marianne shot her a quick suspicious glance. Was Barbara fencing?

But there was only a convalescent child’s wearied, contented smile upon Barbara’s white face, and Marianne had to concede that she was not yet strong enough to see life as the world of Cottonwood saw it.

Barry! Cottonwood had small faith in anything he was going to do. But Marianne couldn’t tell Barbara that.

No one spoke to her about Barry. But one day, after she left the hospital, she faced the subject courageously with Amy.

It was a wet, warm day, with soft rains spattering on the new lilac leaves and making coffee-coloured rivers along the curbs. Amy lived in the home of the senior Duffys, now; she and Ward had the whole upper floor to themselves. Barbara and Kate were with them.

Ward’s mother had an orphaned grandson of four to raise, and that meant that Kate had a companion. The elder Mrs. Duffy was a gentle, simple woman, always busy with front parlour curtains, or lemon meringue pies in a very dream of an old-fashioned kitchen. So Amy and Barbara could murmur on upstairs uninterruptedly for hours, and it was in those hours of rest and content that Barbara quite tangibly felt her heart begin to heal.

Amy, busy with baby clothes, would take the rocker. Barbara would lie stretched upon the old walnut bed, sometimes with Kate moored in the circle of her arm. Through the dormer

windows the high foliage of the pear and maple trees moved in the sweet spring breezes, and the rain drummed softly on the roof.

“Somebody wired Barry that first night I was taken ill, I suppose?” Barbara asked one day.

“No, we couldn’t,” Amy answered in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice. “Nobody knew exactly how to reach him, you see. That was Christmas Eve, and we couldn’t get anything out of you, you were too sick. And by the day after Christmas you were so well that everything seemed to be going too nicely to scare him. But it was two days before New Year’s that the fever came back.”

“I don’t remember that time in there at all!”

“No, I know you don’t. You simply lay there, like a log—oh, good heavens, what days for us all!” Amy said, with a shudder. “We wired New York then, to an address we found on a letter, down at the ranch, but we found out later Barry never got that wire. That day, and the next, and New Year’s Day, they simply didn’t give us any hope at all—it was the most frightful thing I ever lived through! And then a note came for you from Barry, giving a New York address, and we could write. But by that time the worst was over.”

There was a silence, during which all the things Amy dared not say hung almost audibly in the air. Barbara lay musing, one hand under her cheek.

“He never should have left you,” Amy said, against her own will, after awhile.

Barbara raised conscious eyes to her sister’s, and nodded slightly.

“No, of course not!” she conceded quickly, uneasily. “Although, of course, he couldn’t know that Slinder and all the rest of it would happen,” she added.

“He knew you weren’t well,” Amy had to say, in spite of herself.

“Yes, I know. But having a baby isn’t really being *sick*,” Barbara argued, a faintly anxious expression in her eyes as she watched Amy’s face.

Amy was afraid of exciting her, and only offered a soothing:

“Barry never was like anyone else, anyway!”

“No,” Barbara agreed eagerly, a little colour creeping into the cheeks that had been pale so long. “He wouldn’t see it—see doing a thing like that, the way any other man would!”

“Barbara,” Amy asked, after a pause, “were you happy?”

“Happy?” the other woman echoed, genuinely surprised.

“Yes—I mean with Barry, I mean in your marriage.”

“Well, yes, I guess so.” Barbara hesitated, laughed a little puzzled laugh. “I think so,” she answered. “We were frightfully poor, of course,” she reminded her sister, “and life—down there at the ranch—wasn’t easy, in lots of ways. No bath, and no electric light or telephone or gas—nothing of that sort!”

“I know,” Amy said simply. And Barbara suspected from her tone that she had not only considered all the details, and their bearing upon the present situation, but had discussed them with the immediate family circle.

“Barry and I didn’t quarrel, after the first few months,” Barbara resumed, “but he—he’s excitable and unreasonable sometimes. And having another baby coming along so promptly made it—” she hesitated—“made it quite a problem!” she finished mildly.

Amy began to stitch the hem in a soft little flannel skirt. She did not speak.

“I think the real disappointment—if that isn’t too strong a word—in my marriage, to me,” Barbara presently resumed, “was the discovery that marriage isn’t fair to the woman. The burden of the whole thing falls on her, she’s the one that has to make the money do, keep the home comfortable, brace the man through all his troubles and worries, and bear the children.

I'll never—” her voice dropped into silence, and she lay still for a minute, looking dreamily out of the dormer window, to the plummy tree-tops moving in the wind—“I'll never feel quite the same about life,” she said.

“All married life isn't like that!” Amy told her loyally. Barbara moved her eyes to her sister's face and smiled.

“I suppose not,” she agreed. And she did not speak again.

They gave her Barry's letters; one sent to Amy in the beginning of her illness, two brief notes for Barbara herself. His play had a chance, there were important decisions to be awaited in New York, but of course he would come if her health demanded it and if they thought it best. However, unless it was urgent, this would be a bad time to break away.

Her languid hand dropped them; they interested her no longer. The spring was creeping warm and green and fragrant over Cottonwood. She was better every day, stronger every day. A strange confidence and serenity possessed her; her father found her much older, much more silent and gentle and wise than he had ever supposed the wild and enthusiastic and impulsive Barberry Bush could grow to be in twice her years.

When Amy and Ward took possession of their own home, Barbara and Kate and Professor Atherton would continue to board at Mrs. Duffy's. There was no particular thrill in it, there was no mad excitement and surprise, but it all worked out with sensible ease. Nobody criticized or asked awkward questions. Barbara Atherton's husband was in New York, and she and her father and little girl were at the Duffys', that was all.

The school was delighted to welcome her back; she had always been a good teacher, and she was a better teacher now. Looking at her own life from a detached point of view, Barbara had to admit that there was nothing sensational about it all.

Occasionally, she had bitter storms of tears to fight, when the tragedy of the whole disillusioning experience seemed to tear at her heart, when the memories of Barry, and their young love, their jokes and labours on the old ranch together, their talks by the fire, and the icy nights when they consulted anxiously over the baby's basket, were almost more than she could bear. But these times grew less frequent, as the weeks wore on, and as she came to realize how much her content and health meant to those about her, and how little they cared for her secret shame and suffering as long as she could bear them well.

She might feel strangely alone, strangely independent and apathetic, as she rearranged her whole scheme, yet there was an odd satisfaction in knowing herself equal to the demand.

“I've promised to finish out this term at school, Link,” she said to him one afternoon, when they were walking slowly to his house, for some croquet. “But if Barry's play really does go on this spring, and does well at all, probably Kate and I'll go East as soon as the hot weather is over.”

“And should you be glad to go?” the man asked, after a pause.

“Well—under certain circumstances, yes. But, of course, I have infinitely less responsibility here,” Barbara answered.

“You love him, don't you?” Link asked simply, with a disarming smile.

She could smile back, unoffended.

“I'm his wife.”

“Yes, I know.” He ended on a discontented note, and Barbara laughed. “It seems to me you're awfully brave about all this, Barberry Bush,” Link added a little awkwardly, after a pause.

“Only because I’m taking it day by day,” she answered, with a faint little frown as she tried to put her thought into words. “I try not to worry about what may happen or may not!”

The man glanced at her sidewise, as she moved along beside him, through the wide, tree-shaded streets of Cottonwood’s aristocratic quarter. The old-fashioned homes on either side were lost in immense plantations of pepper and locust and elm trees, the natural California oaks spread magnificent branching arms over the lawns and rose gardens. Everywhere was stately beauty and early summer peace; sunshine, mottled with tree shadows, fell in blots and bars on the striped awnings, lawn-sprinklers sent a cool swishing sound through the still, fragrant air.

Barbara wore a much-washed white cotton frock, and the small shabby blue hat that had formed a part of her wedding costume. But her coppery hair was full of golden glints, her flawless skin was touched on the high cheekbones with apricot bloom, and her blue eyes shone with a new gravity, with a soberer happiness that accentuated their beauty. Whatever her costume, there was a distinction, a certain reserve and grace about her now that she had not had as a girl, and the man who walked beside her was conscious of it to an extent that made him feel strangely young and humble when he was with her.

“Your father put the mortgage on his house,” he reproached her.

“He had to, Link. We couldn’t go on owing you all that money forever.”

“Forever! There was no hurry.”

She laughed indifferently.

“As if you hadn’t done enough! The mortgage doesn’t worry Dad, you know, and it makes me feel a million times easier. I didn’t want the whole town to think that Link Mackenzie had paid all my bills.”

Link sniffed contemptuously.

“As if it mattered what the town thinks!”

“Well,” Barbara said temperately, after a moment’s thought, “I think it matters what the town thinks. And as for what I owe you, in other ways than dollars and cents,” she added, with a little emotion, “there’ll never be any computing—or any repaying *that*.”

She could say these things quite simply, smile at him with all her ardent, grateful soul in her eyes. From the troubled stormy years of her wifehood and motherhood, through the fiery bath of desperate illness, she had emerged with the purified, innocent vision of a child.

“My opinion is,” said old Mrs. Duffy to her son’s wife, “my honest opinion, Amy, is that Barb’ry hasn’t ever been in love in her life.”

“Well,” Amy conceded, “perhaps you’re right. She was a funny sort of girl—like a boy, with all the boys. I don’t believe she ever really waked up, to—well, to love, until after she was married.”

“I don’t know’s she did then,” said the older woman shrewdly. “Barry du Spain was a great one for po’try, and runnin’ around on picnics and playin’ games, but that ain’t love, Amy—don’t touch them pickles, child, they’re li’ble to make ye sick! No, she’s just a little girl, for all she’s so sensible. And the Lord stand by,” Mrs. Duffy added, forming rolls from spongy dough, with expert fingers, “the Lord stand by if ever Mr. Link Mackenzie plays alarm clock!”

Amy’s eyes narrowed, brightened, she caught a quick breath.

“She could get a divorce, I suppose?” she said, in a whisper.

“That wouldn’t do her much good, the way Link’s folks hold,” Mrs. Duffy said. “Old Major Tom wouldn’t stand for that!”

“I don’t believe Barbara would, either,” Amy added.

“No, don’t know’s she would,” Mrs. Duffy agreed.

“But what a mess!” Amy burst out suddenly, “what a waste, not to have had her like Link in the beginning! Think of the fun, Barbara as Mrs. Mackenzie. She’d be so wonderful—she’d do it so well! And now the greatest misfortune that could happen would be to have her fall in love with him!”

“Well, they ain’t the only folks in town that have made a mess of it,” Mrs. Duffy said significantly.

“No, I suppose not.” But Amy sighed heavily. “What she’ll *do*,” she went on resentfully, “is follow Barry to New York, and live through freezing winters and broiling summers on a fourth floor somewhere, having a baby every year, and letting him treat her like a doormat!”

“She ain’t the first, Amy. If she thinks he needs her, she’ll stick!” the older woman predicted. And Amy, staring gloomily into space, by silence gave consent.

CHAPTER XX

The weeks began to slide by, and Barbara, pursuing her serene way, grew rosier and stronger. Sometimes Link joined them all at the Duffys' comfortable supper table, sharing canned corn and tea biscuit with the rest, carrying Kate upstairs for Barbara, when Kate collapsed into slumber in her chair. Sometimes he joined Barbara and Amy and Ward for a Sunday drive, or got tickets for them all for a concert or movie. A thousand little intimacies sprang up between him and Barry du Spain's wife.

He came to know Barbara's various frocks, would praise the dotted swiss, recommend that she carry her blue coat. He would telephone to ask if Kate's sniffles had amounted to anything, to ask Barbara to tell her father there was an article about spiders in the new *Scientific World*. Barbara knew how he liked his tea, now, and Link knew that she hated gum and cigar smoke and saxophones, and loved little bags of jelly beans, and crossword puzzles, and—above all—croquet.

It was the foolish old game that brought the first real colour back to her cheeks, and the first ring of her own peculiar excitement and enthusiasm to her voice. She loved to play, and she played vigorously and well. Almost every Saturday afternoon, during the balmy days of April and May, when the fruit blossoms came out in a flood, and the locusts wore their tassels, and the bridal wreath foamed like a snowy fountain at the foot of the lawn, there was croquet at the Mackenzies.

When Link's father came out, to stand planted squarely upon his sturdy old legs, watching the game, smiling at her dash and mettle, it was with a child's pleasure and pride that she smiled back at him. She was not a woman now, and a woman with a strange history and position in the eyes of the town. She was again an eager, hot-faced, breathless little girl, pushing her coppery hair off a damp forehead, running over the green grass, fanning herself with her hat while she watched the others play.

And when Link himself looked at her, she saw nothing unusual in his glance, even though all the others did. She did not know that her slim straight figure in its shabby cottons, with its blazing head, was the centre of the whole scene. Sometimes they all saw him hesitate and flush, happily and confusedly and self-consciously, when he spoke to her, and sometimes they heard, what she never heard, his tone linger as if he would have liked to add "you darling!" to the commonest phrase, to "Your turn, Barbara," or "You'd better make a wicket," when it was said to her. A thousand times her utter unconsciousness, her serious childish dependence on him, checked him from some revelation unanalyzed even in his own heart, and held back the words he had never dreamed he wanted to say.

Often, in the spring mornings, when she was teaching her dozen of small restless children, he would stop at the school for a few minutes of casual talk with Barbara. Often, when she had gone back to Mrs. Duffy's in the early afternoon, for her late luncheon in the kitchen, and her rediscovery of Kate, changing every day, and every day a delicious surprise, Link would come in, perhaps only for five minutes, but usually with a plan, a message from Lucy, a letter from Margaret, now in Europe, a book, or some trifle for Kate.

If Barbara had any errand, there was Link's car for her use. If she must somehow get a chair or a trunk or an armful of books or a newly ironed frock from the senior Duffy homestead to that of the doctor son, Link was eager to be of use.

He was very quiet, entirely inexacting; his squarely built figure, in the comfortable loose tweeds he wore, his fine, keen, homely face, with its sunburned hard cheeks and gray eyes, came to be a sort of comforting, unfailing prop and background to her life. Sometimes he saw her at a disadvantage, worried about money, tired, despondent; and being a woman, she knew it. But the next time they met, when she was rested, groomed, confident again, she would know that he was no less friendly, that perhaps indeed he liked her better for the memory of the tear-stained cheeks and disordered hair, when she had had to turn to him for advice.

Now and then he said to her cheerfully and casually:

“Any news from Barry?”

And she would have to answer, with a little stain of brighter colour in her face, and with a courageous, level look from unsmiling eyes:

“Not a word.”

Presently they two could talk of Barry, a privilege Barbara enjoyed with no other person in the world. Link was lenient, interested without being violently prejudiced, and generous.

“Queer boy, Barry,” he would comment mildly.

“That’s exactly what he is,” Barbara would agree. “Amy and my father can’t see it. But he’s a queer boy.”

“Well, you know him, Barbara. What do you suppose’ll be the next move?”

She would wrinkle her clear forehead, bring to meet his look the candid blue of her beautiful eyes.

“Link, I haven’t the remotest idea! Sometimes I think that if his play succeeds he’ll want us to come on. Sometimes I think that he has completely forgotten us. My only job is to go straight ahead and make what life I can for myself and the baby.

“And I surely have already made the most wonderful friend any woman ever had,” Barbara might add, in her own thoughts, gratefully and affectionately.

Link never made her self-conscious, never said to her a word that the whole world might not hear. But every one of the lazy spring days entrenched him a little more deeply in her life.

He came to know every phase of her existence; he knew which of the kindergarten children she found tractable and lovable, which ones were difficult and unfriendly. For his benefit she quoted, or even impersonated, their mothers. He knew her problems: the question of Kate’s nap, the shabbiness of the coat that had to be lined as soon as the weather was warm enough to permit her to spare it. It was Link’s pleased proud glance that made her know that she had made no mistake in her spring hat, the small white hat that was pulled down so far and so firmly on her blazing hair.

Closer, closer, closer they came. There was no flirtation about it, now, no quarrels or misunderstandings or doubts such as lovers know. But there was a continual strengthening and tightening of the bond of affection and confidence between a strong and determined man and a lovely and lonely woman.

They did not always talk when they were together. Sometimes Barbara, on the front seat of his car beside him, with Kate in her lap, would be silent for happy half hours together. Sometimes, when others were talking, she would merely raise her fringed blue eyes, and let her amused or surprised or significant look meet Link’s for a second, before she lowered her lids again without comment.

She could say to him reproachfully: “You were wrong there, Link. You acted too hastily about that committee meeting,” without angering him. Or Link might comment, “You were all

off, last night, Barbara. Didn't look like yourself and didn't act like yourself. What was the matter?"

It made no difference. The only thing that mattered now was that they should not miss a few moments' chat, miss communication on one score or another every twenty-four hours.

And day after day after day Link appeared at the school, at the house, at Amy's, quiet, square-built, friendly, concerned.

"Listen, Barbara, Tilly says she thinks macaroni with some sort of goo all over it would be fine for Sunday supper, after the croquet."

"You mean in place of the salad?"

"Well, she says so."

"Well, let's try it. Oh, and, Link——"

He would turn back.

"Link, I'm going to shop with Amy this afternoon. She's in the throes of curtaining."

"What time'll you be through?"

"About five, I guess. She's going to have Kate at her house, and we're going to have some sort of pick-up supper there. She hasn't any cook yet, you know, only Anna, for the baby."

"Well, I'll telephone Ward. Maybe I'll get an invitation."

He was quite simple, quite frank about it. He would get his invitation, and come naturally and unembarrassedly into Amy's new kitchen, never making any fuss about Babs, as Amy commented to Ward, but never willing to be anywhere but in Babs's immediate neighbourhood.

"It's my impression," said Amy, "that he'll get her so crazy about him that after awhile she'll go through a divorce to marry him."

And Ward, pursing his lips, considering perhaps for the first time the advantage of having a sister-in-law who was the richest woman in town, conceded that perhaps she was right.

"I don't think they suspect it. I know she doesn't; she's just generally pleased to have things going well and Link so friendly," Amy added shrewdly. "The point of the whole thing will come when Barbara suddenly realizes that she's absolutely bound to Barry and that she's madly in love with Link."

"You think she is in love with him, Amy?"

"Well, all ready to be. Good gracious, Ward, how could any woman help it!"

The gossiping old women of Cottonwood, rocking on porches, when the sweet, dragging afternoons of spring came, commented merely that it was a pity Barbara Atherton had made her market quite so promptly.

"She ain't the kind that chucks the father of her baby out to marry a rich feller," they predicted.

"Looks more to me like he did the chucking out," perhaps a fairer critic would suggest.

"'Twouldn't matter. Old Tom Mackenzie ain't the kind that stands for any monkeying with married women! Look how he carried on when Link was so took up with Marianne Scott, awhile back," said the side-porch club interestedly.

But all they saw was that Link Mackenzie and Barbara Atherton were continually in each other's company, if not often together alone, and that Barbara grew stronger and handsomer every minute, coming and going serenely between her school classes and the Duffys' old-fashioned mansard house, spending Saturday and Sunday afternoons on the Mackenzie lawn, quite innocently, openly, simply, and speaking to Link, and glancing at Link, with all the quiet, proud affection and confidence of a little sister.

Among them all, none watched the situation with a keener, tenser interest than did Marianne Scott. To the world's eye, Marianne was merely that dashing and handsome young woman cousin of Inez Wilson to whom Link Mackenzie had been so unmistakably attentive last year. She had mildly shocked the community by the announcements of her status as a married and as a divorced woman in indecently rapid sequence, she was discussed between funerals, births, marriages, scandals, murders, wills, and other town events with a certain inexhaustible relish.

"She had her mouth all set for Link," said the gossips, "but he fooled her. If Tom Mackenzie didn't have a finger in the pie, I miss my guess!"

Perhaps Marianne had missed her guess, too. But if she had, she gave no sign of confusion or vexation. She was as beautiful, as brilliant as before, as Fox and Harry were willing to testify.

Marianne drifted about her aunt's house all morning long, just as before, trailing her beautiful dressing gowns behind her. She dressed at about noon, pecked at her lunch, walked to the country club to play golf or bridge, gossiped over teacups between five and six, and usually could count upon a male escort, or a male caller, for the evenings.

But Link Mackenzie didn't come any more to the French windows of the dining room in the spring mornings to gossip with her. And when she went dawdling her pretty way to the Mackenzies' lawn in the afternoons, she was merely one—and no longer the important one—of the group. She told Inez, somewhat disgustedly, that they had all apparently grown childish. Croquet! She was sick of croquet.

There was great shouting, animated disputes.

"Well, let Barbara play with Fox, then, and Harry take Lucy!"

"Aw, *no*—Barbara and Fox are much too strong!"

"Why, you just said——"

"Yes, but gosh——"

"Well, now, listen here—listen here——"

"Link says he'll score. Why not let——"

"Oh, but let's play it this way, and then the other combination can challenge the winners!"

"We'll be playing ring-around-a-rosy next week, I suppose," Marianne said once patiently. But they only laughed at her.

Link was always glad to have her play, but she played poorly and did not care for what she regarded as a "nursery governess sort of game." Link always asked her to dance with him at entertainments, just as Fox and Joe and Harry did. Marianne was quite as certainly included as Barbara in everything the group planned. It wasn't that.

It was that everything seemed changed, since Barbara's illness; Link especially, and Barbara most of all. They had been youngsters, only a year or two ago, awkward and simple, awed by the elegance and sophistication of the city visitor.

Now, with Marianne just the same, still assuming her dashing little costumes, still reddening her lips and combing her dark mane into a black satin cap, now they had somehow left her behind. Barbara, newly grave and thin and wise, was a woman, with a little girl to raise. Link had become quite inaccessible, behind a mask of easy pleasantness and friendliness. Marianne's little overtures, pressures of the hand and artful raising of the eyes, made him tremble and grow clumsy and husky of voice no longer. He did not see them at all.

No, he was intent upon those crazy wickets and pins, and appeared to live only for the excitement of picnic baskets and foolish muddy childish walks that began nowhere and ended

nowhere and involved climbing a lot of fences and hills.

And yet he was so incomparably eligible! A little simple, perhaps, but Marianne was the sort of woman who liked a man simple. And his wife, when he should take a wife, would certainly have the cream of whatever Cottonwood could offer. Mrs. T. Lincoln Mackenzie, Junior. Marianne had often visualized the card in her dreams, and she liked the look of it.

Suddenly, she became tremendously confidential and sympathetic and intimate with Link, apparently dropping any personal interests she had to discuss his own nearer problems with him. She gleaned details of his business, and surprised him with intelligent comment upon real estate deals and the hardware market. She spoke with concern of Lucy, Lucy's husband and children, of old Tom, travelling in Europe, and young Margaret who was his companion.

And presently, with infinite tact and caution, she could speak of Barbara.

"Hasn't she been quite extraordinary about making the best of a bad bargain, Link?" she began one day.

"Whom do you mean?" He was carefully winding trout flies. His tone was not encouraging.

"Barbara, of course."

"Oh, yes—of course. Yes. She's wonderful."

"She seems so much more a—well, a person, even in her misfortunes," Marianne ventured, "than she did a few years ago."

"She was only a kid, really, when she married."

"Wasn't she twenty-two?"

"Well, yes. But I mean in the way she thought and acted."

They were on the lawn, waiting for the crowd to gather on a summery May afternoon. The sunshine streamed down placidly upon the green stretch of the turf, peonies and rose bushes made bright blots of colour against the great plantations of firs and oaks, maples and peppers, at the end of the enormous garden. Behind them, the gracious plain lines of the brick house rose squarely; pleasant green light and shadow fell through the encompassing tree branches against the white walls and the wide-opened windows.

"I admire her tremendously. She's made her bargain, and she'll stick to it," Marianne said enthusiastically, trying to get him started.

But he merely shrugged.

"She'd die for the people she loves," he offered.

Marianne felt oddly discomfited.

"Do you think she loves *him*?" she asked sharply.

"Barry? Well," Link answered drily and disapprovingly, "she's his wife. Isn't it—the usual thing?"

"Oh, come now, Link, he's treated her like a dog!" Marianne protested impatiently.

Link disengaged a thread of wiry catgut with gentle big fingers. He did not look up.

"Perhaps she doesn't think so," he said coldly, displeased.

"Well, she must think so, if she has any sense at all," Marianne answered briskly, feeling that she was carrying the heavier end of the conversation in the face of a strong east wind.

The man said nothing. Marianne, looking at him with quick, birdlike flashes of irritation, puzzlement, and displeasure, wondered if he really didn't know that he was getting a frightful "crush" on Barbara Atherton? Everyone else knew it. Was one to believe that when he and Barbara were together they talked only of Kate's new kiddy-car and the difficulty of making the middle wicket?

She sighed imperceptibly and changed her course.

“Link, do you like this outfit?” She indicated her costume.

“It’s perfectly wonderful. Barbara said it looked like the cover of a May magazine,” he answered cordially, laughing.

“What’s funny?”

“You. The swimming suits, and caps, and parasols and capes you get into, and the riding togs,” Link said, grinning.

“I don’t care. I adore hunting pink,” Marianne, who was irreproachably clad for the sort of hunt so dear to the British Christmas pictorials, said sulkily.

“Well, you look grand in it, anyway,” Link conceded indifferently. And then suddenly his face changed, and his gray eyes lightened with an odd, flickering light, and he got to his feet, spilling bait can and rod and reel to the grass.

A tall woman had come through the gate in the hedge, in a group of other women, and of children.

She wore a much-washed white shirt to-day, and an old striped skirt; there was a soft little white hat pulled down over her eyes. She was smiling her new, quiet smile, blinking through a sparkling film of bright, coppery hair, and she had the rompered Kate under her arm, dangling limply, like a marionette.

Coming toward them with the others, she did not speak directly to Link; she sat down on the grass beside Marianne’s chair, and if her eyes flickered to his, it was but for a second. She took a flat-mouthed little bottle from her sleeveless sweater pocket and groped in the thick grass until she found three white pebbles. The three pebbles, clinking, went into the bottle, and Barbara put it down before the expectant Kate.

Kate shivered from head to foot with sheer electric ecstasy. She poured the pebbles out, and gathered them up in a little damp soft hand with a shriek of excitement. Her mother now brought her full attention to the company for the first time.

“Barbara, I love your shirt!” Marianne said. “Who made it?”

“Who made it! It’s one of Barry’s old ones,” Barbara answered, laughing.

“Barbara, you’ll play? Will you take on Lucy? It’s a question of ladies against gents.”

“Well, it depends on what gents, doesn’t it, Lucy? Why don’t you have a bush leaguer’s game? Fox, you play.”

She found a large wire nail in the grass and gave it seriously to Kate.

“How’s Inez—is she coming over, Marianne?”

“Pretty well. Yes, she and Miss Wickam will probably wander down when it’s a little cooler.”

“How’s Amy’s baby, Barbara?”

“Normal, this morning. She telephoned me before breakfast. Ward says he’s all right again. Does everyone know that Rita is going to announce it Monday?”

“No! After all the fuss. . . .”

And then Link, from the stake. “Barbara, will you score? Score until someone else comes, anyway. Blue dead on black.”

“Blue dead on black.” She dragged herself up, shook grass from her skirt, manipulated the wooden pegs at the score board, and settled in a deep chair beside it. The comfortable murmur, interspersed with shouts of advice and tense moments of watching, began again.

The sun shone warmly down on the old Mackenzie house, and the trees moved heavy green branches high overhead. Heliotrope and stock sent sturdy sweet odours into the still

afternoon air; it was almost six o'clock when the sinking sun began to send streamers of mealy light through the lower branches of the trees, and the bees shot by on last hurried errands, and Sanders, the gardener, could start water sprays whirling in the shadier corners.

The water splashed and dripped, the sunshine left the lawn and mounted to the topmost foliage of the elms and pear trees. It spread itself upon them in gold layers of light, and seemed to drip through them and touch the branches beneath with dots of mellow glory.

The second game ended, and Link flung himself exhausted on the grass, his face buried, the thin shirt sticking to his broad shoulders in little darker circles. Harry, infuriated at the outcome, was taking fancy shots from stake to stake. Fox was discussing theatricals; why couldn't they get up a regular play and make a pile of money for something—the hospital or something?

“We could black up, you know.”

“Oh, horror!” from Marianne.

And from Barbara a murmur to Link, when he presently rolled over on his back and looked at her smilingly.

“Happy days! And it's so good to be happy.”

Too happy, perhaps. It was presently for Marianne to make them less so. She began quite simply with Barbara, on a certain Sunday morning when a dozen of the more enterprising had had an early swim on the Casino beach and were waiting for breakfast in the Casino restaurant.

“This is fun!” said Rita Roach, who, sitting next to her promised husband, was in that happy mood when a girl finds anything and everything fun. “Let's do it every Sunday!”

“It's gorgeous, but I don't know when I can do it again,” Barbara confessed frankly. “Kate always sleeps until eight, but this morning she was awake at six. I really thought I couldn't come. However, by a special dispensation, Mrs. Duffy was in the kitchen when I went downstairs and she took Kate off my hands. Only I couldn't count on that again!”

Marianne Scott looked up obliquely, smiling.

“Sure that's the reason, Barbara?” she asked, in an undertone.

Barbara was puzzled.

“Perfectly sure. Why?” she asked, warned by Marianne's tone that something unpleasant was afoot.

“Well,” Marianne said, with an apologetic air of withdrawing, “I happened to hear you quarrelling with Link a few seconds ago, that was all.”

“Quarrelling?” Barbara frowned, remembering, and laughed suddenly. “Oh, he paid my check for breakfast, and he's always doing it,” she complained easily. “I didn't know you had to pay in advance, here. And when the man came to me he merely said, ‘The gentleman paid.’ So I told Link he mustn't, any more.”

“Here comes the coffee!” Link himself, returning from a voyage of financial adjustment, exclaimed thankfully. He slipped into his chair beside Barbara. “Sugar, somebody!” he said. “Harry, help yourself to cream, and pass it up this way.”

Barbara could not speak to Marianne again unobserved for several minutes. Then, with a faint frown between her eyes, she went back to the interrupted topic.

“Marianne, what would my quarrelling with Link have to do with my not coming swimming?” she demanded blankly.

“Nothing,” Marianne answered innocently.

“Wait a minute,” said Barbara. “Omelette here,” she said capably to the waiter, “poached eggs there—omelette here, too, scrambled to that gentleman—that’s right.

“Then what *did* you mean?” she persisted to Marianne, when the meal was in progress again.

“Nothing,” Marianne said, with a mysterious smile.

“Well, but you must have meant *something*. Why make such a mystery of it?”

“It went through my mind—it’s nothing,” Marianne said hastily and lightly, “but it went through my mind that you might feel that it was a little better not to have Link—but if you *didn’t* feel it, and Link likes to do it,” Marianne added, with an air of dismissing the subject sensibly, “and you like to have him do it, why not?”

Barbara looked at her steadily a moment, and the blood crept into her face. Her attitude toward Link during these strange yet not unhappy months of readjustment had been growing only steadily deeper and keener. She had never seen in it anything to fear, and she did not fear now. But she did not like the look in Marianne’s eyes.

“Link has been the best friend any woman ever had,” she said bravely and simply. She had said it a thousand times in the last few months. But this morning, for the first time, it had a strange and different ring.

“Exactly!” Marianne answered, laughing with just a touch of patronage in her laughter. “And the question is whether—of course, I was married myself, and I know exactly how one feels!—but still the question is whether it’s quite wise.”

“You mean,” Barbara asked straightforwardly, between two bites of biscuit, “you mean that Barry might object?”

Marianne smiled.

“My dear Barbara, anybody might object!” she answered sharply. “Do wake up—do grow up—do come to your senses!” Marianne added with good-natured impatience.

Barbara continued to look at her gravely, almost with fright in her blue eyes.

“But everyone knows—but everyone knows how marvellous—how extraordinary he’s been to me!” she said very faintly. And she sent Link’s back, half turned toward her, as he disputed animatedly the question of trout flies with Harry Poett, an appealing glance. “Everyone has said that I would have died if it hadn’t been for Link!” she offered, with the first hint of doubt, of uneasiness, in her tone.

“Exactly. And now everyone is saying something else, too,” Marianne told her pleasantly.

The blood that had receded from Barbara’s face rushed back, and her eyes sparkled dangerously.

“What do you mean, Marianne?”

“Well, simply, that an attractive man and a married woman can’t have an extremely close friendship, and be seen together all the time, and—well, breakfast checks and all the rest of it—without starting comment; you know that as well as I do!” Marianne answered defiantly.

Barbara tried to laugh, but it was a shaky laugh.

“I don’t think anything could spoil my gratitude and my—my affection for Link,” she said quietly. “I can’t take you seriously, Marianne. If you heard any gossip of that sort, it was from a pretty poor source. Why, everyone knows I’m married!”

“*Exactly*,” Marianne commented in a triumphant tone. “That’s all the trouble.”

“Barbara, listen here—what do you think . . .”

The others broke in, and conversation became general. Barbara was left with only an unpleasant impression that somehow Marianne had gotten the best of her in a disagreeable

talk. What had started it, anyway, and what a fool she was to care what Marianne Scott thought, or said she thought, which was quite a different affair.

Link spun her home to the Duffy house, and she went into the dining room in time to gossip over his coffee with her father and feed Kate her cereal. She hugged Kate warmly to her, kissing the silky mop that was under her chin, as the child's head darted about.

The sore feeling grew. How intensely offensive Marianne had been at breakfast—Marianne could be like that. She was a little cat, sometimes. No wonder! Wiser to forget it.

But she could not dismiss it. The sense of having been misjudged and affronted remained. Barbara carried the baby upstairs, put her down in her pen—Link's gift—she hated to be reminded of Link this morning—and made the bed carefully, ordering and airing the room, straightening and dusting.

Kate went down on the same bed, with a pillow and rug, for her nap; Barbara crossed the hall to her father's room and performed for it the same homely duties. Her father was always down on the side porch on Sunday mornings, reading the paper and napping.

It was outrageous that a man and a woman could not have a simple platonic friendship without provoking a lot of silly cackle! Who cared what the town was saying, anyway—vile old women who must put the very worst construction upon everything, if they were to find congenial topics for conversation at all!

Maddening that such folk had power to annoy one, to make one's heart beat faster, and the uncomfortable colour flush one's cheeks.

Barbara put on her blue linen gown after luncheon, an old gown, but her best for summer wear, and pulled down the white hat. She would go over to Amy's when Kate awakened; Amy's indignation would be soothing to her own.

Amy and Ward were in the garden, when she arrived, taking pictures of the baby. The nurse held him, Amy held him, Ward held him, blinking and collapsing and pulpy in his christening robe. They photographed him against a background of pinked and tasselled peonies, against the snowball bush, against the grape arbour. They photographed him with his little cousin Kate.

When this excitement was over, and Ward had gone off on a hospital call, Barbara could speak to her sister confidentially.

"We all got up at half-past six this morning, and went swimming, and had breakfast at the Casino."

"Fun!" Amy commented absent-mindedly, rolling little curls of lint from the baby's tiny palms.

"Yes, it was fun. Afterward Link took me home—Dad had just come downstairs. Amy," Barbara added, in a suddenly conscious tone, "Marianne said a funny thing at breakfast—she's awfully catty sometimes, anyway. And I suppose she might be jealous, I don't know. But she hinted, as if it were a sort of joke, you know—that Link and I—— This is so silly!"

Barbara stopped short, laughing, her face scarlet. To her surprise, Amy merely looked up at her thoughtfully and said:

"Well, Barbara, you must have been perfectly aware of *that!*"

The other woman, staring with slightly narrowed eyes, spoke coldly:

"Aware of what?"

"That—that Link likes you. That he probably hopes you—that if anything happened to Barry——" Amy floundered in her turn.

Barbara was looking at her fixedly, her full lower lip caught against her teeth.

“What on earth *could* happen to Barry?” she demanded stonily.

“Nothing, I suppose,” Amy murmured meekly.

“You mean you think Link and I have been going too far?” Barbara pursued.

Amy said hastily and placatingly: “I don’t! But of course people do notice it.”

“I see I have done Link a terrible injury,” Barbara said quietly, after a pause. Amy felt frightened.

“Oh, now, Barbara, don’t be silly!” she pleaded. “You and Link always have been friends, and he saved your life and stood by you when your own husband didn’t, and everyone knows it! Lots of people,” Amy added, with candour, “think you ought to divorce Barry—really they do.”

“And marry Link?” Barbara asked, at white heat.

“They don’t say that.”

Barbara bit her lip, shrugged, and laughed mirthlessly and lightly.

“Really, I wish people would mind their own affairs,” she said patiently, freezingly.

“Well, they see you always together, and you *are* beautiful, Babs, and naturally they put their own construction on it!” Amy explained.

“Oh, naturally they would,” Barbara exclaimed darkly, in a passion. “Probably they have me his mistress by this time!” she added, largely to counter-annoy Amy, who loathed vulgar conversation.

Amy said nothing; she frowned faintly at young Atherton Duffy, who was asleep in her lap. And presently Barbara began to talk with great good-humour and animation about entirely unrelated subjects.

But the day was spoiled. Her original plan had been to wander over to the Mackenzie garden in the middle of the long afternoon and at least see what was going on. Now she could not do so quite simply.

She loitered at Amy’s, and when Ward got back they all took a long drive. It seemed perfectly senseless to Barbara to take the front seat, which Amy was still quite sufficiently the bride to covet, and where Barbara suspected Ward very much wanted Amy to be, and to ramble along the country roads, saying inanely “There’s an adorable new place!” or “Those must have been the Grants, Ward, who yelled at us!”

What was Link doing? Were they all on the side lawn? Had he been wondering what kept her away? Hopes that Ward would think of the Mackenzie garden, too, and would stop there on his way home, suddenly possessed her. But, after that most disconcerting and ridiculous talk with Amy, only an hour or two earlier, she could not well suggest it.

They got out in Santa Cruz for refreshments, lemonades sipped in a big Casino humming with visitors and flies and trembling with bright sea lights. Hundreds on the beach, sleeping among newspapers and sand. Vulgar day, Sunday, upon which even nice persons looked common.

Back at the car, she insisted that Amy take her rightful place on the driver’s seat, and Amy, perhaps feeling that she had been sufficiently generous, consented without protest. Barbara sat alone in the back, except for Kate, who was entertaining and alert, in her lap.

“Ward, it’s after four. Suppose we stop in at your father’s and make a little call and maybe stay for supper?”

“I kind of hate to take the baby home so late, Amy.”

“But it’s going to be boiling to-night!”

They turned in at the familiar Duffy gate. Barbara's father and Ward's, with two other elderly men, were playing bridge on the shady north porch, Ward's mother was dozing in a litter of scattered Sunday newspapers in the old-fashioned parlour.

To Barbara there was a stupid, glaring ugliness over the world. Sunday afternoon at half-past four was a detestable hour. The house seemed shabbier than usual and smelled hot and dry; odours of the two-o'clock chicken and stewed peaches lingered in the air.

Why wasn't she content to sit on the side lawn with Amy and Mrs. Duffy and the babies and various other members of the household, and join the lazy, pleasant gossip of the afternoon? There was nothing the matter; the world was going on happily enough.

But a sense of wrong, loss, and discontent possessed her. She felt herself drawn as by ropes to the Mackenzie house. To get in touch with Link—she hadn't seen him since he brought her home that morning.

Barbara smiled at the absurdity of it! To have seen him eight hours ago, and yet to be longing so hungrily to see him again.

Well, but all this silly talk by Marianne and Amy had intervened, Barbara reflected. This new preposterous suggestion had seemed to change everything, to put them in a new relationship, to set a different, and a very much heightened value upon Link's kindly, brotherly companionship.

Anyway, whatever the cause, she was burning, possessed, in misery until she might see him. She glanced at Mrs. Duffy's comfortable, double-chinned face, glanced at Amy, displaying the charms of her baby, glanced beyond to the porch where the men were playing, and sighed exhaustedly.

The moments dragged. It was unthinkable that the rest of the evening, supertime, bedtime, would go by, without any interruption that meant her friend, that meant Link coming back!

Presently she slowly went from the side lawn to the house with Kate on her shoulder. Kate had her bath at five, in the old wood-encased tin tub on the second floor. Barbara knelt on the floor beside the tub, steadying the small wet body with firm and capable fingers. As a finish, the big sponge was always squeezed on the top of Kate's tangled curls, and sent drops down on her clean-washed, red, satiny cheeks, and as an absolute last concession, Kate might swim.

Barbara swept her up and down in the water three times, swept her dripping and contorting into the big towel, and retired with her to the dim window to rub her dry.

The bathroom had once been a hall bedroom; it had a wide window seat. While Barbara rubbed her, and spread her small soft hands to dry them carefully, finger by finger, Kate peered interestedly down into the garden.

A strip of garden, a path, a belt of trees and shrubs, and beyond, the country-town sidewalk with Sunday strollers walking up and down in the twilight. The sun had almost gone, but there was plenty of clear shadowless illumination over the deserted chairs on the lawn, with an escaped sheet of newspaper here and there. There was a picket fence beyond the marguerite bushes. On the top of the big trees, red sunlight enamelled the leaves, the air was warm and soft and tired after the hot day. A smell of boiling asparagus rose from the kitchen, there was the slamming of a door; Mrs. Duffy's voice called to her Chinese boy cook: "Wing, bring up the cheese!"

Barbara could imagine that cheese, pale and tasteless, cut into small, uninteresting squares, flanked with soda crackers. They always had sardines, cheese, and soda crackers on Sunday

nights, canned beans and tomato salad. They always had hot tea, and the dim, warm, shabby dining room would presently be scented strongly with it.

“Doggy?” said Kate hopefully, peering into the dusk.

“No doggies!” Barbara made a swooping movement toward the floor, gathered up Kate’s soft little soggy raiment, and mounted to the mansard floor, the damp and fragrant baby upon her arm.

Their bedroom, close under the roof, was dim, warm, and stuffy. Barbara looped the stiff curtains at the low, darkening windows, but no air came in. She buttoned Kate into sleepers that were getting too small; when Kate stretched they tightened upon her from head to foot, and stitches creaked threateningly.

Kate sat watching the door suspiciously from her crib, while Barbara flew downstairs for toast, apple sauce, and the indispensable bottle. The toast was consumed in strips, the spoonfuls of apple sauce regularly interspersed between bites. When the plate and saucer were empty, Barbara produced the warm bottle unexpectedly, and Kate seized it in both hands and mouth, and rolled upon it like a little jungle beast upon its prey.

Barbara gave her a parting kiss in the warm back of the neck, and a parting pat on the back of the too-snug sleepers, and, with a glance at window and door, went slowly downstairs again.

There was dimness everywhere, indoors, for the evening was too warm and airless to make the lights welcome. There were murmuring forms, unrecognizable, on the front steps, bulky shadows in the long drawing room. The odour of asparagus ruled every other scent now.

Street lights were lighted, bright pools of radiance sinking down through the trees. Moths and crickets spun into the glare, and marauding cats, creeping below, caught the adventurers as they fell. Motor cars came up the street, sent a second’s blinding wheel of brilliance across the garden, and were gone. Groups of men and girls, walking by, scattered little trills of laughter and talk into the dark.

The word “hot” ruled the hour. “Hot!” said the shadows in the parlour as Barbara went by. “Hot!” said the shadows on the steps. “Hot!” shouted the pedestrians on the sidewalk good-naturedly.

Mrs. Duffy, flushed and perspiring, came out to the porch and announced supper. They all went in, perhaps sixteen in all, but they seemed a great many, to-night. The dining room was lighted, the bright whiteness was far hotter than the shadowy dusk outside.

Pickles and soda crackers, cheese and sardines—Barbara could not eat. The hot asparagus languished in disorderly points and stalks upon a wide field of buttered toast. Tea scented the room.

Amy sat next her mother-in-law, then Ward, then Barbara, then Professor Atherton. They passed sugar and cream and crackers and pickles.

Where was Link—Link—Link? The question was hammering at her temples, she felt breathless, restless, thirsty, agitated almost beyond endurance.

“Dad, I’m not hungry. I think I’ll go sit on the steps.”

“Babs, as you go, will you peek into the library and take a look at the baby?” This was Amy.

Amy’s baby beautifully asleep on the leather couch. Barbara’s baby beautifully asleep upstairs in her crib. Barbara went out to the dark porch, lighted only by a dull red glimmer from the hall light, and by the occasional flashes of motor-car lamps from the street, and sat on the top steps, and stared into warm, motionless velvet blackness.

She had not been there five minutes when a big low car stopped at the gate, and a squarely built man in white flannels jumped out of it.

Barbara's heart turned upside down, plunged, and began to race at double speed. The man, coming rapidly toward the house, was almost upon her when she intercepted him with the single word, "Link!"

"Oh, hello!" he answered in a matter-of-fact tone. He jammed his driving gloves in his side pockets, and sat down on the step beside her. "Say, where were you this afternoon?" he demanded.

Barbara, to her own concern and disgust, found that she could not answer easily. She laughed, faintly and pointlessly, and spread the fingers of her hand lightly over his own, as it rested on the step beside her.

Link turned toward her; she could only see the glint of his eyes in the dark, but she knew from his tone that he was smiling. "Hello, Babs!" he said again, pleased.

All the disappointment and distress of the day faded away from her, and life was right again. She had been a fool to let them frighten her; everything was quite as it ought to be.

"Had your supper?" asked Link.

"Yes. We have it early here—at six."

"We were going to have a sort of supper at the house, but Tilly sent out a lot of sandwiches at about five," Link explained, "and Fox had a date, and Marianne's sick in bed with a headache, and so I called the supper off. You couldn't go for a drive?"

"Well—Amy's here——" she hesitated. But she had risen to her feet. "Just a few minutes," she stipulated.

Link took the shore road; the soft black air, rushing at them, was cool and salt and scented with kelp and sea. The sky was low, infinitely dark, there was neither moon nor stars. Barbara's heart, as she sat silent and utterly content in her seat beside him, was singing with joy. Nothing else mattered; they were together again.

They were out of the town and running briskly along the shelf of roadway that ran above the sea. Link stopped the car on the point, and they got out and walked to the edge of the cliff.

Other cars had passed them as they came. But they were alone here. The sea murmured busily, rolling shells with little clinking sounds on the rocky points below them. The great breathing surface of the invisible ocean, like some black monster close to the shore, panted in the dark. Beneath their feet the turf was spongy and rough, and yet friendly and sweet-scented and near.

Barbara stood straight and slim, her head thrown back, her soft hair bared, her closed eyes lifted to the infinite bigness above her.

"Link—I'm living, for the first time to-day!"

He was standing close beside her, now she heard him laugh oddly, close to her ear, as he said:

"Why did you put your hand on mine, on the porch back there?"

Barbara began to tremble. She felt frightened, yet it was a happy sort of fright that ran all through her body, and made her conscious of her coppery hair, with the night air gently blowing it to and fro, and of her toes, and of her slim straight body, and of her lifted throat.

"I don't know," she said, in a low voice. And she stood waiting. She shut her eyes again.

There was a silence, and Link did not move. Then suddenly he turned and walked the hundred feet of the springy, odorous turf that lay between them and the car, and as he walked he said quietly over his shoulder:

“We’d better go back.”

It was in that instant that the change came, and she recognized it, and accepted it. They did not speak all the four miles home, and when Barbara got out at the Duffys’ gate, she instantly joined the dark figures on the steps, and did not ask Link to delay.

“Who’s here?” she asked, stumbling between them. “Amy? Who’s this? Dad?”

And she sat down on the steps close to her father and laid her cheek against his sleeve, and locked both hands about his arm.

“Hello, darling,” her father said affectionately. “Aren’t you going to get out, Link?” he called.

“I’ve got to get along home,” Link said, from the darkness. But almost immediately he did get out of his car, and came up the path, as he had come an hour ago, and sat with them for a little while. But Barbara did not address him directly, nor did he speak to her.

CHAPTER XXI

And that was the beginning of strange days between them. The happy confidence and unthinking intimacy were gone, and although they saw each other almost every day, it was with such constraint, such silences and evasions as to make all the world seem entirely different from the old order.

Barbara had gone upstairs that Sunday night in a mood of breathless exaltation and excitement. Never in her life had her heart beat so fast, never before had she felt the same sense of thrilling confusion of the senses.

She had seemed to fly, to be lifted on wings, she had laughed quiveringly as she stopped to kiss Kate, and adjust the baby for the night; she had stepped about the unlighted room almost as if dancing.

And once in her cotton pajamas, the pajamas that Amy had bought for her on that January day when those who watched her had seen that she was to turn the first hard corner toward convalescence, still she could not get into bed and go to sleep.

Instead, she settled herself at the window sill, and reviewed, with a fluttering sort of joy, the events of the long day. Up in the dawn, and downstairs in the kitchen with Kate. Then to the Casino, and down the hard, white sand of the beach with running bare feet, and into the cold salty shock of the ocean. Link beside her, holding her wet hand in his own, steadying her before the hooped rush of the waves.

Coffee, in the early morning quiet and shimmering lights of the big Casino restaurant. Her hair wet, her face glowing from cold water, the scent of the coffee and rolls delicious in the warm air.

And then Marianne, and Marianne's innuendoes—Barbara, looking down through the pear branches at the dark night, smiled to herself, remembering it. Marianne had thought—and Amy, later, had thought——

She went through the hours of the day. That insufferable drive with Ward and Amy, when life had seemed so boring and so squalid. That hot, odorous supper hour in the dining room, with the crackers and sardines and pickles. And then the porch step in the dark, and Link stopping his car at the gate.

Her hand over his. Her hand over his. And, later, his gruff laugh in the sweet, sedge-scented grass of the cliff, beside the dark, invisible sea, and his query: "Babs, why did you put your hand on mine?"

The street was very still now, between the tall lines of the elms and locusts; Barbara could hear a fig drop to the grass from the Carters' big tree, next door. Pools of light still hung high up in the darkness above the street and dripped in white fingers through the heavy foliage. The night was hot.

In the morning, reason returned coldly, and Barbara was wearied and impatient, and felt life strangely flat. She forced herself through her duties before leaving the house, and let Kate toddle beside her to the kindergarten, stopping for a moment at Amy's gate, always with a sense of fatigue and annoyance and disappointment.

Link did not telephone or come to the school this morning and the hours dragged. The last week of school began badly, the children were restless and excited over vacation plans, and the heat, continuing, exhausted teachers as well as pupils.

Barbara somehow dragged herself through it and took Kate home at two. Any messages or notes or telephone calls? she asked, entering Mrs. Duffy's kitchen. None.

None. She tried to sew, to write, to concentrate upon the end-of-the-term bills for pencils and books. No use. A painful restlessness possessed her, a misery of indecision and of hunger undefined.

She took Kate and walked to Amy's house. Amy's dining-room chairs had at last arrived, and she was tremendously excited. The baby was asleep on the side porch under his netting, and Amy and the nurse were dragging furniture about.

Barbara assisted for awhile, hardly hearing what the other women were saying, or appreciating in the least what they were doing, and then, with a confused remark about looking at summer hats, she went on downtown.

It was not far; the Duffy homestead was close to the shopping district, and Ward had bought a home even farther in, as suitable for a general practitioner. Kate had only a few blocks to toddle, excited and adventurous blocks, before they were among the stores, with big plate-glass windows on both sides of the street, and the languid desultory buying and selling of a hot June afternoon pursuing its lazy course between drygoods shop and drug store, market and grocery.

As usual there were farmers' spattered and shabby cars parked outside of the big hardware shop of "Mackenzie & Company." Its shining windows, flashing with steel and brass, sent metallic lights into the burning afternoon. A plough, touched up on its dark green paint with flecks and lines of scarlet, and lettered in gold, rested permanently on the sidewalk. Its ground flanges, silver and gray, twinkled under the shade of the striped awning.

Miss Skinner, the milliner, was putting a yellow hat into a window already embellished by several hats, and by a card saying, "Choice, two dollars." At the fruit stand streamers of red, white, and blue ribbon, attached to an electric fan, and flying in long jerks over the display of cherries and apricots, caught Kate's fancy, and she shouted at them approvingly. Cars, fumbling their way from the county road, between the red-and-blue gas station, and the green-and-white gas station, discovered the neat sign, "To the Casino and beach," and turned left in a line. The summer had begun.

Barbara bought Kate a little blue chambray bonnet for a dollar, and Kate was delighted. And coming out of the hat shop, she saw Link, on the sidewalk, a few feet away.

They stood talking for a few minutes. Link picked up the baby, well wearied by now, and held her on his big, square shoulder.

He was very pale; Barbara felt her own breath and colour betray her. He had on his brown homespun suit with the belt and pleats. She loved every thread of it; he had often worn it when he came to see her in the hospital.

"Any croquet to-day?" Barbara asked, looking up from under the brim of the old white hat, that was still, in its gipsyish smallness and sauciness, intensely becoming to the ruffled copper hair and blue eyes.

"Oh, yes, I guess so, at about five."

"Then Kate and I'll wander over that way."

"I won't be there, but probably Lucy and Otis and Fox will," Link said casually.

The day went dark for Barbara.

"You won't!"

"I don't think so. I don't believe I can make it." He glanced, frowning, at his wrist watch.

"What time is it?" Barbara asked, chilled by his manner.

He had to look again, briefly, and flushing.

“About four.”

“Well, do try to make it if you can,” Barbara urged.

There was an awkward pause, absolutely new in their relationship.

“I just had a wire from my father,” said Link then. “He and Margaret got into New York yesterday. They’re coming straight home. Margaret is bringing a beau, as far as I can make out.”

“I thought they were going to be abroad all summer.” She and Link were talking formally, politely, like persons just introduced.

“No, he says that they’re coming right home.” He took the wire from his pocket, and opened it, and read it again, seriously nodding his head.

And she saw that he was embarrassed, ill at ease, that he wanted the conversation to be over.

“Anything doing to-night, Link?” she suggested. Her colour heightened at her taking what was usually his query.

A pause. He kissed the soft little hand that Kate had plastered squarely over his mouth, and answered without meeting Barbara’s eye.

“Not that I know of.”

In another minute she and Kate were wandering along the sidewalk again, and Barbara felt more utterly at a loss than before, felt sick and forlorn. She had been longing just to see Link and to hear his voice, and now she had seen him and heard him, and the situation was worse than ever.

That evening, she took her father to an illustrated lecture, “The Truth About Europe.” Link was there, everyone was there, it was a social as well as an intellectual event.

But although Link smiled and waved at them, and presently came up for a few good-natured, confidential words about the trouble they were having with the moving-picture machine, his attentions stopped there, and left Barbara actually sick with excitement and distress.

That night was cooler, and she lighted her night lamp at about eleven o’clock, when she went upstairs to bed, and went about the room brushing her web of shining, coppery hair, fussing with creams, soaps, and powders, frowning as the bright little curved blades of the scissors clipped at her hands.

Finally she gave a deep sigh.

“He’s quite right!” she said aloud. “I must be crazy, and he’s quite right!”

And she went to the bureau and picked up the silver framed picture of Barry that was her only likeness of him.

It had been enlarged from a fortunate snapshot taken by Fox fully three years ago. He had been photographed down on the rocks at the shore below the Casino, his white shirt open at the throat, his beautiful dark head bare, one of his splendidly formed legs, in becoming knickers, raised and resting on a boulder, and the laughter she knew so well lighting his handsome face and showing the even line of his white, strong teeth.

The rich wave of black hair was blown and ruffled by the wind, tossed backward, and his big arms were crossed and folded, as if by his attitude he defied the world.

Those same knickers she had darned for him more than once, that same shirt, with its romantic open collar, was the one she wore now when she played croquet. And that smile——

“Whelks, Barberry Bush! Let’s go home and cook ourselves a little mess of whelks!”

She could hear him. Her spoiled, petulant, whimsical, unmanageable boy. The young husband who had taken her so carelessly and ruined her life—or at least done his best to ruin her life—without either compunction or regret.

The long, wet days on the ranch came back to her; they seemed like a dream. The rain falling, the fireplace smoking, the sea fuming on the lonely shore. She remembered the ice-cold pantry, with the mashed turnips and scraped, splintery pot roast on a plate, the smells of mice and damp and rotting wood. The fatigues, the despairs. . . .

Sometimes he had been cruelly unkind to her, he had been selfish and unreasonable always. Yet she was his wife. She was married. It was not for her to find a kinder man, a gentler, wiser man, and to give that man her heart.

The irrevocable agony of it smote her for the first time. She could never be anything to Link Mackenzie, nor he to her. Their happy time of playing, of trusting and seeking each other innocently and openly, under the eyes of all Cottonwood, was over.

Barbara put the picture carefully back on the bureau and went to her bed. She knelt down beside Kate and covered her face with her hands. And suddenly sobs shook her, her throat choked with them, and her face was wet.

She saw Link again on the day that Margaret and his father got home from long journeying. It was a cold, foggy midsummer afternoon, and there were fires lighted in the big Mackenzie mansion.

Link's father had refused to have any part in the general festival of welcome, and when, in the early afternoon, neighbours and friends began to flock in, he disappeared to visit the office.

But Lucy was there, excited and happy, and Margaret, tall and pretty in a Paris frock; Marianne was there, and Fox, Harry, Joe, Otis, and all the boys.

Barbara came late with Amy. She was pale, but all the more beautiful for that; she wore a thin, lacy black dress that was new, and a small black hat, pulled down over the shining glory of her hair.

Link saw her the instant she entered by the open hall doorway, and came to be in her neighbourhood. She and Margaret kissed each other, and there was the usual chatter of questions and replies and laughter.

Then Link came up, and she gave him her hand without smiling, and raised her sombre blue eyes.

"I like your dress so much, Barbara," he said in an odd tone, clearing his throat.

"Isn't it pretty? It was an old one of Mrs. Duffy's, and she was going to send it to the rummage sale, so I bought it. Mrs. Ossler and I made it over."

There seemed nothing else to say. They stood silent in the big noisy room, Barbara smiling faintly and wistfully up at him from under the brim of the little black hat, Link's eyes devouring her hungrily. The perfume of summer flowers was in the air, the delicate scent of tea. Barbara, slim in her soft draperies of lace, baffled, heartsick, presently turned away.

He followed her. They were in the deserted hall together.

"Could you come down to the stable and see the car? I turned my old one in—the new one's just come," Link suggested.

"I'd love to." Her voice was faint and troubled like that of a child.

They went out the side door and across the fog-shrouded garden. The sun, only a heavy yellowed patch on the sky toward the west, was burning warmly through the fog; there was an

unearthly silence in the veiled side garden. The currants' green cottony leaves and the long murderous tentacles of the blackberry vines were alike beaded in crystal.

Far away there was the droning of foghorns down by the shore. Short barks from motor cars sounded now and then in the street, and were still. Link had run the new car into the old carriage house, adjoining the stable; there was no place for it in the garage.

He and Barbara walked through the stable into the pleasantly clear, shadowless big room, swept clean and bare, smelling of oats and harness oil. Old saddles and harnesses were hung on pegs along a wall; handsome old checked buggy robes, folded neatly, hung on a rail. Hay still clung to the mangers, and grain filled all the cracks in the floor and lay in little furrows on the wooden steps that led up to the loft.

The carriage house and the stable were really one enormous building. Barbara lingered in the latter; there was something old-fashioned and sweet about the stable. Link's beautiful bay mare put her ears back, rolled a nervous white eye at them; the sorrel, his father's horse, continued to gnaw the sides of his box stall. A sudden hammering of frightened feet quieted as they came nearer the third horse, the big farm Percheron, who was fastened by a short bridle rope in a stall. The great convulsed flanks strained, and were still.

The fog, following them noiselessly like an enemy, crept to the very door, dissolved, merged itself back into the creamy white world behind it.

The man and the woman, standing still, regarded the new car attentively with eyes that saw it not at all.

Presently Link said:

"I suppose it's better—not to see—each other?"

Barbara trembled; she did not move her eyes from the shining red-and-black wheels.

"I think it is," she said, very low.

"For a long while, huh?" Link asked, clearing his throat.

"I think so."

The man tried to laugh hardily, and failed.

"I don't see why!" he exclaimed boldly.

Barbara was silent. After a long minute Link added:

"It's easy to say it." And in a resentful and bewildered tone he added: "I tell you I've been in hell this week!"

"It seems," began Barbara in a low tone, "that they have all been thinking that—well, that we were simple!"

Both were silent. A chicken, fussing and rustling in the hay, far upstairs, clucked angrily. The big yellowed teeth of the sorrel gnawed noisily in the stillness. The Percheron's heavy feet clattered again.

"These days, when I've not seen you, have shown me that—that perhaps we *were* simple," Link presently said.

He put his arms about her, her face was against the rough cloth of his suit, her hat was pushed back. Barbara had one instant of violent protest; it immediately subsided, and was forgotten.

Their lips were together, and she felt that he would draw out her very life in their first real kiss. Their hearts were beating madly now, and although Barbara was conscious that Link spoke occasionally, the words were so incoherent, mumbled against her bared hair, that she could distinguish among them only her name.

After a moment, she stood back from him, panting, and holding him off with a hand against his shoulder.

“I can’t help it, dear—I love you!” Link said, with an exultant laugh.

Barbara’s face was white, and there was a strained look in her eyes.

“You mustn’t tell me that, Link,” she whispered.

Link instantly grew sober and dropped his hands from her arms, by which he had been lightly pinioning her.

“No, I suppose not,” he agreed heavily. And there was a long silence. “But, Barbara—” he began again, awkwardly and timidly, following her a few irresolute steps—“you—you——?” He stopped.

“Yes, God help me!” she said in a whisper. And she put both hands over her face, and turned away.

“You won’t divorce him?” Link asked, after a silence, clearing his throat.

“He’s my husband,” Barbara said simply.

Link did not speak again. They went silently back to the house together.

There he saw her presently at the tea tray; Lucy relinquishing her post gladly, and Barbara beginning busily to pour. The lines of the black lace gown were exquisitely becoming to her slenderness and fairness; when she raised her face, under the new hat, there was all a child’s wistful, weary bewilderment stamped upon it.

Old Mrs. Bonner settled beside her, ready for endless cups of tea. Norah passed sandwiches; Fox Madison came out with somebody’s empty cup; the second was to be just like the first, please, with a little of everything. Yes, sugar, yes, cream, and, yes—awfully weak.

Link, unobserved, stood in the doorway, watching her. He watched the quick, slim hands, the lifted glance, the serious, questioning look that preceded her slow smile. Somebody considerably asked her if she wouldn’t like some tea herself, and she answered that of course she would.

She poured herself a cup. But he noticed that she did not taste it, did not seem to remember it again.

Presently she frowned faintly, and partly turning her head, looked straight at the doorway almost behind her where he was stationed, as if he had called her. And instantly the glorious colour flooded her white face, and the strange liquid brilliance of which he had caught just a glimpse, in the stable a few minutes ago, lighted her blue eyes.

Then, suddenly, she was gone. His attention left the tea table only for a few seconds, when someone came up to speak to him. But when he turned back, somebody else was pouring, and the chatter was that Barbara had just gone home with Amy.

Link acted, from this time on, according to no code. If he could have thought at all, he must have thought of his father, his faith, of Barbara’s bond to Barry du Spain. But he had long passed the state of being able to think.

He lived wrapped in the consciousness of Barbara, and in that alone. She was there, the slender woman with the coppery hair, there in the old Duffy house, walking to Amy’s, walking to school, and his one desire was to be near her always. Her little shabby hats, her simple frocks, her quiet, troubled glances and uneasy monosyllabic replies, were all he wanted. Nothing else was of any consequence, because nothing else existed.

One August evening, about two weeks after his father's return, he walked in Mrs. Duffy's garden with Barbara, and she asked him not to see her again. For the present, anyway.

"Other people do it," he pleaded.

"Get divorces? I know. But that would break my father's heart and probably kill your father. Don't let's talk about it."

"Barbara, they'd make an awful fuss for a little while. And then, when they saw how madly happy we were, they'd forgive us."

And after a silence, he added:

"You can't love me, or you wouldn't be able to be so cool."

To this Barbara countered presently:

"I'm the one who can't stand it. I can't eat—I don't sleep, I don't seem to be able to sleep. It's like—being burned alive."

"Barbara, I'll wait as long as you like—I'll be patient, you'll see. But in your heart you must know that it's going to be this way, that you and I are going to be married!"

"Link," she said gravely, "please don't talk so. I *am* married. It makes me feel so—common, to have you talking of divorce and marriage to me. There's something—disgusting about marrying one man, and then, in a few years, in less than a year after one has been living with him, cooking for him, worrying about his finances and anxious for his success—to be kissing another man!

"I'm not that sort. I can't see my way out of this at all, but I know your way isn't the right one. And I'm going to ask you—solemnly, as solemnly as I've asked anybody anything, in all my life, to try to help me."

He caught her to him, kissed her; he felt her unresisting in his arms. There was no response from the beautiful, fragrant lips.

"You make it very hard for me," she said simply, when she was free.

"Barbara, you are made of iron, I think!" Link muttered in despair.

After a long silence, she started walking slowly toward lights, voices, toward the porch.

"I have to be," she offered resolutely.

"Would you feel differently if we got in touch with Barry, if he didn't mind?"

"I've written Barry."

"You asked him if he would fight a divorce?"

"I asked him—to come home. No, Link," Barbara said more forcefully, with the new sternness that had developed in her so lately, "it's all clearer to me than to you—expiation, sticking it out, the need for facing the hardest thing there is to face. It's what I have to do. I've been weak in my life, and careless—perhaps my marriage was weakness and carelessness, I don't know. I know that there's a man to whom I and my child belong. I can't throw them both over just because he has disappointed me."

And, as if to confirm her words, from the house, black, tall, and squared with lighted windows against the warm summer sky, there came a voice:

"Mrs. du Spain! Bar'bry! Your baby's awake!"

She flitted from Link's side in the darkness. She was gone.

Her sheer, dogged courage astonished him. He knew she must be consumed with the need of him as he was of her. Yet she sought no occasion of meeting, and when by chance they did meet, she had steeled herself to a few brief, commonplace words, to utterly insignificant glances, and to almost the aspect of indifference. He saw that she was thinner, graver, that

there was always a hurt, puzzled look in her eyes, but she always protested to his different comments that she was well, she was fine, everything was going well with her.

Watching Cottonwood only noted that the friendship between them had cooled to mere acquaintance, and the local paper regularly predicted the return to town of Barry du Spain, whose *Napoleon Third* had been one of the artistic successes of New York's theatrical season. The word "artistic" was perhaps inserted to explain the fact that Barry's play had been performed but eight times, and had closed after exactly one week. The paper generally added that Mrs. du Spain and daughter Kate would probably return to New York with the playwright in the fall.

And Barbara allowed herself only one weakness. Sometimes, when she knew herself safe from observation, she walked past the Mackenzie house, and looked in upon its white brick magnificence, bowered in great trees, and thought of Link as a little boy there, and found, with her puzzled, thoughtful eyes, the windows of his big room. It came to be an almost daily need with her, this glimpse of the place that had known all his sheltered, happy life, and from whose wide halls and spacious rooms, smooth lawns and fragrant gardens, she was forever shut away.

And then, one morning, just before the one o'clock closing, he appeared in her schoolroom. His face was pale, but there was an odd light in it, and a strange shining in his eyes.

"Barbara," he said, coming to the desk, and ignoring the score of staring little children as if they did not exist, "don't let me frighten you. I've got news!"

She sent a quick glance toward Kate, contentedly marshalling weaving straws on a slate.

"Barry?" she whispered.

"He's all right—I've not heard anything of him, that is," Link said. "But suppose I told you that you are not married to him at all? Suppose I told you that you are not his wife?"

She looked at him with a faint frown, displeased. The room began to go around her.

"I'd say that you were crazy, that's all."

He caught her hands, there were tears on his cheeks.

"Barbara," he said, trying to smile, "it's true."

CHAPTER XXII

Not married to Barry? But what *nonsense*.

Barbara was frightened, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Link caught her hand tightly, reassuringly, and had hardly loosened his grip when she dismissed the children and went with him bewilderedly to the street. The whistles were shrilling one o'clock, it was a sunshiny autumn day, mild and hazy and sweet.

At the gate she hesitated, she spoke dazedly.

"Dad—I'll have to see Dad. He's at Amy's to-day, I think."

Link's car was at the school gate, but they left it there, and walked to Amy's, only around the corner. Barbara was breathing hard, her eyes looked bewildered. She did not speak.

Amy and her father were at the lunch table. Without preamble, Barbara, sitting down next to her father, and catching his hand, said, in the vague puzzled voice she had used before:

"Dad, Link just came up to school. It seems——"

She frowned and stopped, and Link, transferring Kate from his arm to a seat, and sitting down himself on Professor Atherton's other side, took up the story.

"I kind of scared Barbara, maybe. But I——" his voice broke upon an embarrassed and excited laugh—"I got hold of some news to-day that kind of knocked me flat!" he said.

"Barry?" Amy surmised swiftly, as Barbara had.

"Not Barry, no, although it has to do with Barry. Amy," Link interrupted himself to question suddenly, "you remember that clergyman, Hutchinson, who was here for awhile as assistant at St. Rita's?"

Amy looked at him, perplexed, looked at Barbara, who was anxiously studying her father's face as he received the news.

"Well, certainly," she admitted warily.

"It seems," Link burst out, "that he wasn't a clergyman at all!"

There was a moment of stupefied silence, then Amy said:

"Ward read in the paper, a night or two ago, that he'd been arrested for stealing or forgery or something in Oakland, but nothing was said of his not being really a clergyman."

Another pause. Kate crunched audibly on zwieback, the curtains at Amy's windows moved softly in the noon breeze. In the kitchen, Amy's new cook was furiously beating something with an egg whip.

"Why, then, Barbara," Amy pursued slowly, with a staring look, "you're not married!"

"That," Barbara agreed faintly, "is what Link says. What do you think, Dad?" she questioned.

The Professor rumbled his thinning hair. There was a pause.

"I don't know what to think, dear," Professor Atherton said. "This is a—this is a most extraordinary thing! Amy, where's Ward?"

"Oh, that's just what I was thinking!" Amy snatched the extension telephone that was never far from the doctor's elbow. She jiggled the receiver furiously, just as Ward's triple honk announced him, at the side gate, and beginning to be tremendously excited, flung the news at him hysterically as he came in. Ward dazedly listened as he took his rolled napkin out of its ring and fell upon his belated meal.

“Link saw in the paper that this man Hutchinson was arrested, and he telephoned to Oakland and got some information about it. This afternoon paper’s going to have the whole story—for he married several other couples besides Barbara and Barry—he married the little Prince girl, we went to that wedding, and he married——”

This was Amy. Link interrupted her; Barbara, very white, and clinging to her father’s arm, did not speak at all.

“I not only telephoned Oakland,” Link said, “but I went over to Judge Cobb’s office just now, and he looked it up for me. He says that the couples Hutchinson married are not married at all. And then, about an hour ago,” added Link, “I called the Oakland Chief of Police again, and he says there is no mistake about it, they have the man’s whole history; he never was ordained. It’s going to be a big scandal, and I just happened to get hold of it before the papers did.”

It was all like a confused dream to Barbara; Amy’s dining room, tomatoes and lettuce in the blue bowl, graham gems and blackberry pie, Dad looking so amazed and helpless over his cooling tea, Link flushed under his sunburn, eager, strangely talkative.

“I suppose they’ll all be married again as fast as they can,” she suggested, frowning, speaking for the first time.

“By golly, it’s funny, when you think of it that way!” Ward burst out boyishly with a grin. “I can see Mrs. Prince getting hold of Roy Cutter and Mary!”

Amy voiced the thought that was burning in all their hearts.

“But *you* won’t, Barbara?” she asked.

Barbara’s quiet look met hers, she moved her eyes to Kate, whose Uncle Ward was feeding her surreptitious tastes of chicken gravy.

“It makes her illegitimate,” Barbara said, still in the strange, lifeless, puzzled, mild voice she had used before.

No one answered, and presently she said herself what they were all eager to say.

“Not in any real sense, it doesn’t, of course. It would be ridiculous to worry about that!”

She sat silent, her elbow on the table, her chin cupped in her hand.

“One wonders what would be the *right* thing to do?” she asked suddenly.

“I don’t think you owe Barry du Spain much, Barberrry,” her father offered, in the silence.

“The extraordinary thing is,” Barbara answered, in a tone more like her old spirited voice than any she had used in months, “the extraordinary thing is that, if I’m not Barry’s wife, I’m —” she spread her hands in an eloquent gesture, arched her eyebrows—“I’m nothing!” she finished artlessly.

The others suddenly burst into shaken laughter, but it was to be observed that Link was pale, and his smile was strained. The look of fear and hope in his eyes made Amy’s motherly heart ache.

“Exactly!” said Ward.

Barbara mused, scowling faintly, her eyes very bright.

“Well, I’m not going to let myself think about it until I know, and I’m not going to talk about it!” she said, after another silence during which they all watched her expectantly. And, smiling at them all, suddenly face and mood changed, and the tears began to run down her face. Blindly, her arm crooked childishly over her face, she got up, and stumbled to her father’s chair, and sat on his knee, with her arms about his neck, her face buried on his shoulder, and her coppery hair touching his white hair. And he comforted her, holding the slender figure tightly, and half laughing and half scolding her as she sobbed.

“You mustn’t cry, Babs, it isn’t your fault!” Amy said, blinking away tears herself.

“I’m crying,” Barbara admitted, in a muffled voice, “for fear it isn’t true!” And at this there was laughter again.

But it was true, as the other “Hutchinson brides” found to their confusion. There was some good-natured laughter in the town as they and their partners hurried into legitimate wedlock, but for Barbara’s case a more respectful feeling prevailed. Everyone knew that she had been badly treated, and there was a general satisfaction that she did not have to abide by the consequences of her unfortunate marriage.

The matter of the annulment was simple; a mere putting on record the fact that there never had been a legal union. Barbara and her father and Judge Cobb settled it in fifteen minutes, and afterward, rather white and quiet, in spite of her unquestionable satisfaction in this unexpected turn of events, she and her father, Amy, and the babies took the car and went up the old Mesa Trail to the mountain-top, and spent a whole day there, talking and resting and planning for the time to come.

A strange day, a dreamy happy day, set between the hard months that bound her to Barry and the hour that would give her to Link. Barbara was silent and abstracted, but Amy could read aright the light of utter peace and content in her eyes.

The next morning she went again to Judge Cobb’s office and had a talk with him. And coming out, she walked to St. Rita’s, and discussed the whole matter, from beginning to end, with the pastor.

“You’re as free as air, my dear!” said the old man, who had known her from babyhood, and liked her.

“You mean *morally* free?” the girl asked anxiously. “We’ve had a child, you know, Barry and I. Wouldn’t that make one *obliged* to remarry the father?”

“Not necessarily. Marriages are sometimes annulled,” her advisor reminded her. “A marriage might be annulled because a girl was under age, for example. I don’t believe anyone would expect her to remarry the man, immediately it was legally possible. No, you’ve been the victim of a fraud, and as far as you’re concerned, you acted in good faith. Now that legally—for, mind you, this isn’t anything but a legal question—now that legally you are free, you’re not bound to do anything. The law would hold you tight enough if the fraud had broken the other way, you may be sure of that!”

And in conclusion he came to the door.

“Go into the church there and see the new altar,” he suggested. “And remember I’ll marry you to the best man in the parish the minute you say the word!”

Barbara went into the church and knelt down at the altar and cried. But they were tears of joy.

That night, Link came to see her, and she went away with him for an hour’s drive, in the summer darkness, in the new car. And again they left the car on the cliff and walked across the short, turfy grass above the sea, and sat staring out over the mysteriously moving waters.

There was a moon to-night, whitening the world, sending lacy shadows from the low mallow bushes and the beach grass; gulls, walking busily in the slow, creaming circles of the waves, were reflected in shallow shining water on the strand.

Barbara leaned against Link’s shoulder, their fingers were locked. She felt as if, after a turbulent voyage, she had made harbour at last. There was restfulness, there was deep, satisfying peace about being near him, about the grip of his big arm, and the sound of his pleasant, deep voice.

"I love you. You are the most wonderful woman in the world," he said.

"I love to hear you say so, Link."

They turned their faces together, but their kiss to-night was a child's kiss.

"Barbara, if you could know what it means to me—the thought of taking you home to our house, of having you always there!"

"And if you could know what it means to me to come!"

"I can't get over it, I'm dazed. Every little while I go back to a week ago, when I was half crazy, worrying, wondering——"

"I know." Her voice trailed off into an infinitely contented silence, and moonlight and the peeping of the gulls again held the cliff.

"Link, isn't it marvellous, the love of a man and a woman?" Barbara asked, after awhile.

"I was thinking of that. I was thinking of our breakfasting together—of Saturdays and Sundays, when everyone will come to us for croquet and supper. Always together, Barberrry! Imagine the runs in the car——" His voice thickened; he kissed the top of her hair.

"I can't believe that you and I are going to be married!"

"You're sure you're happy about it? You *do* love me?"

"Oh, Link, too much. How could I help it? You've stood by me in the very darkest hours of my life. I'd be dead, if it weren't for you. You're always in the back of all my thoughts—there's nothing else.

"Why, I've tried," Barbara began again after a pause, "I've tried my best to get interested in Dad, or Amy, or anything else, during these days when I thought I had to give you up—and it's no use! Every street corner means you, means the thought of your turning into it unexpectedly, and every shop you *might* be in, buying something. Every telephone call, or letter, or man walking along the sidewalk, has been you—until it's been somebody else!"

"Oh, my God," Link said, more in prayer than as an ejaculation, "you don't have to tell *me*!"

The sweetness, the softness and youth of her, rested against his shoulder, her satiny-smooth warm fingers were in his own; they talked, or they were silent, it was of no consequence. Life had brought them together; they were never to be separated again.

"When will you marry me, Barberrry?"

"Oh—I haven't got that far, even thinking. What about our birthday?"

"Our birthday! Christmas Eve! Good Lord, this is only August!"

"Our birthday has terrible memories, too," said Barbara's rich voice slowly, in the dark. "A year ago," she added, musing, "I was down at the hacienda, cooking and washing, and caring for the hens! And Barry was terribly—terribly unhappy, and that made me unhappy. It was raining—at about this time. Perhaps a little later. But how it rained and rained!"

"Well, if you think I'm going to wait for our birthday, you're mistaken!" Link said, cheerfully reverting to the previous topic.

"Why not right away? Why not a week from to-day? I want my wife."

The thought made her senses swim with a sort of heady sweetness, but her laugh protested.

"Link, I have to get—things."

"What things?"

"Oh, a dress, and shoes—Amy thinks you can't get decent shoes in Cottonwood, but I saw some beauties in Washington Street to-day."

“Did you, darling? And did you stop and think about being married in them?” Link asked, diverted.

“Well, I felt happy—I was walking home from church. And I did think of them, a little!” Barbara confessed.

“Well, if not a week—you mean that a month won’t really be enough time to get them in, Babs?”

“I mean that I’ll talk to Dad to-morrow, and to-morrow night, if you haven’t anything else to do, you might come in to supper, and have stewed tomatoes and brown betty, and we’ll talk about it.”

“Not more than a month,” he pleaded.

“Not more than a month,” she agreed. “But I can’t believe it,” she said again. “I can’t believe that I’ll be Mrs. Lincoln Mackenzie, charging things to you at shops, and having cards with your name on them.”

And over and over again in the days that followed she said to Amy or her father, or to Link again:

“I simply can’t believe it!”

Her own tremendously augmented importance was one of the things that dazed her. Cottonwood flocked to the Duffy house, presents and invitations flooded every mail. The shopkeepers were gracious, the old cashier of the Bank came out to the sidewalk to talk and laugh with the happily engaged pair, all the world smiled on Barbara du Spain—or Barbara Atherton, as the wedding license must read—and Link Mackenzie, whose wife she was so soon to be.

Link’s aunt sent her magnificent lace, her mother’s lace once, and all her silver. Inez dragged herself into clothes and shoes long enough to act as hostess at an engagement dinner. Lucy and Margaret were indefatigable.

But the attitude of Link’s father was, after all, the one element that gave Barbara keenest satisfaction. The old man had asked Link’s sweetheart, and her family, to dine with him, immediately upon the publication of the strange circumstances of her supposed first marriage.

They had all sat talking pleasantly and easily enough through the beginning of the rather imposing affair, but long before the chicken was served, Link knew his girl had won his father, and after that Barbara had her own way with him.

She made no visible effort; she was always quite simple, direct, and entirely natural with him; Link thought he had never seen her look so lovely as when her earnest, wistful blue eyes were turned upon his father, and her wide, radiant smile broke across her face, in answer to something his father had said. The dinner started harmoniously, it went well.

Afterward, anyone who knew old Major Tom might easily have interpreted his feelings. For beside the fire that evening, with Margaret on his knee, and Link balanced on the arm of Barbara’s chair opposite, he talked of his own early days in Cottonwood, and of the children’s mother, always, in him, a sign of felicity. Professor Atherton could remember when there was no High School, no Casino, no houses at all below Skinner’s Bridge. When he was courting Barbara’s mother at old Mrs. Bush’s home in River Street . . .

The conversation went back and forth comfortably, between the two old men, the younger members of the group listening in amusement and superiority. And to Barbara the whole evening seemed almost unendurably sweet. To be here in Link’s house, beside his father’s hearth, with her own father and sister sharing this wonderful hour of hospitality and

reminiscence, was to be more than merely happy; there was a dramatic, a thrilling, and a completely satisfying quality about it that she had never known in her life before.

Link had always been her friend, and of late years he had been oddly and steadily her champion and her confidant; she had known, without a word between them to express it, that Link cared for her happiness in a very special way.

Now she saw him in a different light, as the man who was within a few weeks to be her husband. And she saw in him a definiteness, a confidence, a protecting gentleness and tenderness that were quite new.

Every school day he came to get her at one o'clock. Sometimes then they went to the Duffys' house for lunch; more often to Link's house, where Barbara came to be quite at home among the tempered lights and shadows of the big dining room, where the family silver flashed at her solemnly, and where Norah went about noiselessly with platters of fried chicken and fluffy rolls. Now and then Lucy entertained them, in her doll's house across the road, all wicker furniture and chintz and bridal linens.

Afterward there was always some new and fascinating thing to do. If they were in the Mackenzie house, they might go upstairs and look at the big rooms that were being put in order for their occupancy.

The woodwork of the big doors and the deep old window sill was being painted creamy white; Barbara herself picked the orchid and gray curtains that were to hang at the high windows. All the furniture had been moved out, now, for paperers and painters; there were gently waving branches outside, and wide fresh breadth and space within.

She and Link, sometimes with Amy or Lucy, stepped over buckets and planks and stood looking at the damp walls, the fine old fireplaces, the enormous bathroom, all glass and tiles. They would speak to the workmen, debate, stand watching, with tireless fascination.

Below the windows the garden burned in motionless autumn glory; the trees were still in heavy leaf, but there were red-cheeked apples hidden now among the dusty, blue-gray leaves, and the air had the crystal clearness of the season's end.

And in the old house were the stir and excitement of a change. Link and Barbara were to have a big room on the second floor, over the south garden. Beyond their bath and dressing rooms was Kate's nursery, and beyond that a small sunny room just over the front door, a sewing room in the old days, but to be Kate's playroom now. And on the other side, facing east, and catching, through oak and elm leaves, the full flood of the morning sun, was a square wood-panelled room that would be a sort of upstairs living room and sitting room for the newly married pair.

This was enough, more than enough, for Barbara. She caught her breath when the realization came, in odd moments of clear vision, that all this was for her; the delicate papers, the fresh new hangings, the white doors and the window sills with their sunshine and their fragrance.

All the rest, too. For Link's father would spend some of his time in the East, when Margaret was married, and for the rest of the time would be his daughter-in-law's guest in his own home.

"We'll try it anyway, won't we, Barbara?" the old man asked, with his shrewd, keen glance. And Barbara, all roses, answered in her fluttered, happy voice: "Oh, we might *love* it!"

So that was arranged, and she could explore the whole place with Link, with the strange, shaken feeling that some day she would be its mistress. Her bright, pretty blue eyes, shy and astonished and admiring, fell upon the tapestries and brocades, the mahogany and rugs and oil

paintings of the old-fashioned stately drawing rooms, the billiard room and library, the wide, clean pantries flashing with glass and silver, the china closet with the Doulton and the Haviland ranged in rows.

In the kitchen, Tilly Smith, who had known her all her life, greeted her affectionately. Tilly displayed her wide range, shining black, with the fire twinkling under the graduated rings of the stove plates, her new white gas stove, her cabinet, sink, and storerooms, her ice box—a little room in itself—and the small room where the maids and men had their meals.

Tilly's daughter was to be Kate's nurse, an arrangement that made Barbara want to laugh. It seemed ridiculous that her wild gipsy baby should have a maid to herself.

"I guess Mr. Link didn't see this coming!" said Tilly, with relish. "You in here as Misses Mackenzie!"

Barbara flushed deliciously.

"I guess none of us saw it coming, Tilly!

"Well," said Tilly, snapping open an oven door, glancing within, and snapping it shut again upon a wonderful odour of baking, "my sister-in-law, Jim Clute's wife, was sayin' yes'day that Mis' Barb'ry Atherton was in luck! 'Well,' says I, 'I guess Mr. Link Mackenzie's got some of the luck!'"

"You might have told her that Mr. Link Mackenzie knows it!" Link told her, smiling down at Barbara with that firm, that almost unearthly expression of happiness in his gray eyes that always made her heart beat fast for joy.

Barbara looked up at him with her dewy, grave smile. It was all too wonderful, too like a strange, happy dream.

She stood in the room that was to be Kate's night nursery, a few days before the wedding, and she and Link, who were alone, spoke of the child.

"Those are Lucy's windows, across the trees there," Barbara said in a low tone, as if she were speaking half to herself, "and Amy's only a few blocks away. What a happy place, and what a home and room and garden for a little girl to grow up in!"

"I hope she'll never know the difference—never know that I'm not really her father," Link said.

Barbara sent him a sidewise glance, and there was a sweetness in her smile that made his head swim.

"I'm not afraid of that."

"She's going to be beautiful," Link added thoughtfully.

"She'll boss the whole crowd of them!" Barbara predicted contentedly.

His arm tightened about her; he did not speak. They stood silent in the airy, sunshiny room, mottled with green tree shadows, that was to be the nursery.

"I wonder," Barbara said, when they were walking to her home a few minutes later, "I wonder if I will ever see Barry again? If he didn't feel himself bound when he thought he and I were married, one wonders what he'll feel now. I used to despair, waiting and wondering, down at the hacienda, praying for some way to wake him up—to bring him to the realization that we were really man and wife, that we had to fight out our fight together! He never got it at all. It takes a developed man, I suppose, to make a good husband. And Link—Link," she finished, with a note of dreamy sadness in her voice, "but for the strangest accident in the world, but for the fact that the man who married us wasn't in holy orders at all, I would have been bound to him forever. The tragedy of it!"

Link, sauntering at her side, turned to smile at her. He made no comment. The beauty of an August sunset wrapped the town, and split the green, shadowy masses of tree foliage, all along Washington Street, with arrows and pennants of light.

On either side were the quiet, comfortable country-town houses, each in its garden, each roofed by trees, and each completed by a driveway and a remote garage. Garden sprinklers were whirling to-night over the massed autumn flowers, and the air was damp and sweet.

Little children toddled on lawns, their mothers, fresh and brushed and fragrant, ready for dinner, kept an eye on the street; any car might be the family car now.

Almost everyone knew Barbara Atherton and Link Mackenzie, loitering home through the sunset; for three generations to come, the gossips would talk of their affair. It was already one that was “for all the world like a book.”

“Nearest thing in the world,” the women would say, “that he didn’t marry the Wilsons’ cousin, a Mis’ Scott that came down here and just about broke his heart. And while all this was going on, didn’t Barb’ry Atherton up and marry a feller named Du Spain, that didn’t amount to fifteen cents’ worth of cat meat. And they went down to an old place he had—nobody saw much of them for awhile.

“Meanwhile, a good deal had developed that made Link Mackenzie’s father come out flatfooted against his marrying Marianne Scott—seems she was a married woman, anyway—and that all died down. And then Barry du Spain just simply and flatly deserted his wife; she had a baby girl, too, and her folks was all moved down south then, and she had to come into town and get a job.

“And didn’t she find out, a few months later, that she wasn’t married at all. No, the clergyman who married her was nothing but a forger, and she wasn’t any more married to him than to any other man in town. And let me tell you that it didn’t take her and Link Mackenzie long to make up their minds this time—they were married within a month of the whole thing coming out!”

Thrilled by their romance, and as interested in its dramatic developments as they were, all the world smiled upon Barbara and Link now. Tall and slender and more serious than she had been in the days of a few years ago, they watched her pacing at his side, and perhaps they wondered what detail of the marvellous future bent his head toward her glittering coppery head so absorbedly and chained her blue eyes to his.

A couple of schoolgirls passed them with linked arms, and not without a beaming greeting and an awed backward glance. A young father and mother passed them, wheeling a hooded perambulator. Children passed them at an Indian whirl, screaming, breathless, racing.

“Somebody was wheeling you and me along these streets, Link, not so many years ago. It seems good to be marrying and settling here where we belong.”

“And we went yelping along this same sidewalk just as those kids did, once, Barberry. Do you remember the feeling when the first long spring evenings came, and we all went whooping and yelling all over town?”

“And I can remember walking along here, home from school, when I was just beginning to grow up, when the most thrilling thing in the world was to go to Bartell’s for sodas,” the girl mused. “Isn’t life funny? The first boy who ever bought me an ice-cream soda was Barry du Spain, and I almost died of the shock. I was about fourteen, I think. It was the first time I wasn’t supposed to have a dime for my own.”

“Remember when Fox first came to town and we used to make fun of him?”

“Remember the awful minstrel show?”

“Gosh!” he murmured boyishly. “And in two days,” he added dreamily, “you’ll climb into my car beside me, and we’ll be off for Del Monte! And when you come back, you’ll have to turn in *my* gate, instead of my always turning in yours!”

The beautiful face paled with sheer emotion at the thought.

“Link, sometimes it seems as if the time was standing still. And then—so curiously—it’ll seem as if it was just rushing, taking my breath away. Day after to-morrow!”

They turned in at the Duffy gate. The mild old mansard house looked down at them blandly, and Barbara’s father, wandering about the garden with Kate, guided the baby’s staggering footsteps toward them. Barbara caught the child up in her arms, and left the two men who loved her. They watched the graceful young step with which she mounted the porch and disappeared into the dim doorway.

Inside was twilight, and a certain stuffiness, and the odours of blackberry pies and corn soup. Barbara stopped in the littered kitchen for Kate’s supper tray and chatted with Mrs. Duffy.

“Well, how’s our bride?”

“Your bride is taking her baby upstairs to bed.”

“That sounds something terrible, Barb’ry!” remonstrated Mrs. Duffy. “Well, I guess you feel considerable more like a bride now than you did when you run off with Barry du Spain, three years ago!” she surmised.

“I didn’t feel like a bride then, at all!” Barbara assured her. “Whereas now,” she confessed, cutting a slice of bread into appetizing strips, “I feel all fluttery and laughey and cryey.”

“You certainly are going to be a good-looking pair,” Mrs. Duffy, cascading smoking rice from its saucepan into a cullender, predicted admiringly. “You’re lucky, Barb’ry. But I don’t know as I’d rather have it come to anyone else sooner than you, when all’s said and done!”

“Well,” Barbara reminded her, in the country phrase, “I’ve had my share!”

“You’ve had troubles, when you were sick and all,” Mrs. Duffy, putting a small sponge cake on Kate’s tray, conceded. “But you’ve not had what some women have, Barb’ry—don’t fool yourself!” she said. “Women that have to drag along with no-account, shiftless men, drinking men, as like as not, with a baby coming every year, and no way out, and nobody to help ’em or care if their beauty gets hammered down and their teeth drop out.”

“Yes, I know,” Barbara said, in a small humble voice, as the other woman paused. “You’re quite right! I’m lucky.”

“You married a man that wasn’t good to you, but Barry du Spain was a handsome feller,” Mrs. Duffy resumed, almost with severity, “and he was mighty attractive. You didn’t have to marry him if you didn’t want to. And now, three years later, when he’s gone away from you—treated you badly like lots of other women’s husbands—it’s your luck to find that you aren’t tied to him at all, and that there isn’t a clergyman or a priest in the country that won’t marry you to a better man, since you’ve found him.

“Why, you might be expecting Barry du Spain’s third baby, down on that God-forsaken place, Barb’ry, and where’d you be then? You’d be the one to talk him into marrying *you*.”

Barbara engineered the last of the rice and cream into Kate’s expectant mouth. She lifted the baby’s glass and held it patiently against Kate’s vague little red lips.

“Yes, that’s true! That’s perfectly true. I’ve gotten out of my troubles much quicker than some women do,” she conceded gravely. The warm cheeks wore a satiny flush. “You have to be in marriage,” Barbara said, “to know just how serious it is. Look at Marianne’s case, and so many other cases! It was only the thousandth chance that let me out.”

And she looked at the big calendar—Mackenzie & Company's yearly contribution to the kitchens and offices of Cottonwood. To-day was Tuesday. To-morrow would be the eve of her wedding day. Thursday she would be Mrs. Thomas Lincoln Mackenzie, Junior.

Her wedding costume had come; it was tied with white tape, under layers and layers of silky tissue paper in a big box. A little rough white silk skirt with a flare, a long tailored white coat, and a delicate embroidered waist, with a rich frill spilling itself down the front. A small white hat in a little round box of its own, with a beautiful white owl spread over it trimly and closely, wrinkly white gloves, white stockings, white slippers, pumps with buckles, and to complete the whole, one of Link's gifts: the great furry, sprawling, soft, deep-furred yellow fox skin, whose tawny tones would match Barbara's own bright hair.

She had wanted white for her wedding; Amy had insisted on white. But not a train, not a veil, for the woman who had had so strange a marital experience only a few years ago. Barbara had compromised on the thick, creamy, Oriental silk of the suit, and the little hat.

And to-night, when she had looked her fill at hat and shoes and frilled immaculate waist, she and Link carried the boxes over to Amy's house; the wedding was to be there, and Amy must be given a chance to exult and exclaim beforehand.

They sat about Ward's table gossiping happily; more presents had come in. Link's father was sending more palms. Mrs. Poett had said they could have all her phlox, masses and masses of it, pale pink and white and delicate blue. The hydrangeas had come, they were in buckets in the garage.

Something else had come. Barbara stretched a slim brown hand toward her sister. Amy gasped, catching in her own hand the fingers that carried the brilliant white stone between two guardian green ones.

"Mortification has set in!" Ward diagnosed; "two of 'em have spoiled!"

They all laughed shakily, protestingly. Link's sister Lucy and her husband had joined them now. The evening had turned chilly, and Ward had all the new householder's satisfaction in fussing with an open fire.

"And, Amy, all his mother's beautiful set—onyx and big pearls," Barbara said in an undertone; "the chain is simply magnificent, old-fashioned gold rope. And the ring!"

"Mother had several sets," Lucy Mackenzie Barnard said. "Dad gave me her amethysts, and Margaret is to have some lovely odd things—all her diamonds. But my father gave my mother the onyx; with the pearls, and she always said they were for Link's wife. You know," Lucy added cautiously, behind her brother's back, "you can have them reset, after awhile."

"Oh, but I love them as they are!" Barbara protested. And she got them and put them all on: chain and locket, ring and bracelets, pagoda earrings and brooch. Each oval of onyx was set with a pansy of five round pearls and edged with larger pearls.

"Well, you really could wear them exactly as they are—they're stunning," Lucy conceded. "We had all ours broken up, but that black and pearl suits you, Barbara. Doesn't it, Otis?"

They all thought it did. Barbara, looking up in all the new dignity of her heavy jewellery, caught Link's adoring, steady gaze, caught the look in his eyes that made her own eyes lower and her colour creep up. Not to-morrow night, but the night after that, she and Link would be down at Del Monte.

She had never been there. She visualized pines and palms, and a rambling old wooden hotel beside the sea. Mrs. Mackenzie, unpacking beautiful, delicate new things from a new suitcase. The Mackenzies going down to a hotel dinner, taking the seventeen-mile drive in their car. Link, always with her, Link a part of her life as long as they both should live. Her

frocks made to please this square-built, sunburned man who was smiling at her, her room his room, her name his name.

Her children the little Mackenzies—the most fortunate children in town.

“What are you smiling at?” Link asked her.

“Just thinking. I’ll tell you later!”

“Barbara, if the wedding is four o’clock Thursday, what can you do all day? You can’t go out, and you’ll get as nervous as a witch loafing around here.”

“Link and I could take a drive, maybe.”

“Link and you couldn’t! Haven’t you any sense of delicacy?” This was Ward, who liked his wife’s sister immensely and loved to make her flush.

“I’ll be bustin’ to have a hand in everything,” Lucy said, “and I’ll come over about noon.”

“Come over to lunch, Lucy,” Amy suggested. “We’ll probably have scrambled eggs in the kitchen, for the dining room will be full of plates and glasses.”

“Glasses!” said Ward, struck. “Remind me of glasses!”

“The wedding will be at four,” Amy, full of affairs, resumed happily. “We’ll have only sandwiches, cake, coffee, and ginger ale and tea.”

“How many are you asking, Amy?” This was Otis Barnard.

“About a hundred, I guess.” Amy gave an excited giggle.

“I’ll bet it’s more,” Link assured her nervously.

“The list is a hundred and three. But there are a few more we have to telephone to.”

“Barbara, you better begin to dress at three,” decided Lucy.

“Oh, heavens! I think I’ll go over to your house and play croquet until quarter of four!”

“To *whose* house?”

Her April colour flamed and faded, she laughed apologetically, looking toward Link for the glance that never failed her.

“To *our* house,” she amended. “Lucy, would you like to see my suit and the hat?”

Lucy rose with alacrity.

“*Would* I? What’s Kate going to wear?”

“Kate? Oh, the darling, she has a new romper—white, with a butterfly on it. She’s adorable in it.”

“She’s really nicest of all in her pajamas,” said Link, grinning.

“A nice stepfather you’ll make!” Ward, from his proud six months of parenthood, said scornfully.

The women went upstairs in an eagerly murmuring group. They could be heard laughing. When they came down, there were tears on Amy’s lashes, and Barbara’s beautiful eyes wore a mystified look; she was even a little pale.

“She is *the* most gorgeous thing in all that white,” Lucy said. “Amy began to cry when we got her all into it! I’m mad about it.”

“She looks gorgeous to me in anything,” Link said mildly, from the arm of Barbara’s chair. They quite openly laced fingers.

“Oh, this old rag!” Barbara protested, looking down on the dark blue swiss.

“These girls who marry money get their heads completely turned.” Fox Madison, who was to be one of the ushers, and who had drifted in while the bride-to-be and her attendants were upstairs, said regretfully.

Barbara laughed then. But later, when the visitors had gone home, and Lucy was upstairs giving her baby his eleven o’clock bottle, when Ward had run over to the hospital for a late

report on some surgical case, and when she and Link had their usual precious last few minutes alone, by the dying fire, she reverted to the subject.

“You know when you asked me what I was smiling at, Link?”

“I remember. You said you would tell me later.”

“Well, I was just wondering—” her head was on his shoulder, their fingers were together again, the beautiful slender body rested against him, as she shared his big chair, his arm about her—“I was just wondering, if you were poor, if we wouldn’t be quite as happy,” she said. “You know, Link,” added Barbara, moving her head to give him a glimpse of her eyes and looking back at the fire again, “I’ve never minded poverty! I loved contriving and fussing, in the little house in Las Haciendas for Dad and Amy. I like emergencies and makeshifts—really I do. If you had to go to Alaska to-morrow, and we had to live on a hundred dollars a month, I could do it! I’d be so happy, doing it!”

“I believe you, Barberry,” he said, stirred.

Again she flashed upon him the blue, blue eyes that were misted now with her tears.

“You’re my *life*, my darling,” she said, in a low tone. “I couldn’t live without you!”

It was so rare in her, the complete confession, that he tried to preserve this exquisite minute while he might.

“I don’t suppose any man, no matter how much he loves her, ought to have a woman like you,” Link said boyishly and bashfully, and Barbara laughed.

“Thursday,” she said presently, reverting to the wedding plans, “Kate and I will come over here, in the morning, unless we occupy the brand-new spare room to-morrow night. You’ll send somebody over, any time during the morning, for my suitcase?—and then they can’t tie a lot of white ribbon to it, or charge it with rice, or get off any other little pleasantry.”

“What I thought I’d do,” Link explained, “is come over here in the big car and park it in Battle Street with two empty suitcases in it. If they’re going to get funny, that will take them off the trail. Then I’ll have Collins or somebody bring over the roadster at the last minute, and wait at the back gate. We can come out the side door, start for the big car, double, and be off before they can do more than brain us with a couple of old shoes.”

Her laugh broke joyously.

“I suppose other people, when they get married, have as much fun and excitement out of it, but it’s hard to believe,” she mused.

“I was thinking that. Brides and grooms always get sentimental and gushy when they talk about it, but somehow you don’t realize it, when you’re on the outside. We can stop the car, when we get a few miles out of town,” Link resumed, “and brush off rice and get things straightened out.”

She smiled, thinking of it. When the roadster carried them out into the brown, flat, hazy autumn twilight, she would be Barbara Mackenzie, going to Del Monte with her husband. In less than two days!

“Look,” he said, fumbling for a telegram. Barbara read it as he flattened it with his big right hand, his left arm still employed in a firm grip of her shoulders. It was from the proprietor of the hotel: Mr. Mackenzie’s reservations for Thursday night would be duly made.

“You think of everything!” Barbara commented. “Sometimes I think you are going to take pretty good care of me.”

“It won’t be my fault if I don’t,” Link assured her seriously.

“And it won’t be my fault if you are not the happiest man in the world.” But she did not say this aloud, this was only a part of the fervent thoughts, the half-fearful and all-happy

prayers that absorbed her during these last days. He should be happy, she promised her own soul. He should have a wife whose one prayer should be always to grow more and more simple and pure and loving, more and more anxious to make his life and his home perfect in their way.

There would be children in the big white brick house, Christmas parties and holiday picnics, there would be gentleness and charity and goodness. And some day, when they were old, and the dim tragedy of Barbara's first marriage only a dream, and little Kate a wife and mother in her turn, Link would say to his sons and daughters: "You can't be any happier than your mother and I have been for forty—for fifty years."

Slowly, yet the clock's hands did move, and it was the morning of her wedding eve; it was noontime, and with the clear droning of the factory whistles Link had come to find her, under the yellowing maple leaves in the side yard, at Amy's house.

"Link, Miss Wilcox from the school wants to play a little music when Dad and I come downstairs to-morrow. Amy nearly had a fit; she says she'll play 'The Rosary' or 'Oh, Promise Me,' or something, and get everyone giggling. But she's such a nice old thing, and so thrilled! Her beau went to Manila and died of fever, and she's romantic, you know. Do you care?"

"I don't care if she plays 'Red Hot Mamma,' dearest."

"Well, you're a darling! And listen, Link, your sisters and maybe your father, and Mrs. Duffy and Amy and Ward and I are all going to early church to-morrow. You'll come, too?"

"You mean you really are!" His burned, hard, attractive face reddened with pleasure.

"I mean I really are!"

"Barbara, that means a lot to me."

"Well, I'm glad. My father doesn't mind. He said mildly that my grandfather had given the ground for St. Rita's Cemetery, and he expected that he'd turn in it, when he knew. But that was mere humour."

"Let's remember to-day," Link said. "I don't believe people are often as happy as this!"

She half closed her eyes, smiled quizzically.

"And to-morrow'll have its points, too," she reminded him.

"Barbara!" Amy called from the house, "Mrs. Green is on the telephone, and she can't come to-morrow, and she wants to speak to you! Hello, Link," said Amy, following her voice out to the side yard, as Barbara fled within, "isn't this simply bedlam? I hope we won't have another wedding until Kate here marries Lucy's Otis! Are you coming in?"

"I thought maybe you and Barbara would sneak downtown with me and have lunch at the 'Yellow Cream Pitcher.' We can sit in those little alcoves there, and nobody'll see us. Maybe we could catch Ward."

"I think it would be grand!" responded Amy, with the enthusiasm of the hostess who discovers at a ticklish noontime that her guests are to be assets rather than liabilities. Wedding preparations had now reached the point when Amy's one desire was to appear in the kitchen doorway, and say to her new and still highly unsettled cook: "We won't be here for lunch—dinner—breakfast!"

CHAPTER XXIII

It was on this last afternoon that Barbara and Link walked through the splendid rooms of the old home that was to be their new one; looked through the gracious, white-panelled doorways, crossed the wide polished floors to look down through the freshly cleaned window panes into the garden.

Their own quarters were finished now, or almost finished. Some of the curtains were still folded, and waiting, with brass hooks and rods, on tables or chairs. The beds were not made; but upon the deep new mattresses were folded the blankets and linen. There were details of picture-hanging and the placing of chairs still to manage; even while they strolled, enchanted, through the whole domain that was scented with paint, varnish, and the new smell of rugs and hangings, crates were being unpacked in the barn, and Barbara's desk and Link's dresser were carried upstairs and carefully placed in their destined corners.

Ready for the desk was her engraved stationary, boxes and boxes of it, her heavy crystal inkwell and marbled trays and bowls. The closets looked deliciously large and bright and empty; certain fascinating boxes had been placed within them. "I can't remember half the things we've bought!" Barbara said, in a perfect whirl of confusing and happy impressions.

"We'll take our time opening them all up!" Link assured her; "one of those Shreve boxes might be the little lamps—or it might be those two birds you took such a fancy to in Chinatown."

It was on this occasion that he suddenly diverted the conversation to the almost-forgotten ranch.

"Barbara, do you remember that, while you were ill, you asked me to go down to the old hacienda, and look about for letters and deeds and things?"

"Perfectly." But she never quite liked to be reminded of the ranch.

"You remember that Barry had told you that he was giving you the place? Was that before or after you were married?"

"I'm not sure. Afterward, I think. It was just around that time. And finally he *did* give me a deed. Didn't you find the deed?"

"Yes. It was made out to Barbara Atherton, though. So that it is valid."

"Even though I'm not Barbara du Spain!" she mused, struck. "I suppose he either arranged it before we were married, or else was in one of his absent-minded moods, later. It isn't—the ranch isn't worth much, is it, Link? It's mortgaged, you know, to the hilt. That property never will be worth anything."

"I'm not so sure," Link said, with the look that Barbara secretly characterized as his "business face," and secretly admired. "It won't be for some time. But Miller and I have had a little scheme about it for almost a year. As a matter of fact, we had it in mind when we went down there, Christmas Eve. We don't want to make a mushroom development of the place, like some of these other places, but we both do feel, and my father feels, too, that it might make a very fine investment. To lay out roads, put sewerage and water in——"

"It would have to go slowly, there'd never be anything sensational about it. But it would mean a little money trickling in for Kate, year after year. By the time she was a young lady, it'd be a good nest egg."

“Miller is working on a proposition to make you now; you to preserve a certain interest in the whole thing, we to develop it, and the profits, if there are any, to go to Kate.”

“Oh, Link, Link—this is a put-up job!”

“Put-up job nothing; it’s a straight business deal. And you might easily do better, if the southern end of town begins to develop. But, anyway, there’s a possibility there. We’d preserve the hacienda, make it into an inn, some day——”

“You’re the best man in the world, I think. You’re so much nearer her—nearer Kate—than her own father!” Barbara presently said in an undertone. And in the room that was so soon to be their study and own private upstairs sitting room and library, she put her two hands on his broad shoulders and raised her face to give him one of her rare kisses.

The clock’s hands moved on; it was four o’clock, on the wedding eve, it was five o’clock. Link was to dine with his father and sisters to-night, Barbara and Kate would be at Amy’s. After supper, she wouldn’t see Link, she would be writing notes of thanks for presents; it would be a quiet evening, she would go early to bed.

Dusk was at half-past six to-night; Barbara paid her father, who was in bed with a cold, a daughterly visit, loitered through the Duffy kitchen with a reminder to her good friend and landlady that he was unattended, and left the house by the side gate, to walk the two short blocks to Amy’s house. Kate was already there.

A man was standing at the gate, a tall man—waiting for a girl, perhaps. Barbara came near him, glanced at him directly in the half light.

And then she saw that it was Barry, looking at her with the old look she knew so well, the doubtful, timid, little-boy look she had seen upon his face after a score of meaningless quarrels, a score of times.

Her heart stood still, and her mouth grew dry. She looked at him for a long minute, quite unable to think at all, much less to speak.

He was shabby and looked badly groomed. But he was still beautiful, the dark eyes burning in his white face, the remembered wing of black hair loosened across his low forehead.

“Barbara,” he said, in a hoarse voice broken a little with an awkward laugh, “I’ve come back. I’m sorry!”

The sickening significance, the utter horrifying unexpectedness of it, caused her a wave of something actually like nausea. She trembled and stared at him blankly, locking the fingers of both hands together and pressing them over her plunging heart.

“Barry!” she whispered. No voice would come. She put one hand behind her and steadied herself against the picket fence.

She had kissed this man, her hand had caressed that wave of dark disordered hair, she had slept through winter nights, through hundreds of nights, with his big arm about her. In agony and weakness and fright, she had borne him a child.

And now he was nothing to her, nothing more than any other casual passer-by on this dim autumn sidewalk, under these gaunt, thinning trees. To-morrow she was to marry another man.

“I just got in on the train; I’ve not seen anyone!” Barry said. “Where are you going? May I walk with you?”

Not knowing where she went, or what she said, she faced about, and they walked slowly along together. A woman, passing gave Barbara a smile, and the man a sharp look. She turned, Barbara could hear her ejaculated “For the land’s sake!” as she went on her way.

Now what—now what—now what? Barbara's thought ran confusedly. What was she to do? What would happen now? Were they all crazy that they had gone on placidly planning her wedding, while this man, who was her husband, walked the earth?

"I got to San Francisco yesterday, and the first thing Schofield showed me was an old paper with something in it about our marriage not being legal. Did you see it?"

The remembered voice, the familiar intonations! Barbara could not speak. She walked along silently, feeling dizzy and sick.

"Do you mean you are really so angry at me, Barbara?" he said. And they might have parted yesterday in the old hacienda; it might have been only yesterday that they had quarrelled, and Barry had flung himself away from her, to walk the wet flat fields above the sea, and to return penitent and plead for her forgiveness once again.

"It isn't that at all, Barry," she managed to say faintly. The nightmare continued; the sound of her own voice did not waken her as it might have done. She was still walking with Barry du Spain, past the Wilsons' garden fence, long and dim and ghostly white, stretching away into a perspective of scalloped poles, in the twilight.

In the Mackenzie house, only a square away in Link's room, standing beside his own packed bag, was her suitcase with the new clothes in it, the silk pajamas that extravagant Amy had given her, the tortoise-shell mirror and brushes.

And in Amy's house, fragrant and soft and white on its hanger, was her wedding suit, and above it, in layers of tissue, her white hat—waiting, like the ranked glasses in the dining room, and the softly drooping flowers in the drawing room, and the little white romper with the butterfly on it—for to-morrow.

To-morrow, when more than a hundred affectionate folk would stream along the sidewalk, and turn in at Dr. Ward Duffy's gate, and come into Amy's house to see Barbara Atherton happily married.

Would this man, whose wife she had in fact been, whose child she had borne, be among them? A wild hysterical impulse toward laughter shook her, and Barbara realized that she must summon all the strength and self-control she might, and meet the situation with the supreme courageous effort of her life.

"Barbara," he asked anxiously, "is it true?"

She could actually see the bland old white-painted brick walls of the Mackenzie house. She was to have been mistress of that splendid old tree-bowered place to-morrow. Why were she and Barry du Spain wandering like disembodied spirits through the sombre autumn dusk instead?

The night would be cold. Barbara tried to think, as a sad little breeze rustled yellow leaves high over their heads, and the Wilsons' windmill creaked and splashed in the soft evening gloom. Motor cars were carrying lights, now, and in the big houses of Cottonwood's most aristocratic district square windows shone suddenly; upstairs windows unshaded, downstairs windows against whose revelations maids drew down the shades.

"I think we had better go to Amy's," the girl said slowly.

"Amy's? Are Amy and Ward back?"

"Oh, yes. He came up on Christmas Eve, a day or two after you went away, Barry, and he's sharing Dr. Bonner's practice. Dr. Bonner hasn't been well. Amy and Ward have a little boy, and Lucy Mackenzie has another baby, and Margaret's going to marry a man from Connecticut she met when she was at school."

Not that it mattered, the town gossip, but it was something to say. She spoke apathetically, vaguely, hardly thinking of what she said.

“Ward bought the old Rogers place; they’ve had it all fixed over, and they’ve been boarding with his mother and father—she keeps boarders now, the old man hasn’t done anything for some time. And Kate and Dad and I have been there, too.”

“Kate!” Barry said, “she’s nearly two. I’ve thought of her every day—every hour!—since I went away, and of you, too.”

Barbara’s throat felt thick and dry; she was utterly weary.

“You don’t look very well, Barry.”

“Oh, I’ve been sick!” he said eagerly, pathetically.

“What brought you—” she was so tired—“what brought you back to California?”

He stopped. In the dusk, she could feel rather than see his reproachful stare.

“Why, I was always coming back! I’ve only been gone eight months!”

Barbara felt weak and chilled.

“But, Barry—so much has happened!”

There was a moment’s silence. Then he said:

“Why aren’t you married to me? That’s what I can’t understand. You *are* married to me!”

“No, it was no marriage. The man who married us wasn’t really a clergyman at all.”

“Barberry, who said so?”

“Why, everyone, Barry—and the people he married had to have it done all over again!”

“What of it!” he exclaimed impatiently. “Have the old town biddies been making capital out of it?”

It was almost dark now. She was still walking in a nightmare. This was Barry—Barry come back again.

“Have you and the baby gone back to the hacienda?”

“No, Barry—Link Mackenzie and I are to be married to-morrow.”

It was said. There was a dead silence. She could not see his face in the gloom.

“What are you talking about?” he presently asked bewilderedly.

She knew that elaborate, gentle surprise.

“I know you won’t stay here—I know you won’t make it hard for me,” Barbara said.

Another silence. Then suddenly and harshly he said:

“Oh, my *God*—I don’t believe it!”

“It’s true, Barry. If you had come here at this time to-morrow, it would have been all over.”

“I would have followed you, wherever you went,” Barry said, after a moment, in a low tense voice, “and shot him down like a dog! I don’t blame you, I treated you terribly, *terribly*, and he’s rich, and he can play the friend—I know Link Mackenzie! Of course, it would impress you. But he can dam’ well keep his hands off you!”

She knew the tone, half earnest, half sheer drama.

“You’re talking foolishly,” he answered, in an unexpectedly gentle, determined tone. “I know just how wrong I’ve been——” he was beginning, when her tired voice arrested him.

“Come to Amy’s. This is no place to talk.”

They turned in the side gate; walked up the steps, and Barry followed Barbara into the lamplighted, comfortable sitting room.

Ward was in a chair by the fire, with his baby in his arms, Amy was opposite him, sewing. Both Amy and Ward blinked at the shadows that softly wrapped the doorway, trying to see who the tall man was, bent a little and shabby, following Barbara in.

“Amy,” Barbara said, in a light, frightened voice, “it’s Barry!”

Amy was instantly on her feet, her mild little face flushed, her mild tones raised to sharpness.

“Barry du Spain can’t come into my house!” she said flatly.

Ward, his honest simple face also turning dark red, remained seated, the baby’s downy little bobbing head just under his chin, his eyeglassed look focussed anxiously on Amy.

“Barry didn’t know I was to be married to-morrow, Ward,” Barbara explained quickly. And it sickened Amy to hear the old conciliatory note, the explaining note, in her voice again.

“That has nothing to do with it,” Ward contributed slowly, in a silence.

“I want to talk with her,” Barry pleaded. He stood, down-at-heel and gentle and forlorn, in the lamplight and firelight. “I’m going away,” he said. “I just want to talk with Barberry Bush.”

He had put her old love name in to make it pathetic, Barbara thought, steeled against the effect his voice, his beauty, his charm had always held for her. She knew them too well!

“I can’t see what you can have to say to her, Barry,” Amy said sternly, after a pause.

Barry crossed to the fire and sat down. And they saw that there was gray in the dark rich hair above his temples, and that in every way he seemed a much older man than the poetic, graceful boy who had left Cottonwood almost a year ago.

They all sat down; it was like Barry’s old power over everyone with whom he came in contact that this first point was in his favour. And immediately circumstances began to work for him, to shelter him, as they always had.

The baby’s nurse came down, to carry the baby away, and following her, with an enormous and substantial tea tray, came the waitress who had been impressed into special service for to-morrow’s great occasion, and who had been counting napkins and rubbing floors all day.

It appeared that, because of a late, hearty lunch, and because of the domestic excitement, the family was to have sandwiches and tea instead of supper to-night. Barbara had forgotten the arrangement, but it made it simply impossible not to include Barry in the meal, unless he were to be antagonized, infuriated, and sent forth into the night an enemy.

And that even the enraged and unfriendly Amy was shrewd and swift enough to appreciate this, was evinced by the fact that it was Amy’s voice that asked: “You’ll have tea, Barry?”

“Oh, Amy!” he answered quickly, humbly, “I’m starving!”

That was Barry’s way, too. That would win the heart of the housewife, of the young woman who had a boy child of her own, upstairs, as could nothing else.

The sandwiches were substantial, oozing sustaining wedges of egg and tomato and lettuce. Barry fell upon them ravenously; Ward kept him company. But Amy, nervous and suspicious, would only nibble, and although Barbara drank her tea gratefully and smiled courageously at her sister every time Amy’s anxious glance reached her, she could not eat.

When Barry had finished, he put away his plate and flung his crumpled napkin on the tray. His colour was better now; he looked less tired and spent and much more like his old self as, sinking forward in his chair and linking his fingers, he fixed his dark and troubled gaze upon Barbara.

“Barbara, what did I do?”

She had sunk back into her own big chair, slender and frightened and more beautiful in her pallor, with the blue eyes burning beneath the fire of her blazing hair, than any one of these three had ever seen her before.

“Barry, it’s too late to discuss that!” she answered nervously. “Let’s not go into it. I’ve forgiven you long ago. We never were married—you knew that? It’s all over, and the only thing for us to do is forget it.”

His brow contracted a trifle; he did not shift his steady gaze.

“I heard,” he said patiently, as one who determines to unravel a mystery at any cost, “that that fellow who married us was not a clergyman.”

“Exactly!” Amy contributed on a note of triumph.

“Is that true?” Barry asked bewilderedly, turning to Ward.

“Yes, absolutely!”

“He must have married other persons?” Barry pursued.

“He did. The little Prince girl, for one. They’ve all been remarried,” Ward explained.

“There had to be formal annulments and remarriages,” Barbara added faintly.

“Did they arrest him?” Barry demanded, piecing it all together with a judicial air.

“They’ve arrested him on other charges—forgery, I don’t know what.”

“I should think so!” Barry ejaculated, and appeared to muse.

The other three eyed him in silence, all three afraid of what he might say next.

He looked humbly at Barbara.

“I only got the news two days ago. I was in San Francisco, and someone had sent Schofield a Cottonwood paper,” he explained. “I thought—of course, you and I would be married again, right away.”

Barbara spoke slowly, determinedly. She must be the one to say this; no one could say it for her.

“Barry, what reason had I to suppose that what I did or didn’t do was of any interest to you?”

It was a broadside, and he weakened under it, and still sitting forward in his low chair, he turned his eyes toward the fire and faintly shrugged.

“I left you last December—this is August,” he presently said. “All that time I’ve been trying—you don’t have to believe it—but I’ve been trying to make good, for you and the baby. I suppose I’ve been stupid about it—God knows I’m an ass! But I always thought—” he paused, blinking, and pressing his big palms tightly together—“I’ve always sorter thought you’d stand by me, Barbara!” he faltered, smiling shamefacedly like a boy, and giving her a quick glance before sending his gaze back to the fire.

Her answer came quick and hurt. Amy realized with a sort of terror that the thing was taking the shape of an affair debatable.

“*You didn’t stand by me!*”

“No, I know I didn’t. You were terribly ill; Joe Dodge told me that. But I didn’t know that until it was all over—I couldn’t understand it, I thought Ward and Amy were down in Los Angeles. It was all confusion to me, I hadn’t a cent, I knew there was no use in my coming back——”

“I suppose you didn’t know that a tramp got down there, and frightened her almost to death, and that she almost died?” Ward asked, thinking in his own kindly soul that he was being mercilessly stern. But Amy, perceiving that this attitude of argument was the one thing for which Barry had hoped, felt a most unwonted sensation of impatience and anger.

Barry sent a look of genuine consternation about the circle.

“A tramp!” he ejaculated.

Barbara sat back in her chair. In the warm firelight her cheeks were the colour of ivory; her heavy dark lashes were lowered, and between the closed lids two tears slipped, while they watched her.

“Barry,” Amy began, goaded to desperation by the thought that this was actually the wedding eve, and that further temporizing would perhaps cost Barbara her life’s happiness. “It’s too late now to argue and discuss. Whatever case you can make out for yourself, this whole town doesn’t agree with you. This whole town,” Amy went on, beginning to cry, but speaking angrily and determinedly through the tears she dashed away, “thinks you treated Barbara like a *skunk*. She was deathly ill; she almost died! She had to come back to life deeply in debt, with no home and no money and no one to help her. She got her old job at the school —”

“I thought your father cleared everything up!” Barry interrupted suddenly.

“Trust him to have found that out!” Amy said later, scornfully, to Ward.

Now she only said, with a voice whose mollified notes showed the cost of the angry overstatement:

“Well, if he did, *you* didn’t help!”

Strangely, except that it always happened where Barry was concerned, their position seemed to have been appreciably weakened and his strengthened by the last few phrases.

“Barbara,” he said gently, “I’m sorry about the tramp.”

She opened her eyes, shrugged faintly in her turn.

“Oh, that’s all right—Link happened to be coming down to the ranch,” she said. “And he brought Kate and me back!”

“Just his luck, to be able to do what I failed to do for you!” Barry commented in an undertone, as if he were thinking aloud.

Suddenly he looked up, and his eyes found each one of them in turn. Surprisedly, simply, he faced Ward’s serious and troubled face, Amy’s scornful glance, Barbara’s blue, accusing, weary eyes.

“Why, but—but the fact that the man wasn’t really a clergyman certainly doesn’t make us any the less man and wife, does it?” he asked, with his baffling air of honesty and amazement.

“It makes you absolutely nothing to each other,” Amy answered, in a silence.

“Nonsense!” said Barry sharply. “What about Kate?”

“You’re the one,” Barbara contributed in a tone she made dispassionate, “you’re the one who used always to say that that very thing didn’t matter—that to be born of parents who didn’t love each other was the only real illegitimacy.”

Barry stared at her, stupefied.

“But—but I always have loved you and always will!” he protested, after a pause. “You know that! There’s never been anyone else in the world for me.”

Barbara smiled with infinite sadness, and Amy noticed how changed she was, in just this one short year, from the old gay Barbara; what spiritual values lay in the deep shadows about her blue eyes, and the chiselling of her tender, wise, beautiful mouth.

“Oh, no, Barry,” Barbara said, unconvinced, and shaking her head. “You mustn’t tell *me* that!”

The rebuke lingered in the air; Amy’s eyes watered, and she bit her lip. Ward shot the other man a challenging and a triumphant glance. And they saw Barry’s colour change.

Barbara alone seemed quite herself, mistress of voice and manner. She twisted the beautiful green and white glitter of her engagement ring, and watched it, as they talked.

"I went away to succeed for you!" Barry exclaimed, looking about for sympathy. "Amy," he pleaded, "Ward—tell her that the actual wedding ceremony didn't matter—that she and I are just as much man and wife as if the whole college of bishops had married us! Why, we've a child. Why, I left her less than a year ago, to try to make a living for us all! You know that, Barberty."

Barbara, bowing her head forward, pressed all ten finger-tips to her forehead, pushed them up and down. When she took her hands away her hair was dishevelled and her eyes tortured.

But she did not speak. It was Ward who presently spoke quickly and impatiently, rising from his chair, and going to the fireplace to stand, shoving tobacco into his pipe, staring down at the other three.

"Barry, there's no sense in this—there's no justice!" he burst out. "For God's sake, man, try to realize that she treated you far, far better than you ever deserved to be treated. She stuck it out, down there at the ranch, long after ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have quit. She was ill, she hadn't a cent, still she hadn't an ugly word to say about you. You didn't write for——"

"Because I had nothing but bad news to write!" Barry interpolated hotly, as Ward, quite unconscious of what he did, stopped to hold a match to the bowl and pull on his pipe.

"Yes, I know. But a wife has a right to know even that! And even then," Ward went on, shaping his case with an eloquence that seemed perfectly astonishing to Amy, as she breathlessly listened. "Even then," he said, "when everyone in town—or at least when her whole family was trying to persuade her to divorce you—she wouldn't, on Kate's account. No, she'd married you, and that was all there was about it, and if you didn't succeed in New York, you'd probably come back here, and she'd wait for you. She took her old job——"

"My God, Ward!" Barry exclaimed, looking up haggardly from between the two long hands that had been pressed against his fallen head, "don't rub it in! It's all true! But haven't wonderful women always been forgiving rotters like me—always been taking them back, giving them another trial? That's all I ask. I want a trial! I want to show her," Barry rushed out, beginning to shake with sobs, "that I *do* love my wife, that I can take care of her and my baby, that I've learned the bitterest lesson a man ever learned in this life."

Amy's eyes were brimming with tears of most unwilling sympathy. Even Ward seemed shaken, and looked, irresolute and scowling, at his wife, trying to read her feeling. But Barbara was unmoved.

"Barry," she said calmly, her quiet voice cutting across his high-keyed, emotional utterances with an effect instantly stilling, "you have no right to come here and take this stand. I *did* love you, or I thought I did; I did fight to make our marriage a success. You were the one who sickened of it——"

"Never!" Barry gasped passionately, his dark head again fallen almost to the level of his knees, and clasped in his long white fingers shaking violently with the denial. "Never!"

"You left me without a penny," Barbara went on inflexibly, "when I was not well and had a baby to care for and another coming——"

"My God, my God," Barry burst forth, beside himself with despair and excitement, "I didn't *have* a penny! *You* knew that! Did I ever try to keep a cent back from you? I worried myself sick, I walked into town in shabby shoes and gambled, all to get enough to keep our souls and bodies together! And finally—finally, when I had to watch you growing absolutely sick over money, I made the break. I told you—I wrote you—that I'd be back. And now that I'm back," he went on, suddenly beginning to sob bitterly, his voice cracked and deep with

agony, “the news that meets me is that we are not married at all, and that you want to kick me out—to forbid me to see my baby girl again—to marry Link Mackenzie!”

There was a long, terrible silence in the room. The other three were young, after all, inexperienced, and they were affected in spite of themselves. Try as she would, Amy could not keep her lip curled contemptuously, or her eyes dry.

Ward shifted feet, cleared his throat, looked dubiously at Barbara, dubiously at Amy, looked back closely and attentively at his smoking pipe.

Barbara remained motionless, her hands linked lightly before her, her body leaning a little forward in the low chair, her eyes on the fire. She wore a soft and shabby gown of dark blue corduroy, a dress she had often worn in the old days, before her marriage. There was a broad linen collar at her throat; her slender body, outlined in the rich lustre of the folds of velvet, looked young and childish in the shadows of the big chair. The sheer beauty of her absorbed face, her brows lightly drawn, her under lip caught, in her own old fashion, between her teeth, and her beautiful, black-lashed eyes, wise and sad and brooding, made her seem, to Amy’s fancy at least, and perhaps to Barry’s, the tragic and exquisite central figure of some thrilling drama. Her narrowed eyes wore a quizzical look, there were moments when a tremor touched her closed lips, as if she might almost have laughed. And the clear skin, that had paled to her first emotion, wore the satin flush, the slight frown, of a child’s face, as if she were thinking stubbornly, determinedly, like a baffled child.

But the beautiful laced fingers were a woman’s, and the self-control, the temperance every line of face and figure betrayed could have belonged to no girl.

Outside, the autumn wind whined and sang softly, leaves rustled, and an occasional motor car honked its way down the street. But the comfortable, homely sitting room was utterly still; lighted with lamp and firelight, carpeted, furnished with books and chairs and the pleasant litter of leisure hours. With the curtains drawn and the door closed, they four might have been in a ship’s cabin, moving lost and abandoned through a trackless sea.

“Do you think—you two, Ward and Amy,” Barry exclaimed, after the long silence in which he was perfectly able to estimate the effect he had made, “do you think I’ll give her up?”

Again Ward cleared his throat; when he spoke, it was in a perfectly reasonable tone.

“It isn’t a question of your giving her up, Barry. You haven’t any claim on her. It’s more as if you and Barbara,” Ward floundered, conscious that his eloquence had suddenly deserted him, “it’s more as if you and Barbara had been engaged—and you had gone away, and she had become engaged to another man, that’s all!”

“No claim!” Barry echoed, “except that she was my wife, and that we have a child! Why, suppose one of the witnesses of a contract is proved to be a cheater—or a liar—or not fit to testify to anything,” he went on, with the fatal readiness of argument Barbara knew so well, “does that make *honourable* people——”

“Oh, Barry, don’t—don’t!” Barbara pleaded, in a sort of weariness of despair. “It’s all such a waste of breath.”

“You don’t think,” Amy interpolated sharply, “you *can’t* think, that Barbara is going to consider your marriage valid.”

“No, but surely the only honourable thing is for us to make it so!” he countered instantly.

Again Barbara smiled, her nervous, tired smile, and again she slowly and gently shook her head, without speaking.

“Ward says I have no claim on you,” he said patiently, his anger suddenly cooling. “Do you believe that?”

“It is true,” Barbara answered simply.

“True! When I have a child that is your child!”

“I don’t think,” Amy said disapprovingly, rising, as Barbara did not answer, “that we get anywhere by this kind of talk. I want to ask you, Barry, not to worry Barbara any more to-night. To-morrow—we can talk to-morrow!”

“Just a minute,” Barry delayed her, with a gesture of his hand. “I married Barbara in all good faith, three years ago. I went away, as many a man has to do, to follow up a business opening, and I left her a note, saying that I would be back as soon as I could. What more could I do? What didn’t I do?”

The three others exchanged glances. Barbara was on her feet now, she looked exhausted and white, and her eyes were heavy and apathetic.

“Nothing!” she said lifelessly and indifferently, “nothing, of course! You did everything.”

Instantly they had returned to their old tone of controversy. Barry, watching her, flushed resentfully. It had been her old custom to concede him everything, to shame him by her very excess of agreement. Amy and Ward looked at each other indignantly, amazedly, but Barry knew the point was Barbara’s.

“I don’t mean that. Everything was against me,” he said sulkily. “It was hard on me, and it was harder on you—I see that. But we aren’t the only young people who’ve had things hard.”

The girl flung up her head as if she were suffocating, her restless eyes moved here and there inconsequently, she would not meet his look.

“My dear Barry,” she said breathlessly, lightly, with a little miserable laugh that held no mirth. “We can’t go on this way. Whosever fault it was—it’s over. I don’t want to talk about it—I *won’t* talk about it! You’ve arrived here the very day before my marriage. Please imagine that you arrived instead on the day after it, and that it’s too late. I’m extremely tired,” Barbara finished, blinking as she turned toward Amy, and speaking nervously, as she struggled with an inopportune tendency to tears, “I’m going upstairs. Amy——?”

“Yes, I’ll come with you!” Amy answered quickly, with a dagger look for Barry, whom she had never liked.

Barry watched them moodily, almost menacingly, his handsome head slightly drooped forward, his hands in the side pockets of his shabby coat.

“Is my little girl upstairs?” he asked, jerking his head backward.

“She and I came over to-night from Mrs. Duffy’s,” Barbara answered. And Amy saw the terror that invaded her heart as if it had been a tangible thing, and saw the colour ebb from her face until it looked gray.

“May I see her, Barbara?” Barry asked humbly.

She hesitated, glanced irresolutely at Amy, cleared her throat.

“Why—of course.”

“To-morrow?”

Her miserable eyes met his fairly.

“I should think so.”

Barry seemed irresolute in turn.

“You and Link——” he began incredulously—“to-morrow?” he asked. “Does everyone know it?”

“Everyone!” Barbara answered faintly.

The man she had thought her husband for two stormy years flushed nervously, spoke with a boyish sort of awkwardness and brusqueness.

"I'm sorry," he said huskily. "I thought you felt that you were married to *me*. I saw something about Hutchinson not being really a clergyman, in the papers, but I never imagined it would affect *us*."

He paused, and they were all silent, appreciating more and more the difficulties of the situation that faced them.

"Of course, I'm thinking of my little girl—you can't blame me for that! I've not seen her since last Christmas," Barry offered simply.

Again Amy gave him an annihilating look. He thinking of his little girl! He had never loved her until this instant, when she supplied him with an argument forceful beyond all opposition. The full helplessness of her sister's position in his hands made Amy's heart feel weak and sick, and her eyes flash with impotent anger.

"Could I have her for a few days, perhaps?" Barry asked. Barbara stirred herself as if arousing from a hideous trance.

"We'll arrange something to-morrow," she said.

"You're not angry at me, Barberry Bush?"

"No."

"If you want me to step aside, I will," Barry promised. "But I couldn't give my little girl up to Link Mackenzie," he added, in a moderate reasoning tone. "No man would do that! Her mother and I may not have been legally married, but I didn't know that. I acted in good faith. It was like a blow between the eyes to have a man in San Francisco tell me—only this morning!—that our marriage had been annulled.

"How could it be annulled," he went on, with sudden agitation in a dead silence, "without my knowing it?"

"There was nothing to annul; it simply didn't exist," Ward told him. He touched his arm. "The girls are dead tired, Barry," he said in an urgent undertone, "and of course this is a shock—it changes everything. We'll have to leave the details until to-morrow. Where are you staying?"

"I don't know," Barry said blankly. His old attitude—he never had any plans! "Maybe I could stay at Mrs. Duffy's. That's near here. Has she a room?"

He would go to the very boarding house from which Barbara had sent trunk and suitcase and wedding gown for to-morrow's event! Amy's look tried to tell him what she thought of the matter, but Barry, as always, was entirely impervious to hints.

"There'll be talk enough about all this, without your going there," Ward said. "We'll walk over to Mrs. Watson's—I'll go with you and see if she has a room."

"Good-night," Barry said obediently, following him. But neither Barbara nor Amy replied.

CHAPTER XXIV

They went silently upstairs, and Barbara went into the spare room and closed the door. She straightened Kate automatically, automatically undressed and put on her old wrapper, her bright hair loosened on her shoulders.

When Amy knocked at the door, a few minutes later, Barbara sprang into bed, extinguishing the bedside lamp as she did so, and answering her sister with elaborate sleepiness from the dark.

But Amy had heard the thud of bare feet and the snap of the light, and she was not deceived.

She entered the room confidently.

"Barbara," she commanded, "light that light!"

Barbara obeyed, jerked a second pillow under her head, and lay with her arms locked behind her neck, and her haggard, violet-ringed eyes with a look of fearful expectancy in them staring at her sister.

Amy hooked an opened magazine over the crib rail to shade the eyes of the sleeping Kate, and came to perch on the foot of her sister's bed, answering Barbara's desperate look with one almost equally despairing.

"Ward hasn't come back yet," she said inconsequentially. Barbara made no reply.

"What I'm wondering," Amy began again, "is exactly what Barry intends to do."

Again Barbara refrained from answering. She continued to regard Amy with bright, hard, feverish eyes, her under lip lightly bitten, her face pale and tense.

"You know," Amy argued it confidently and reassuringly, "he really can't *do* anything!"

"Oh, yes," Barbara said unexpectedly, with a hard little laugh, "he can. He can do everything!"

Amy's heart sank.

"You mean," she asked fearfully, "you mean that you aren't going on with your wedding to-morrow, that it's really going to make a difference in your plans?"

"Amy—in the name of everything sensible, what else could it do?" Barbara demanded impatiently, in turn.

The older sister flushed, paled. There was a silence.

"Barbara, you can't be so silly! Oh, dearest, dearest, please don't take it this way!"

"I'm not aware that I'm taking it in any special way," Barbara said wearily, with a touch of scorn. "I'm simply facing the simple fact. Kate is Barry's child, and Barry did marry me in good faith. I don't know how much claim he has on her, or exactly how much trouble he could make. . . . But I do know this," Barbara added, after a pause in which Amy had looked at her with a mixture of fear, exasperation, and pleading, "I know that the whole situation will be infinitely less complicated if I don't marry Link!"

"I could kill Barry du Spain!" Amy said, in a burst of tears.

Barbara was sitting erect, her hands locked about her knees, her eyes infinitely bitter, as they stared into space.

"I suppose it was remarkable that we didn't see this coming!" she observed mildly.

"Barbara!" Amy implored her, "remember that he has no claim on you at all!"

Barbara rested an elbow on her knees and lightly beat her forehead with a clenched fist.

“He has every claim!” she whispered, with shut eyes.

“Dearest,” Amy begged, “don’t break my heart! Don’t let him influence you this way. The circumstances are unusual, but what of it? That doesn’t make any real difference . . .”

Barbara appeared not to be hearing her. Amy’s voice faded to a dismayed silence.

“I can’t share Kate with him!” Barbara breathed. “That—that I couldn’t do! That would be intolerable!”

“You won’t have to share Kate with him. Kate has nothing to do with him!” Amy argued eagerly.

“Dragging Link into it!” Barbara muttered.

“You marry Link to-morrow,” Amy began suddenly and firmly, “you leave Kate with Lucy and me, you go off on your trip. He’ll loaf around here for a few days——”

Barbara’s patient, scornful smile silenced her, and she was still.

“Amy, can you imagine me as settled in the Mackenzie house, just married, with Barry du Spain coming to see his daughter—with all the town saying that, while he thought himself married to me, I turned round and married Link Mackenzie! Can’t you see the weapon it would give him against me, and against Kate, and against Link, for all time! You don’t know Barry; that’s just what he’d like! That’s just the position he would like to take in this community.”

“Everyone knows that Barry du Spain treated you horribly, Babs,” Amy offered, in the pause.

There was an interval during which Barbara brooded darkly. After awhile she said:

“It seemed to me he did. But you heard him to-night—you heard his version. He says that he only went off to New York to make his fortune, and by an accident I was frightened into a serious illness. He learned a few months later that the validity of our marriage was questioned, and he came straight back. That’s his story. You can imagine that half the town at least will have sympathy for him!”

“He never supported you, he treated you like a slave!” Amy burst out furiously.

“Lots of men do that,” Barbara reminded her. “Marriage is marriage, just the same.”

“You don’t even know,” Amy suggested bitterly, “that he’s been faithful to you! Living there in that Bohemian settlement in New York, running around with all those freaks who believe in free love and socialism, and everything, and with all the girls crazy to make eyes at him!”

“No, I don’t know that he’s been faithful to me,” Barbara conceded, “but neither do a lot of other women!”

“I would rather see you dead than have you go back to him!” Amy exclaimed, again in tears.

“Oh, *that*,” Barbara answered unemotionally, suddenly getting out of bed and assuming wrapper and slippers again. “That, at least, you needn’t worry about. I promise you that I will never do that! And I promise *you*, my heart,” Barbara murmured, bending over the crib, and putting down her hand to loosen, with infinite gentleness, the fine silky dark curls that were caught under Kate’s warmly glowing cheek on the pillow, “I promise you, Katydid, that I’ll fight for you, to the last gasp,” she said. And then, quite composedly, with her loose thick braid of coppery hair making her face look even whiter and more tired than before, she added, to Amy, “Come downstairs and let’s start up that fire. I have to talk to Ward just for a few minutes, and we’ll need you!”

Suddenly Amy opened her arms; her face was working with tears.

“Barbara, I’m so sorry——” she faltered.

Barbara did not break. She put her arms about her sister and laid her cheek against Amy’s.

“I’m sorry, too,” she admitted, with a deep, tired sigh. They went downstairs with their hands locked.

Before they had fairly established themselves before the replenished sitting-room fire, Ward came in, his face reddened with cold night air, his hair dishevelled, and his eyes anxious. The two women looked up as Amy, extending a hospitable hand with her sympathetic glance, patted the seat of an empty armchair.

The man jerked his head backward, toward the hall doorway.

“I’ve got Link here,” he said.

Barbara whitened, bit her lip.

“Bring him in,” she said in a whisper, getting to her feet.

She looked very tall and young and frightened, in her old gray wrapper, with her hair hanging in a loose braid. Her apprehensive eyes, fixed on the door, filled with tears, as Link came quickly in, and her lip trembled piteously.

The man walked over to her and put an arm about her, bending his head to kiss her.

“It’s too bad, dear, but it will be all right!” he said, smiling. But his voice was husky, and Amy thought she had never seen sunburned, florid Link Mackenzie look so pale.

They all sat down, Link in a light chair close to Barbara’s armchair so that he could keep one of her hands tight in his.

“Barry back, eh?” he began, with a quick keen look. “Ward’s been telling me about it.”

His very voice, authoritative and quick and pleasantly husky, wrung Barbara’s heart like a rack. The touch of his hands, so infinitely assured and firm, made her taste the first deathly realization of what renunciation must mean.

“What’s he trying to do?” Link demanded practically.

“What did Barry du Spain ever plan!” Amy exclaimed scornfully.

Ward scratched his head perplexedly, squinted through his glasses, shaking his head.

“Just the same as ever,” he said hopelessly. “He hadn’t a cent, of course, he didn’t know where he was going to sleep. I took him over to Watsons’—I suppose the old lady has called up half the town by this time. He’s queer. One minute he isn’t going to stand in Barbara’s way—the next he’s going to fight for his child.”

“He’s acting,” Barbara contributed, as if thinking aloud, as she stared into the fire.

“He’s always acting!” Amy exclaimed. “He has no claim on Kate!”

Barbara raised heavy eyes to Link’s dark, frowning face.

“Has he, Link?” she asked.

Link shrugged.

“I don’t know!” he said unwillingly. “I suppose there’s never been a case just like this, before. When a man deserts a girl, and there is no marriage, she has full rights to her child. But when a man thinks he is married, and acknowledges the child——”

He hesitated.

“Or when a man chooses to *say* he thought himself married,” Amy amended, “and chooses to *pretend* that he loves his child——”

“Well——” Link conceded, shrugging. And for a moment they were all silent.

“For Kate’s sake,” Barbara presently said, “I have to avoid publicity—I have to wait.” She looked at Link. “We have to wait,” she told him.

He did not answer. His big fingers continued gently to hold her hand; she felt them grind for a second, as if he were smitten by sudden pain, but his face was only filled with sorrow, and with sympathy and understanding.

“We’ll be a nine-days’ wonder!” the girl whispered.

Link’s shrug dismissed that as unimportant.

“We must face the thing day by day and do the best we can,” he said.

Barbara stood up; Amy and Ward had left the room. The fire had taken fresh hold and was burning brightly.

She felt Link’s arms about her; she raised her face to his.

“I thought that this time to-morrow night I would be your wife, Link,” she whispered.

His kiss was crushed against her sweet and tired mouth.

“I’ll wait for you, Barbara!” he told her.

“I know you will!” she whispered back.

“You’ll not go back to him?”

He felt the shudder that ran through her.

“No, never that,” she said. Suddenly she was crying bitterly, hopelessly, and Link took out his big soft handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

Amy and Ward came back, Barbara made no attempt to hide the fact that she had been crying. Link stood with his arm about her; the other two faced them soberly. Amy’s usually placid little face looked drawn and frightened; Ward was very grave.

“That telephone call was from the Hamiltons, Barbara,” Amy faltered, “and we told them the wedding was probably going to be postponed.”

“Oh, yes,” Barbara said faintly, “we shall have to tell them all that.” She looked up at Link. “I am so sorry!” she stammered, her tears beginning to flow again.

“Well, no use talking about it any more,” Ward said, in a pause.

“No, no use.” She disengaged her hand from Link’s and went toward the door, walking slowly, with her head drooping a little, and every line of her body tired and broken. “Good-night, Link. Good-night, everyone,” she said.

“I’ll go up with you!” said Amy. They went up the stairs together.

CHAPTER XXV

Through those mysterious agencies by which news spreads in a small town, it was only a few hours after Barry du Spain's return that all Cottonwood knew that he was home again, shabby, penniless, and without plans—for hadn't Amy's husband, Ward Duffy, taken him to Mrs. Watson's at ten o'clock at night and arranged for a room for him there, and hadn't Barry said, right in the presence of Maxine Watson, that he didn't know how long he'd stay and immediately borrowed ten dollars from Ward Duffy? All Cottonwood was discussing this before midnight, and all Cottonwood was indulging in a surmise—so exact that it amounted to positive knowledge—that Barbara Atherton and Link Mackenzie would not be married next day, whatever happened in the future!

Scores of folk found excuses to loiter past the younger Duffys' old remodelled homestead next morning, a soft August morning, with fog shrouding the world. All the old-fashioned, tree-lined streets were filled with the softly moving ranks of the creamy mist, yet the air was balmy, and toward the southeast a yellow, sulphurous disc, halfway up the wall of the mist, showed where the sun was struggling to force an entrance.

The trees were beaded, the gardens soaked with dew. Voices came oddly abrupt and blanketed this morning, and forms loomed with startling suddenness through the enveloping vapours and disappeared again as suddenly.

The observant townsfolk saw Dr. Ward Duffy come out on his own porch at about half-past eight with pretty young Mrs. Duffy, who had been Amy Atherton a few years ago, accompanying him. Amy had her own baby, small and shapeless and alert, on her shoulder, and at her knee clung Barbara du Spain's beautiful child, a starry-eyed brunette with apricot cheeks and tumbled silky black curls. Little Kate du Spain's sturdy person was buttoned into a romper deliciously faded and deliciously snug; she carried a woolly dog, to which Uncle Ward had to say an affectionate good-bye.

When Ward had started his car and was gone, Amy took the children back into the house and closed the door. There was no sign of Barbara, the heroine of the occasion, the woman who was to have been married in this old house at four o'clock this very afternoon.

But the men and women who were apparently casually watching the house took Kate for a substitute, and lavished upon the child the burden of their curious speculation. All that morning long, Barbara's baby was discussed.

"You'd think she'd want to make the child legitimate," some of the women said.

"But, look, she'd have to give up Link Mackenzie, and the prospect of being the most important woman in this town."

"But, look, she can't marry Link anyway, with Barry hanging round, and probably refusing to give up his child!"

"He hasn't any right to the child!"

"You don't know that. I'll bet you there's plenty of juries would give him half-rights in Kate, especially if Bar'bry refused to marry him. Nine times out of ten, it'd be the woman that was all for the marriage—this is the one time it's the other way, and you don't know that she could get away with it. Kate spending half the time with Barbara, living like a princess in Link Mackenzie's place, and the other time gipsying round with Barry du Spain!"

Then fresh reports: "The newspaper men have just been over to Duffys. Old Mrs. Duffy is there now, and Professor Atherton. They say Barbara's as cool as a cucumber!" and "Loretta Bridges, down at the telephone board, told her mother that the Duffys have been calling up everyone, and saying that the wedding is indefinitely postponed!"

And with great excitement at ten o'clock: "Link's there now—at Ward Duffy's. And Una telephoned Mrs. Watson, and she says Barry du Spain isn't up yet."

If the eager eyes and ears could have followed Link into Amy's little library, they would have found, as he did, Amy, Barbara, and their father sitting there, with Amy's warm-hearted old mother-in-law, who had come over just as soon as the boarders' breakfast was out of the way, much in the same spirit that carried her to births, funerals, and all the other emergencies in the families of her friends.

Indeed, there was something entirely funereal in the atmosphere of the house that was still decorated with wedding flowers. The women looked up apathetically, expectantly, as Link came in, and there was a general sigh as he stooped to give Barbara a quick kiss and took the chair beside her.

"Get any sleep, dear?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, yes! I wakened up rather early," Barbara answered in the same key.

"Has Barry been over?"

"Not yet. He sent a message about half an hour ago. He's coming in at noon."

"Do you know, Amy, just what he plans to do?"

"No," Amy answered, "and we don't think he does. Dad and Judge Cobb went in to see him, he was in bed—all tously and everything, Dad said. He says that he doesn't mean to interfere with Barbara's plans, and a lot of stuff like that, but that, *if* a man believes he is married to a woman, and wants to protect his child when he finds he is not, doesn't the law give him any rights?"

"As a matter of fact, it does not," said Professor Atherton.

"My plan," Link said, with an anxious glance at Barbara's white, tired face, "would be to call off the wedding this afternoon——"

"Oh, yes, we'll have to do that!" Barbara said faintly.

"And then, later in the day, get quietly married, and slip away, and take Kate with us," Link pursued eagerly. "Barry can investigate then, and if he finds he has no claim, he will probably disappear long before we get back."

For one instant a wild light of hope brightened Barbara's eyes, but immediately she subsided into weariness and despondency again, and shook her head.

"No, we can't do that," she said. "He mightn't disappear. He might get ugly. It would put us all into a hopelessly compromised situation. There must be some other way than that?"

"You'll see how patient I can be, Barbara," Link said cheerfully.

"I know already that there is no one else in the world just like you, Link," the girl answered, with brimming eyes. Amy began to cry silently.

"Now I'm going down to the office, just as if it were any other day," Link observed, with a sort of quiet hardiness. "You can get me there at any minute. I'll be up again, around two, and this afternoon I'd like to take you for a drive—bring Kate, if you like. My father suggested that we dine with him. It won't be," Link added, with a smile, "exactly Del Monte, but we must just take the thing day by day, and presently it'll be over, and I'll have my wife, safe in my own home, never to be out of my sight again!"

They were standing, as he said the last words, and Barbara, in the circle of his arms, raised her face for his kiss. But she could not speak.

When he was gone, she sat silent while Amy and Mrs. Duffy murmured on, while Amy's baby slept at his mother's breast, and Professor Atherton took Kate on a long and microscopic tour of the garden. The mist had lifted now, and the sun was hot; there was not a breath to stir the heavy foliage of the high trees.

It was well after twelve when Barry came in. In the broad daylight Barbara could see how shabby he was; his wrists showed at the shiny cuffs of his sleeves, and his trousers had not known a tailor's care for many weeks.

His beautiful face was tired and distressed, and after a nod of greeting to Amy and Mrs. Duffy, he went as far as was humanly possible toward disarming the two hostile, watching women, by his first words.

"Barbara, I've been thinking all this over. It must be hellishly hard for you. I've come to ask you what you want me to do?"

Amy and Mrs. Duffy exchanged glances that were surprised, and even faintly mollified. But Barbara knew this tone only too well.

"Your father and old Cobb came in this morning," Barry pursued. "They tell me I haven't any claim on the baby, Barbara." He looked up, scowling, and finished on a little rueful smile. "Well, that's all right," he said philosophically, "if that's the law, that's the law."

He ground his palms together, his old familiar gesture, looked down at the linked hands that were hanging between his knees, looked up again.

"But I'm going to stay here near her. I'm going to make good and have her know and love her Daddy, whether she belongs to him or not," he said simply. "You're going to be married to Link this afternoon—all right. My loving you—my having thought for three years that you were mine—hasn't anything to do with it. But—but could you leave the baby with me, just for your honeymoon, Barbara? I'd take her down to the ranch; she'd be happy with me, children always are. And maybe—maybe it would help me to live through the days when I know you belong to Link—know that you aren't ever going to be mine any more."

Mrs. Duffy, departing kitchenward with some vague thought of extracting lunch from the confusion and stagnation that reigned there, was visibly affected by this. But Amy had had time to recover herself now, and she directed toward Barry an unconvinced and contemptuous eye.

"I want to talk to you," Barry began, when he and the sisters were alone. He glanced at Amy significantly.

But Amy gave no sign of moving, and instantly Barbara said:

"I'd rather have Amy here, Barry. There's nothing to say."

He came over to her side, as Link had done, and if he did not pointedly exclude Amy from the conversation, at least his turned shoulder and lowered tone indicated how distasteful to him was her presence.

"There's this to say, Barbara," Barry pleaded. "Through it all—no matter what a fool I've been!—it had been because I loved you. I'm not a business man; I can't sell real estate or write policies, but I *did* work for you, in my own way! We—we were happy, Barbara," he faltered, his eyes suddenly filling with tears, his thin, ungroomed hand holding tightly to hers. "Those first days down at the hacienda—when we cleared the cellar—and you fed the hens
_____"

She took her hand away, linked her fingers, and, leaning back in her deep chair, rested her clasped hands on her breast.

“Yes, we were happy then, we were like children then,” she said steadily, and Amy’s heart leaped for joy at hearing the composure, the inflexible determination in her tone. “But we are not children now, Barry. If everything had gone well with us, we might have built that time into a happier time—it might be just a memory of poverty and—and youth, such as so many people have!

“But it didn’t go well with us,” she pursued, as he watched her patiently and anxiously, and Amy’s concerned look enveloped them both, “it didn’t go well. You were the man, and you got out. I was the woman—and I couldn’t get out!”

“I got out to make money, to succeed—for you!” Barry interpolated.

“Yes, I know, that’s what you said, that’s what men always say,” Barbara answered. “I wonder if they ever think how easy it is—to give up the stupid drudgery of the problem they’ve failed to solve and be off to new problems! Travelling on trains—meeting new faces —”

“I hate trains, I hate strangers,” Barry put in sulkily, as she paused.

But Barbara was not listening to him. Her narrowed eyes were fixed on space; she was speaking dreamily, as if to herself.

“I had Kate, little and troublesome and exacting,” she said, after a moment, “and I was chained to the new baby—waiting to be freshly burdened, doubly tied down, and without a cent, and without any knowledge of where the food and clothes were coming from for the next few years!”

“I gave you all I had,” Barry reminded her, very white.

“That’s the woman’s part of it,” Barbara resumed. “Wait—hope—fill the bottles, jump up in the cold nights, wash and cook and sweep, through the lonely days, and realize—as I’ve realized so many times!—that at any minute some pretty girl far away may be asking a man she admires: ‘Are you married, Mr. du Spain?’

“Realizing,” Barbara added, with bitter force, “that the very man whose kitchen one is sweeping, whose little helpless children one is tending, may—if he likes!—tell anyone that he is *not* married! And many of them do like to deny it,” Barbara said, her eyes flashing with angry tears. She dashed them away.

“If anyone ever says that I ever denied that I adored my wife, and was only working and slaving to get back to her——” Barry began hotly. But she silenced him.

“You used to come back from San Francisco and tell me about the women who were crazy about you,” she observed indifferently. “But that isn’t the point. The point was that we started even, you and I—were just a young man and a young girl beginning marriage together. But the cards are always stacked against the woman! Within a few months it was *I*—I who was physically handicapped, who was sick and tearful and helpless, it was I who bore the child and had to submit to your comings and goings in silence, because a woman with a young baby is helpless—she is absorbed, she isn’t attractive to her husband in the old way, and she knows it!”

“I loved you!” Barry said thickly, grinding his palms together, his desolate eyes full of tears.

“You say you did, just as lots of men do. But if *I* loved anyone,” Barbara said, accusation in her voice, “I could make sacrifices for that person. I can stay up all night with Kate, I’d die for Amy or her baby here, and she knows it.

"Men aren't like that. You loved me, but you were furious when you knew the second baby was coming—you left me alone for three days, then. And afterward, when I was sick, and worried, and lonely, caring for Kate all day and all night, washing, cooking, feeding the chickens—you didn't love me then!"

"I did!" Barry affirmed resentfully, "you know I did! It was *because* I felt it so deeply, *because* it made me so frantic to see you tired and worried and ill, that I couldn't *stand* it!"

Barbara looked at him speculatively for a long while. But there was no indecision in her quiet look.

"Well, anyway, you went away," she said unemotionally. "And a man who was mentally twisted, who is in the state asylum for the insane now, came creeping down there, in the dark of night——"

She fell silent, and in her eyes was the reflection of an unforgettable horror.

Barry looked up quickly, his eyes resentful. But if he would have said: "That wasn't my fault!" he thought better of it, and did not speak.

"Fortunately," Barbara went on, "Link came down that night—it was my birthday night. He brought us home——"

Her dreamy eyes were full of a strange liquid light now, and her lips touched with a smile.

"They saved me, with surgery and blood transfusions and stimulants," she finished, after a pause. "But, except for that, I would have died!"

Barry was studying her scornfully, an ugly expression in his eyes.

"And so your life belongs to your hero!" he sneered.

Amy made a scandalized little exclamation and looked at him indignantly. But before she could speak Barbara spoke.

"Yes, my life belongs to Link," she acknowledged gravely. Her thoughts went to the stately big white brick mansion under the trees, the awninged windows, the dreaming garden and lawns. And for a moment she forgot the events of the past twenty-four hours, and imagined herself Link's wife, mistress of Link's splendid home.

"If I had Link's money——" Barry began insinuatingly.

Amy said. "Oh shame!" indignantly. But Barbara, long used to his argumentative characteristics, did not even flush.

"You have nothing, Barry," she told him. "And just this once, life has given the wife the whip hand. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would be *I—I* with my two or three little babies, and my empty pocketbook, who was pleading to be remarried. I would be haunting the courts, and you would be free!

"But this once it is different. If you and I *were* legally married, to save my character with all the women of this town I would have to go back to the hacienda with you this afternoon, give up my job, perhaps bear more babies, and go on washing and struggling and cooking, because you were my husband, and that's marriage.

"I couldn't even divorce you for desertion or non-support; you had given me a home, and you were working as hard as you could to support it. Perhaps, after awhile, I might have gotten a divorce. But even then to marry me Link would have had to give up his faith, and his job, and his father and sisters!

"Yes, just this once," Barbara concluded, in a silence, "just this once it's all different. I'm free. And after generations of women who have accepted the man's law, and crept into legitimate marriage because of the children, I'm going to stay free!"

"So that's your decision?" Barry asked, in a heavy, menacing tone, after a pause.

"That *has* to be my decision, Barry."

"And Kate's side of it—her growing up in another man's house, with her father right here in town, that doesn't matter?"

"That's the lesser evil, Barry."

She did not speak so much coldly as with a sort of deliberate patience, but the man's face reddened as if she had struck him.

"I thought you were the sort of woman who would stick to a man when he was down and out!" he said slowly and bitterly.

Barbara, to Amy's amazement, remained unmoved.

"Perhaps I am not," she answered, in the silence.

For a long minute Barry continued to regard her steadily, a sort of cold fury in his eye. Then he got to his feet.

"Well, it must be strange to be able to treat another human being—and one who loves you!—as you've treated me," he said, with a hard laugh.

"It *is* strange," Barbara said slowly, as if she were musing.

Barry went out of the house immediately afterward. His face was set and white, and his eyes strangely darkened. But he walked along the street with his old jaunty swing, and it was Barbara who collapsed, and who felt frightened, confused, and sick when he was gone.

Link returned at about half-past two, and sat quietly beside the couch where she was lying; her blue eyes were ringed in faint lavender shadows, and her face was pale. She put her fingers in his limply, and while they talked, he held them in his own brown, hard hand.

"All the town buzzing, I suppose, Link?"

"Let 'em buzz. They have to buzz about something!"

"It's horrible!" Barbara said in a whisper, with shut eyes.

"It's just one of those things that happen," Link said vaguely, indifferently.

"What do you think will happen next, Link?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I know something will, and whatever it is, it will give us our cue. And what do we care—we love each other! Lucy, by the way, is all upset, and sent you her love, and said she would come in when things had quieted down a little. Margaret's coming in late this afternoon. She was going off to Tahoe to-morrow, anyway, and I think she'll still go."

"What do you suppose Barry will do?" Barbara asked fearfully.

Amy, who had come in and was sitting beside the window, said promptly:

"I know this. Mrs. Watson told him she needed that room to-night, and so he won't stay there!"

"Poor Barry!" Link said. "I know that he went into the Bank, and tried to borrow some money, but they wouldn't hear of it."

"Well, perhaps if they treat him that way, he'll get out!" Amy observed, with vindictive satisfaction.

Ward, returning from his afternoon round, could add to the report.

"Harris was telling me that Barry came down to the garage about one o'clock and asked for a car to take him out to the ranch," Ward said, "but Harris wouldn't do it on credit. From what he said, I imagine he went down to the ranch anyway, and I imagine he walked. Anyway, he started on foot. He's sure to get a lift, if it's only on a haycart, this season."

Barbara lay still, listening, thinking. And when Link went back to the office for a little while she lay still, thinking of Barry.

Poor, handsome, headstrong Barry, once a happy, gifted, popular boy, drifting about the town, laughing and writing rhymes, picnicking with Barbara Atherton down on the old Mission Creek, playing writing games with the Athertons in the winter evenings! Jealous, eager, clever—how had it happened that life had served him so badly before his thirtieth year!

Rejected by Barbara, separated from his child, without a cent, without friends or credit, utterly alone. Suddenly she found her heart aching for him painfully, with a sort of obsession. She imagined him, shabby and tired and discouraged with her father's and Judge Cobb's verdict cutting away his last defences, and with her own denial of friendship to add to theirs.

Whatever his faults—and no one knew Barry's better than she!—no man quite deserved this; to be made ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of his own township, to sneak away from Washington Street in the gathering autumn dusk and hide his head.

Alone—it was a horrible thing to be. It would be especially horrible to Barry, with his overdeveloped sensitiveness and his overdeveloped imagination.

Suddenly, hurriedly, she was sitting erect on the couch, she was straightening her disordered dress and buttoning herself into a long, warm coat. A soft shapeless hat was pulled down over her unruly copper hair, and Barbara, pulling on a pair of loose gloves, had slipped out of the side door and was walking the two blocks that separated the senior Duffys' house from the junior Duffys'.

There was an old riding horse in the stable that was far back of the mansarded house, on a quiet lane. Sometimes Ward had ridden him, years ago; now he spent most of his time idling in the yard. Barbara had had more than one early morning ride on his back of late months with Link on his famous buckskin beside her.

This afternoon she put the saddle over his back with trembling fingers, fastened the straps nervously, quickly, and slipped the bit in between his enormous yellow teeth; almost as she opened the barn door into the lane she climbed into the saddle, and they were moving toward the highway to the south.

Perhaps some of the townspeople saw her, and wondered. But she saw nothing and nobody; she was only vaguely conscious of the miles and the moving scene about her.

The garden fences and trees stopped, flat brown fields, struck by the full flood of the westering sun, were on either side. It was after three o'clock, and Portuguese, Italian, and Japanese children were straggling down the long miles toward the outlying ranches.

Barbara rode on at an easy gallop. She had not the slightest idea of what her intention was in going down to the ranch. Nothing had formed itself in her mind to say; she merely felt a deep need of Barry's presence, she felt that she must find him, and that he must hear her.

At Milo's one little store she stopped and bought bread and butter and sugar and coffee; the Portuguese proprietor brought back the same sharp pain to her heart, the same fluttering urgent fear, by explaining volubly why he had not felt himself justified in trusting Mr. du Spain with a small grocery order.

“Oh? How long ago was he here?”

“Hour, maybe. Maybe not so much.”

Feeling oddly a pioneer, with her basket over her arm, and with a wild excitement growing even through the heavy sadness of her heart, Barbara remounted and took the familiar road from the highway to the hacienda.

CHAPTER XXVI

Its aspect shocked her; it looked so lonely, so deserted in the sunset. The long, pipe-tiled roofs seemed to have shrunk down under the shabby peppers and eucalyptus; the fences were broken, the walls and roofs of the barns showed actual gaps. In the patio drifts of leaves had packed and rotted; Barbara felt that they might have been away, Barry and Kate and she, for eight years, rather than as many months.

Sunshine was red and gracious over the whole place, and the sea lisped its eternal whisper on the shore. The flagged floor of the patio was already grown with weeds and littered with fallen branches and leaves, but the door of the kitchen stood open; Barry was here.

She went to the door noiselessly and looked within.

He was at the old table, he had flung himself carelessly into a chair. His head was down on his arm, his rich black hair in careless disorder.

All about him was the desolation of the big room that had been their home for some eighteen or twenty tempestuous, hopeful, busy months. The stove was cold now, rusted and cracked, the fireplace, in which a few silvery ashes puffed mildly, as Barbara crossed the room, was cold. The world outside was dazzling with light, but in here there was already twilight, between the low, smoke-stained ceiling and the satiny old tiles of the floor.

Memory came back in a chilling rush. The couch where she and Kate had slept, the sink where she had struggled with can-openers and dish towels, the old drying-line still dangling above the stove, the old brass lamp still occupying the centre of the table.

A thousand recollections of soup and lard, spots and smells, hunger and weariness, of mice and chickens, of special fatigues and special coldnesses and darknesses assailed her, and she looked about the dreary place as a prisoner might look upon an old cell, with a shudder. Kate had been born in this room.

She put her hand on Barry's shoulder, and he started up in amazement and caught at her fingers, with a cry of incredulity and longing, almost as if he thought her a ghost.

"Barbara! Barberry Bush!"

She could not speak; she stood holding his hands, breathing deeply, trying to smile.

"Who's with you?" Barry asked quickly with a glance at the door.

"Nobody. I came down alone."

"Driving?"

"No. On the Duffys' old horse."

She sat down at the table, and he knelt at her feet, and put her hands to his lips. And all the joy and beauty of youth had returned to his face.

"Barbara, in all your life you never did anything as kind as this! Oh, my God, if you knew what I've been going through!"

Suddenly she felt that he was only a little boy—her little boy. She freed a hand, and laid it on his hair.

"I can imagine it!" she said briefly.

Breaking all at once he put his arms about her, and dropped his head on her breast as if he were exhausted. His eyes were closed, he was breathing deeply, like a spent child.

"Poor Barry—my poor old Barry!" Barbara said, infinitely tender. And her voice sounded like a silver bell in the silence of the room.

“Oh, Barberry, Barberry, don’t be kind to me—you’ll kill me! I love you so!” he sobbed, clinging to her. And as he pressed his face against hers, grasping her tightly, she felt that his cheek was wet. “I was going to kill him!” he whispered.

“Link?”

“Link. Damn him! And I wanted to kill you—Amy—everyone who is laughing at me—who hates me——”

Barbara smoothed his hair.

“They don’t hate you. They aren’t laughing at you. You mustn’t take—things—so hard!”

“Oh, I don’t care!” he gasped, on a great breath of exhaustion and relief. “I don’t care what they do, if you’re not against me—if you’re not angry with me. Amy! She doesn’t count. None of them count but you.”

The full revulsion of his feeling had broken him completely, and he could only hold her tightly, as if the touch of warm, human sympathy were his anchor and his healing.

“You came down here alone!”

“I got worrying,” Barbara confessed, with her blue-eyed smile. She sat down, Barry knelt beside her. “I couldn’t have them saying—thinking—such things of you,” she went on.

Barry leaned backward a little and looked at her with wet eyes; his face was flushed, his hair disordered.

“You are the most wonderful woman in the world,” he said slowly, solemnly. “I thought, a few minutes ago, that I hated all life! But see—see how easily you bring it all back, Barberry Bush! That you came to me, all alone——

“Why,” Barry faltered, his eyes suddenly brimming again, “you *must* still love me a little, you must still care for me a little, or you wouldn’t have done that?”

Her arms were linked loosely about his neck, she rested her face against his hair.

“I don’t know,” she said wearily, and sighed.

“A little?” he asked jealously, something of his old buoyancy already returned to his voice.

“I know that I can’t leave you to fight it out alone, with them all against you, Barry. We’re not legally married, you and I. And yet there is something stronger, something deeper than the law—where a man and a woman are concerned. I belonged to you—for all those months. I belong to you still, somehow. To-day, when you were shabby, and the Bank turned you down . . .”

Barbara was speaking gently as if half to herself. Now her voice drifted into silence, and they remained silent for a full minute, the man’s arms locked about her waist, as he knelt before her, and her hand on his hair.

“Women are like that, I suppose, or some women are,” the girl began again, in a puzzled voice. “It came to me—that I had to stand by you, just as I would by Kate. There’s no other way of happiness for me.”

“Barberry,” Barry said solemnly, when she had stopped speaking, and for awhile there had been no sound in the dim old room, “you won’t be sorry. This is the turning point of my whole life. I’ll make you proud of me yet.”

Did she believe him? She would have liked to believe him. But under the familiar accents, the eager, confident promises, she only saw and heard the old Barry, undisciplined and vacillating and changeable with every wind.

He believed himself, she knew, as he gripped her with the hungry fervour or relief from unendurable solitude, and poured out to her the story of the past few months, the disappointments and disillusionments, the frustrated designs and ruined hopes.

There had been a presentation of *Napoleon Third* in New York City; Barry's pocketbook was bulging with flattering press notices. He was the new Keats, the new Shelley; Du Spain was to be "watched for further demonstrations of his extraordinary gift."

But the play had been performed but eight times, and the producer was even now trying to come to some settlement with the outraged members of an unpaid caste. Barbara could only gather that Barry had assuaged his disappointment in a prolonged interval of intemperance, before he had managed to work, borrow, and beg his way home. Thirty-two hundred miles from New York City to Cottonwood, penniless, discouraged, alone—it had been a nightmare, he said.

"I kept thinking if I would once get to you, Barberrry Bush, once see you and get my arms about you again, nothing would matter! I kept thinking that if once I were here, safe, talking it over with you, everything would be all right! As the miles went by, and I got nearer and nearer, it was like a sort of fever.

"Barberrry—Barberrry—Barberrry——" he repeated the name, after a pause. "Your eyes, and your old blue kitchen aprons, and your way of seeing things clearly—I was so hungry for you! I thought that to be just once more in the old kitchen, down here, talking, with the baby in her high chair, and the chickens picking around the patio, and the smell of the sea coming in, under the pepper trees——"

"You don't know how crowded, how dirty and close and mercenary the big cities are. Everybody jammed against everybody else, everything costing money—money, money, you can't turn around without it!"

"This old place, shabby and poor as it is, seemed like heaven to me. I made up my mind I'd take a job with Fox, work around here on Sundays and holidays, play with Kate—I made up my mind that I'd make it all up to you——"

He paused, staring into space, his dark eyes lighted with hope and with dreams. Barbara did not speak, her gaze was fixed thoughtfully, with a sort of wise and sorrowful speculation, on his face.

Barry roused himself from a moment of trance.

"And then I heard that you had taken that silly business of the clergyman seriously—Ferguson, Hutchinson, what was his name?" he went on, in a changed voice—"and that you were going to be married to Link Mackenzie—my God, I almost went crazy! I'd seen the marriage validity story in one of the New York papers, and that all the couples he married were being remarried. And if I thought about it at all, I only thought that you'd hate that sort of notoriety, and that you and I would of course be married again, when I got back."

He shook his head, as if to shake away his thoughts.

"Lord, what a day—what a day!" he ejaculated. "I lay awake almost all night, worrying—heartbroken, after what you had said. This morning your father and that old ass Cobb came in, to tell me that I was all wrong in thinking Kate was my property and you were my wife, and that you were going to move into the Mackenzie place.

"Then Ward, and Amy, and that beastly Mrs. Watson practically turning me out of her house, and the new man at the Bank—I'd never seen him before, using his damnable little brief authority—even Castro, at Milo, wouldn't trust me for some bread and meat."

The woman was hardly hearing him. Her eyes were fixed on space, and her thoughts already going forward to what must be her future.

The dark, plastered, distempered walls of the kitchen seemed to typify it; she knew their every stain and crack by heart. She knew the smell of the pungent pepper leaves, and the

sweet aromatic breath of the eucalyptus tassels, brought in from the patio on the late afternoon breezes. She knew how low the autumn sun must be, before that triangle of blood-red light found its way under the narrow-tiled porch that sheltered the western window and shone on the kitchen wall.

The past eight months had vanished in mist; she was Barbara du Spain again, Kate was asleep in the adjoining bedroom, there were bowls of soup and stewed tomatoes and cold rice pudding in the gaunt, mice-scented pantry for supper. Her old aprons, her old problems; the gathering of warm brown eggs with tiny wisps of feather clinging to them, the rinsing of wet clothes, and snapping them in the dim, smoky kitchen, so that from them a fine, warm fog blew in her face—the old life seemed to live again.

Again there were bay logs in the fireplace, with creamy sap bubbling from their fresh-cut ends, again driftwood, smooth and silvery, was burning blue on the fire. Again there would be pools in January, caked with ice, and ice in the shrivelled cold wheel tracks that spread like antennæ all over the flat meadows, and again the rain—falling and falling and falling in the dim, quiet, empty afternoons.

Silence, through the long dreamy days, except for the babble of the baby, and the intermittent creak of the windmill, and the occasional scandalized undertone of a squawking hen. Stewed onions, and sponge cake to-night, and milk, and the sausages again— She came out of her musing with a start. Barry had rested his head against her breast once more, he appeared utterly wearied, utterly at peace. Now and then he shifted slightly, and tightened the hold of his embracing arms, and shook, like a terrier, the rich black mop that had fallen carelessly backward from his forehead, and when he did this he muttered: “My God, I love you!”

It was his old phrase, when he was tired of altercation, of argument, of anger. Many a night he had left his own bed, in the icy chamber next the kitchen, and crept repentant and wearied back to Barbara’s arms, back to Barbara’s kisses. And it was always with the words, fervent, hungry, passionately loving: “My God, I love you!”

“You won’t desert me, Barberry Bush?” he murmured, after awhile.

“Never, dear.”

“Is it going to be terribly hard for you?”

A fleeting thought of the big rooms of the Mackenzie house assailed her, the elm branches moving in summer sunshine outside of the opened windows; Tilly busy in the big sunshiny kitchen, Link’s car parked by the side door, croquet balls clicking on the shadowed lawn, and white-clad women and men idling and talking under the trees.

And when the world went away from the Mackenzie home, and twilight fell, she thought of a man and woman turning together toward the quiet and beauty of their own big rooms, talking together, reading together, breakfasting in morning brightness—always together. The awninged windows, the polished floors with their sprawled silky rugs, the winter fires, the spring trophies of wild iris and the first lilacs—only a part of the home they loved. . . .

She stroked Barry’s hair slowly. She mustn’t think of Link, now. She was back at the hacienda with Barry.

“It won’t be as hard as feeling that you needed me and I failed you,” she said. “Nobody has a right to say to anyone else what I said to you to-day, Barry; it isn’t true that one person is a failure, or a success, more than another. We’re all in the same boat.”

She fell silent, but her hand went on slowly, gently stroking the dark head that was resting against her heart.

“Barbara, stay in my boat,” he besought her humbly, “and I’ll steer better this time!”

A long pause.

“I think you will!” she said.

“We’ll begin all over again. I’m not going to try to write poetry any more—I’m going in with Fox. You’ll see how I sell real estate!”

A weary premonition of difficulties already chilled her. Link had planned to subdivide and sell the ranch, slowly, over a space of years. This was to have been Kate’s portion. Was it conceivable that Barry would agree to this arrangement? In any case, he could hardly be working for Fox in the interest of a rival development.

No matter. Plenty of time to think of that!

“Barry, have you anything to eat, here?”

She walked about the kitchen, her old, old battleground, straightening and investigating. The humped blankets on the couch smelled musty; there were no sheets. Barbara stooped to open a dark doorway under the iron sink; an odour of pipes, mould, and dampness rushed out.

“You must make yourself a good fire, here, dry these things out. And I brought some bread and coffee—there must be some things here. We came down, Amy and Ward and I, one Sunday this summer, and packed a few sheets and the silver spoons.”

“I’ll be in cotton wool,” Barry assured her, undaunted.

“Here’s salt—here’s sugar. I’ll stop at Maria’s on my way back and ask them to bring you down some milk.”

“Ask her if she has any cream,” Barry suggested.

And this trifling addition was so exactly like him that Barbara felt suddenly checked and cold, with a sort of despair creeping through her veins. He was entirely incapable of understanding; he would always be incapable of understanding.

“You are the best woman I ever knew, Barberrry Bush. Coming down here to-day was the loveliest thing you ever did, or anyone ever did!”

He said it over and over again, but she knew he did not understand this either.

“You’ll not be too uncomfortable, Barry?”

“Uncomfortable! When I’ve been hungering for weeks and weeks just to get back?”

The girl gave a last look about the dark room; a woodfire had been started now, and was fuming in long writhing banners of smoke about the damp logs. Occasional whiffs of stifling smoke puffed into the kitchen. A pool of rusty water stood on the range; the flagged floor was littered with chips and leaves.

And still the triangle of blood-red sinking sunshine came in at the low western doorway, and lay bright on the discoloured old plaster wall. The garden side of the kitchen, the eastern front, was cold and dark and shadowy, beyond the iron-barred window.

They stood in the doorway, parting, the young pair who had lived here once as man and wife. Barry’s hair was tumbled into a dark disorderly mop, his face was flushed and stained with tears, his dark eyes alight with emotional excitement. Barbara looked tired, tall and gentle and strangely subdued, in her rough, long buttoned coat and little soft hat.

“I know you, and I know Link!” Barry exulted with all a child’s satisfaction in being sorry and being forgiven. “And I know that he isn’t your sort. We’re different from these rubes, Barberrry. You wait—we’ll show them!”

A strained look came into her suddenly whitened face.

“Barry—you mustn’t forget that I’m giving him up for you. You mustn’t forget that I—I’ve come to love him——”

His confident laugh interrupted the stammered words.

“It won’t take me long to make you forget Link Mackenzie! He isn’t the kind of man to hold you very long.”

She dared not think of the sunburned face with its grave concern, and its sudden, transforming smile for her, the shoulders that were squared, under Link’s favourite tweeds, to carry her burdens, to make her life easier. Link’s finely groomed big lean hands, busy with the wheel of the car—with the fountain pen he always produced when calculations of time or money were in order—with the croquet mallet—how strong they were—how kind they were. . . .

“Barry—I’ve got to get over, or to partly get over, feeling as I do toward Link, before there could be any talk of our—of our really commencing again—as man and wife, I mean.”

He was looking down at her from his superb height, his smiling eyes unafraid. He began gently to shake her to and fro by the shoulders, an old custom that typified a sort of mental and spiritual shaking as well.

“Why, you don’t think you’re in love with him?” he chaffed.

Barbara’s colour came back in a glorious rush.

“No, not in love,” she answered. “What I feel is more than that. Just plain—love. Just—all that a woman can feel for a man. Just—worship, that’s all!”

Barry drew back, and an affronted look came into his eyes.

“Why do you talk that way?” he said, displeased. “Link Mackenzie happened to come along when you needed him, and afterward loaned you some money. That’s all! And I’ve adored you all my life.”

Barbara was looking at him thoughtfully, speculatively, unstirred by what he said, although she was still breathing a little quickly from the emotion of her own admission, a few moments before.

“I just wanted you to understand, Barry,” she said mildly.

“Understand that you’re in love with Link Mackenzie!” Barry interpreted, magnificently scornful. “That’s a nice way for us to start over,” he added. “I come back to you and put all my cards on the table! I haven’t made money, I grant you, I haven’t been successful. All right—that isn’t my fault. Gissing and Poe and Keats and Shelley weren’t so successful, either, if it comes to that. . . .”

The old vibrating, fatally facile tone, flowing on and on without effort. As she watched him, pouring out the angry, eager sentences, the flush of generous self-immolation that had brought her down to him, in his hour of need to-day, died coldly to ashes, and sober reason and a simple sense of what was expedient began to take its place.

“What got you,” Barry was saying, with a faint accent on the last word, and his old air of being able completely to understand and interpret the ways of women, “what got you was the Mackenzie house, and the Mackenzie money—I don’t mean entirely—I mean that any woman would take those into consideration. Link—what’s he done? With his red face and his damn Y. M. C. A. airs—talking to employees and posing around in his roadster!”

“Barry, don’t talk foolishly.” This was in the old, restrained tone of rigidly enforced endurance. “I tell you,” Barbara went on patiently as the man was silent, satisfying himself with only a smouldering and scornful look, “that it *is* hard for me to do this, that—we might as well face it, Barry!—everything is going to be hard. You’ll have to get a job, you’ll have to make good in the eyes of Cottonwood, for my sake, and for Kate’s——”

“Oh? That’s it, is it? Perhaps Link would give me a job!”

Silence. Barbara sighed.

“You waste time, taking that tone,” she reminded him, looking away, slightly pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes.

He was suddenly penitent.

“Yes, I know. You’re quite right. I’ve got to get a job, do I?—and satisfy all the old biddies in town that I’m capable of supporting a wife. All right.”

Folding his long arms, setting his jaw determinedly, he stared into space, his nostrils moving stormily in the violence of emotion this concession cost him.

“Link and I have been talking of dividing this place into lots, Barry. Perhaps you could get into that—that would be a dignified way to work your way into real estate, anyway.”

His startled eyes met hers, amazement kept him silent for an incredulous half minute.

“What place?”

“This place. The ranch.”

“Divide it!”

“Divide it into a hundred and seventeen lots, and sell them off gradually. Link doesn’t want to make anything sensational or rapid about it. Joe Miller thinks it’s a sound proposition—they’re talking of calling it Southsea Garden.’ ”

He stared at her wildly, laughed aloud.

“This place! *My* place!”

“It isn’t your place. You gave it to me.”

A moment of consideration. Then he said slowly:

“I did give it to you. But you were my wife!”

“Whether I was your wife or not, you gave it to me. It was just at the time we were married, you remember you and I used to discuss it, and the mortgage, and so on, and you said you wanted me to have it. The deed was signed two days before we were married, as a matter of fact.”

“My God—my place! And you’ve sold it to Link, have you?”

“No, I haven’t sold it to him at all. I tell you we are merely discussing this, in Kate’s interest.”

“Ah, well!” he breathed naturally again. “I thought you’d committed yourself!” he said, in relief. And then, in an undertone: “Isn’t that like those tight-fisted Mackenzies—dragging my kid in, pretending it’s all being done for the baby’s benefit! Well. I guess we can double-cross him this time. Nothing,” he ended firmly, “nothing would ever persuade me to divide this place or part with it—I’ll tell Link Mackenzie that, or you can! By the Lord Harry, it was about time I came back!”

Barbara offered no combative suggestion to this, perfectly familiar with the evanescent quality of his moods. The more violently he railed, the less difficult would be the business of winning him to a perfectly different standpoint. But every word he had said had steeled her own spirit anew, and it was in a tone that he had never heard from her in his life before that she could say:

“There’s no need to quarrel about it. When you see it all on paper, you’ll realize that it is ridiculous to go on paying taxes and interest on this place, and getting no revenue at all from it. We couldn’t sell it as a ranch for the price of the mortgage—Link put a second mortgage on, for me, only a few months ago, for almost a thousand dollars’ worth of overdue taxes. The Bank has carried us for two years.”

“It’s my home—my grandfather’s home! I love every inch of it,” Barry persisted.

“You would have to live in town, Barry——” Barbara was beginning, when he interrupted her.

“I? You, too! You’d be with me!”

“That’s too far ahead—any possibility of that—for us to discuss now,” she said soberly, bravely.

“Any possibility! Then what, in God’s name, brought you here?” he demanded, instantly furious.

“Because,” she answered steadily, “I wanted you to know that one person would stand by you. I didn’t want you to feel that all the world was against you—or that I thought all the fault had been on your side!”

“Ha!” he ejaculated scornfully, leaning against the doorway now, with his arms crossed on his breast, “*thank* you!”

She could ignore his irony, in her desperate eagerness not to fail him, or rather, not to fail the finer instincts in herself that his need had called into life.

“Barry,” she pleaded, “can’t you be natural, simple about all this? We shall never get out of the bog unless you are. Can’t you get a job and work your way up as other men do? Everyone in town will stand back of you, if you’ll just stop—*acting*, stop dramatizing yourself——” Barbara groped for words. “If you’ll just show that you are in earnest, and mean to make good!”

“Oh, that’s what you came down to tell me, is it? Take a job in some life insurance office and board at the Watsons’?”

“That’s a silly tone to take,” she commented coldly and disapprovingly in the pause.

“It’s so like you, Barbara,” he presently said stingingly, “to come galloping down here, regular Paul Revere stuff, with a lot of guff about loving me, and not wanting to fail me, and then putting a lot of strings on it—and qualifying and conditioning it, like an old maid! If I’ll pour myself into the damn’ Methodist mould, and scrape and lift my hat every time Link Mackenzie goes by——”

“Good-bye. I’m sorry it’s turned out like this!” the girl presently interrupted the stream abruptly. She had failed, it was no use. She walked away from the kitchen door and across the patio toward her horse. Barry followed her restlessly, uncomfortably, as she knew he would.

She untied the halter, put a left foot on the old chopping block, mounted to the saddle. It was still broad daylight outside, toward the west the sun was sinking regally in enveloping veils of opal fog. The sea was shining in wrinkled levels of gently seething and swelling silk. Gulls wheeled and piped over the long, feather-edged curves of the surf. Toward the south, a score of headlands cut the shore into scallops, the wandering brown-white line of the coast road disappeared over the low rise of the hills. Abalone Rock stood bold and dark against the light.

Barry came impulsively to her saddle horn, clasped his hands about the smooth old mahogany leather. Her own roughly gloved hands, holding the reins, rested upon them.

“I’m sorry!” he said, all little boy again. “I’ll do anything you say.” Her tired face brightened with a mother’s smile.

“We’ll talk about it again,” she promised, almost at the limit of her endurance.

“Dearest, I’ve tired you!”

“No.” She was going to cry, she was going to cry, she was going to cry, and it would be fatal to cry.

“You wonderful, wonderful woman!” he said. “To come down here and comfort your unsatisfactory, disappointing old boy, when all the world was against him! Kiss me, Barberry Bush.”

Her beautiful, weary face, the exquisite mouth trembling a little, the black-fringed eyes, dark with unshed tears, stooped over his obediently.

“Don’t worry about me, you’ve saved me!” he said. “I’ll be fine, now, I’ll stay here and read and rest, and Tomas and I’ll go after abalone on the cliffs, and in a few days I’ll press my suit, and shave, and come into town, and we’ll settle everything.”

“It’ll all turn out right, Barry,” she said, with death in her heart.

“I love you!” There were confidence, pride, devotion in the old words, reverentially said, emphasized with another kiss. He called the same phrase after her as she rode away.

CHAPTER XXVII

Morning came. Afternoon. Morning again. A quiet foggy afternoon and a mist-shrouded morning. It was autumn now, and although the noons were hot and still and flower-scented, dark came early, and lights were lighted on Amy's breakfast table.

"If I am good, it will all come out right," Barbara said. "The only thing is to be good, not to mind one's pride being hurt, not to hurt anybody."

She lay on the bed in Amy's spare room, where the new chintz curtains awaited hanging, and the new paper glowed with roses and twisted blue ribbons; she went downstairs to push aside untasted meals; she followed Amy to the sheltered side garden, where only a glimpse of their white skirts, or the sound of the children's voices, betrayed to the passers-by that they were sitting under the trees.

It was all strange and unreal. It was like walking through a dream.

Friday passed, Saturday passed. It was a warm, sleepy Sunday, and Barbara told herself that they must be at breakfast, for there were cornbread and bacon. Amy was talking resentfully of the staring at church. But what did staring matter? Somebody was suggesting that they sit out of doors, it was going to be hot. Later they would go for a drive.

"Dad, dear." This was Barbara herself speaking, in an odd, lifeless voice. "I saw Mrs. Rudd yesterday. She hasn't been able to find anyone. So I'll probably go back to school tomorrow. It's really better to go on as if nothing had happened——"

She stopped on an uncertain note, looked at him steadily without expression, almost as if the words had no meaning for her, and went away, went slowly upstairs.

"Barberry, your heart's breaking—your heart's breaking!" Amy mourned, catching her in her arms, during the course of the long, slow morning.

"I don't think so." Barbara spoke carefully, gently, like a person who has been very ill.

"Dearest, can you get through it?"

"Minute by minute, perhaps." Her voice was hurt, puzzled. "What else, Amy, can I do?" she demanded simply.

Amy could make no reply. To have Barbara's castle in the dust, to have her return to boarding at the Duffys', and school teaching again, to have the beautiful rooms, the beautiful life, that had been awaiting her, empty, was almost too much for Amy to bear. What it must mean to her sister she dared not think.

Link came to see her; she raised heavy, troubled blue eyes to his, watching his face anxiously, while he talked, as if trying to follow him.

"We have to take every day for itself, Link. It's impossible to plan. Now I only feel so horribly—tired, so *broken*, all the time!"

She was to have been married on Thursday; now Friday and Saturday had come and gone dreamily, slowly. Barbara liked to have Amy's little baby in her arms; she was never far from Kate.

In the heat of the burning, perfect autumn Sunday morning she and Amy and the children were upstairs, in Barbara's room. Amy had been talking, desultorily, timidly, of the future, but her sister had not appeared to listen. Presently, Amy went away, carrying her baby off for his nap, and when she came back she brought Kate.

Kate had had an untimely mid-morning bath, and her rich black curls were damp. Her soft, dark little face glowed like a ripe apricot, her satiny little body, in the pale blue rompers, the pale blue socks, the pipe-clayed little ankle-strap slippers, was without flaw, from top to toe. The restless, perfect little hands, the firm baby legs, the way she planted her feet and narrowed her heavily fringed black eyes and worked her wild strawberry of a mouth were all characteristic of only one person in the world—of Kate. Already she was an entity; she was “my.” “My” knew what she wanted, she was full of imperious wiles in getting it.

“Wipe my’s tears dorf,” she would command, in self-pity. “Dump my up! Dump my down!”

They were all Kate’s slaves: Amy’s servants, Ward, Kate’s grandfather, everyone. The beautiful dark hair was brushed almost as often as it was kissed, the little body was bathed and powdered, the big plates of Kate’s carefully apportioned cereals and vegetables and fruits were the supremely important question of the day.

Barbara had often dreamed of her future as the oldest child in the Mackenzie household. Kate with a baby brother. Kate at six, in pongee and sandals; Kate at ten, running off to school, under the elms. In blue jackets, blouses, and tams, in Russian cottons gay with red and black and yellow embroidery, in dancing-school pumps and Leghorn hats . . .

With Barry home again, the child’s little fortune had suffered a bitter eclipse. Barbara, seating Kate beside her on the wide bed this morning, looked at her in sorrow and fear. What sort of a future was awaiting a child of Barry du Spain? Little Kate. Would she grow up in the dark hacienda kitchen, going with her mother to feed the chickens, picking up the little wisps of feathers and sea shells for toys, looking apprehensively at her father when he was angry, watching the varied activities of washing and cooking, sweeping and sewing, until she was old enough to share them? Would her life be much the same as that of the dark-eyed little Portuguese children at Tomas’s humble, dark shanty?

“I mind for her,” Barbara said to Amy with a restless twist of her body and a tired sigh.

“Mind?”

“Mind her name being associated with Barry far more than my own. You can stand anything yourself, Amy. But it’s when you see your children deprived or suffering!”

Amy, as was usual, seemed to find nothing inspired to say. But one might always direct the conversation to Kate.

“She’s exhausted, after that yelling spell,” Amy commented, looking at the child. “She’s going to sleep. What time did she have you awake this morning?”

“About dawn. About six, I imagine. She cried as if her little heart would break. She *is* going to sleep, the darling!” Barbara said. And then, with a radiant light in her violet-ringed, weary eyes: “Amy, this is the first time she’s done this in ever so long—gone to sleep with her head against my arm.”

“What difference the children make!” Amy mused. “How much freer you’d feel, without her, to live your own way—to settle this in the easiest way for you.”

Barbara was musing, she nodded without moving her eyes from the lovely little gipsy face that was blind and unconscious in the curve of her arm.

“Odd how many mothers would say ‘yes’ to that,” she answered, “and yet not one of them would give up a hair of a baby’s head.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Amy agreed. And she sat silent awhile, in the wicker chair, thinking.

“Peaceful up here! I wish I never had to leave this room,” Barbara murmured.

“Listen! Ward’s calling me—oh, dear, he’ll wake them both up!” Amy, her ear tuned to hear the doctor’s voice, in all his irregular comings and goings, said, bending her head sideways. She ran to the door, disappeared noiselessly through it, and closed it without sound. “He’s got to *stop* that coming to the door and hissing my name!” Barbara heard her murmur, as she fled.

Then there was a long silence. Barbara thought idly that it must be a well-built house. Amy and Ward, and perhaps Ward’s mother and Amy’s father, were all probably in consultation in the sitting room or library. Yet not a sound penetrated to the quiet, orderly room where she lay, like a creature washed on to a beach, unable to move, waiting for the divinely healing powers of rest and sun to accomplish their work of regeneration.

That all four of these persons so vital to her happiness, and the closest of all, Link Mackenzie, had met just outside her door, with frightened and solemn faces, and were now no farther away than Amy’s bedroom, she naturally could not dream. She would have been as amazed to identify the fifth person in the group as Tomas Bettancourt as they had been a few minutes before.

One raucous voice whispering steadily, in broken English; the others merely interjecting horrified ejaculations.

“Abalone Rock, eh?”

“My God—my God—my God——”

“Did he swim? Did he struggle?” This with gestures, and Tomas gesturing feverishly in answer.

“He must have slipped from the rock, Daddy. Nobody in the world could live five minutes in the wash below it. The water simply boils and seethes there.” This was Amy, white-faced, aghast.

“Let’s see the card again. He gave it to you last night?”

Then Tomas, with many a “’Sus Maria!” and much slipshod crossing of himself. “Meest du Spain geeva da card lasta night.” Tomas persisted. “Say, geeva da wife.”

A pasteboard card, an irregular bit wrenched from a shoe box. Still pasted to it, a strip of bright green glazed paper. And pencilled upon it little more than twoscore words, unsigned.

Barberry Bush, your bread-pudding future of real estate and pressed suits doesn’t appeal. We can do better than that. You’ll never know what a hit you made Thursday, coming to comfort me. You did the only thing that would have worked. Love.

“Daddy—was it—do you suppose—did he deliberately——”

“We oughtn’t to say that, Amy, or even think it. Even if it were true——”

“Oh, you’re right, Link! Even if it’s true, we mustn’t say it.”

“My God, I can’t believe it!”

“Poor boy—poor boy. We ought to send—as soon as she knows——”

“Link and I’ll attend to all that, Professor. Poor Barbara, she’s had more than her share of jolts.”

“He *might* have slipped, really. It’s frightfully slippery at low tide.”

“We must say he did, to her and to the whole town. We must stick to it. I don’t think we ought even to say that he sent the note in.”

“You’re quite right, Link!”

“Tomas says the face is quite untouched, but that the rocks——”

“Oh, don’t!”

“She ‘did the only thing that would have worked,’ eh? That looks premeditated—but we aren’t going to speculate. Poor boy, perhaps it was the happiest solution for him, after all,” Professor Atherton mused. “She had made the peace with him—she had given him to understand he might win her back.”

Strange silences, during which they all looked into space, with darkened eyes. Exclamations and broken comment; this aspect of it and then that. Ward solemn, Amy tearful, Link, with his head caught in his hands and his body bowed, muttering, “Oh, my God, my beautiful, my wonderful girl! My beautiful, wonderful girl!”

Lying flat on her bed, two rooms away, with one arm flung free to protect Kate’s unconscious little body, Barbara could know nothing of this. She was on her back, her wide-open eyes, that had forgotten how to sleep, staring at the ceiling.

There was green light on the ceiling, from the tree branches outside the window. Church bells were ringing for eleven o’clock, and feet were chipping on the sidewalk, under the tree shadows.

Friendly Cottonwood was keeping the week’s holy day. Church bells, drowsy in the soft, mid-morning heat, were ringing. And in every one of the comfortable homely houses, behind the gardens, were chicken and ice cream and chocolate cake. Fresh clothes, for Sunday. Company coming, for Sunday. Lowered voices and restrained games, for Sunday. The honking and chucking of small cars, loaded with holiday guests.

Peace came to Barbara’s tired spirit, mysterious, illogical, quite without warning. She experienced one of those strange, exalted moments when life, on any terms, seems smooth and sweet, because of the exquisite and supernal harmony that possesses the innermost soul. It seemed good to her suddenly to be a young woman, healthy and beloved in quiet, happy Cottonwood. Barry, and money problems, and the heartache of love defrauded, all faded into insignificance in the swift dear glimpse of the larger scheme.

So infinitesimal—the pains and fears and disappointments of the individual soul! So marvellous, the opportunity to weave one’s own microscopic bit of the great pattern firmly and faithfully.

“I believe I could sleep,” she murmured, turning a little, and looking at the child’s beautiful sleeping face, close to her own. “I’m a woman,” Barbara mused. “I’ve suffered and wondered and blundered for all the twenty-five years of my life. But now at last—at last I think I’ve begun to learn how to live!”

“And that, Kate,” she finished, with a long weary sigh, lowering her thick, curled lashes upon her cheek almost as peacefully as the baby had, a few minutes before, “that’s all that matters. That one should learn to live—without hate or resentment against those who hurt one, and without too much thought for one’s own selfish will! Whoso loseth his life shall gain it, Kate.

“To-morrow you and I are going to arise like giants refreshed. We are going to begin to lose our lives, my dear woman. And in God’s good time we shall begin to get them back again!”

[The end of *Barberry Bush* by Kathleen Thompson Norris]