

THE VALLEY
OF CONTENT

BLANCHE UPRIGHT

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Elinor (Norma Shearer) attends a Bohemian party at the apartment of Templeton Druid (Ward Crane).
(*"The Valley of Content"* screened as *"Pleasure Mad."*)

THE
Valley of Content

BY BLANCHE UPRIGHT



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WITH LOVE AND DEVOTION
I DEDICATE THESE PAGES
TO

Marjorie Rambeau

MY BELOVED INSPIRER

THE VALLEY OF CONTENT

CHAPTER I

Over the immaculate, freshly ironed white cotton cloth on the little table set near the window in the kitchen-dining room of the Bentons' tiny bungalow, a paper-shaded lamp glowed rosily. From its tempered rays, the plated knives and forks and spoons, polished to a shine that forgave the nickel spots of usage, caught a pinkish tinge, and the bowl of wild roses from its place of state in the center of the table returned blush for blush.

But neither the rosy light, nor the roses themselves had anything to do with the bright flush that adorned Marjorie Benton's face as she arose from in front of the oven of her brightly shining kitchen stove. She felt of her burning cheek with the back of her hand. The twittering remonstrance of her canary in its cheap little brass cage, disturbed by the metallic clang of the closing oven door, turned her gaze in his direction. She shook her head ruefully.

"More cooking for women and there'd be less rouge, eh, Andy?" she asked, and an understanding "tweet-tweet" was her reply. Her glance wandered to the small alarm clock tick-ticking merrily from the shelf above her head.

"Another ten minutes," she murmured. The slowly moving hands of the time piece marked off seven minutes after six. "Hugh should be here then, and he does so like his roast just out of the oven. Hmm! So do I—" she went on, but a cross little look of dawning discontent crept into her eyes as she glanced at the stove distastefully,—“except that I surely would like to have someone else take it out for me, for a change. Wonder if we're ever going to have a maid, or if I'm just naturally to dry up and brown to a crisp bending over a stove all my life!”

Again she felt of her burning cheeks, as she turned toward the neatly set table. A mended spot in the table cloth caught her eye. She smoothed it over.

"Cotton!" she said, plaintively. "Just plain cotton! I can pretend it's linen all I want to, but it don't change the threads, nor—," and she lifted a knife with its silver worn undisguisedly off the end and tried the effect of turning it over. She frowned at the poor pretense.

She turned back to the stove and picked up the dish cloth she had been using as a holder. Her hand went toward the kettle that simmered contentedly, a contrast to the simmering thoughts of the pretty woman who glanced at it.

“I wonder—” she began, half aloud.

She stopped, listening, the dish cloth dangling in her hand. With a hurried gesture she dropped it, and was across the room to the door that led into her hallway. Just a moment more she listened, her head with its fair curls pressed against the door. Then she opened it and tiptoed quietly through, closing it noiselessly behind her.

Before the closed nursery door she stopped once more. Unmistakable sounds from within proved that wee ones behind that portal were not spending their time in earned repose. Marjorie’s half frown was chased away by an indulgent smile of mother love. Then she opened the door and entered the room.

“Children!” she cried, as sternly as she had ever brought herself to command. “Dear little people, what does this mean? Mother can’t have this, you know. It’s sleepy time.”

From one of the two white cribs surrounded by their halo of the last rays of the September sun came a little wail. Two-year old Elinor Benton distinctly disapproved of something—perhaps of going to bed at all while the sun still shone.

From the other crib another brown tousled head bobbed up. Its owner sat erect. Master Howard Benton was reasoning that if his little sister who was only two should be receiving attention, what then was his due at the mature age of four.

Marjorie Benton’s thoughts flew to the kitchen she had just quitted, the flush from her oven still on her face. Everything was all right there for a few minutes, she knew. She did not approve of taking babies from their beds once they were tucked in for the night, but surely this once she could not refuse. Her glance rested softly on Elinor’s curly head and her pleading eyes. Then she lifted her gently and sat down with her in the low rocker. Baby Elinor snuggled in the protecting arms and though she felt that she may not have been doing the prescribed thing, Marjorie Benton’s eyes were soft and her voice caressing as her hold tightened on her baby and she began softly to sing.

As she sang, the girl-mother’s eyes wandered about the room, resting on the dado of Mother Goose pictures where more than one darkened spot proclaimed an interest and love for a particular story-book personage. What

babies Howard and Elinor were! And they were hers! Hers! And Hugh's! Her hold tightened the least bit on the baby in her arms, who was drifting off to dreamland.

The reverberation of the front door closed cautiously brought the mother back from drifting. Hugh! She must hurry.

This time the child made no protest as she was placed in her little crib and tucked in. But she stopped long enough to place a kiss on the hair of each baby before she lowered the shade and tiptoed out.

Her hands gave a quick pat to her own curls as she flew up the hallway to greet Hugh Benton. He had shuffled out of his light coat and turned from hanging it on the hall rack with his arms extended to his wife.

"H'lo sweetheart!" was his tender greeting, but there was all the fervor in the bear-like squeeze he gave her as she ran into his arms that there ever had been in the earlier days of their honeymoon. The Bentons were fond of remarking that their honeymoon was only extended.

Hugh Benton raised his head and looked over his wife's shoulder.

"Um! Dinner!" he exclaimed with a boyish grin. "Pie! Your dinners are always wonderful, dearest." And Hugh gave his shiny-haired wife another hug.

"Hugh! Please!" Marjorie struggled out of his arms. "You don't know how strong you are. You almost hurt me—and do please be quiet—the kiddies are asleep."

"Already?" Hugh Benton's tone and eyes were full of disappointment. "No romp to-night? Seems like I never do get much of a chance for a frolic any more."

So genuine was the young father's disappointment, that Marjorie tempered the laugh she gave.

"Big baby!" she chided, lovingly. "It's not hard to see who wants the romp most. But dinner will do you more good, just as sleep will do them. I can't be having my family spoiled, you know."

"Right, dear,—just as you always are. Be with you in a minute—some of the grime of an honest working man has to come off first."

Marjorie Benton hurried to her dinner serving, and as she placed the roast on the white cloth, her eyes were tender as she heard the masculine splashing from the bath room and the soft-pedaled whistling that accompanied it.

She whispered again softly. "Who could help loving him. It's enough to make me the happiest woman in the world to know——"

Her husband's entry broke in on her reverie, and it filled her with all the pride of accomplishment to see the glance of delight with which he took in the simple tempting dinner. He leaned over to kiss her as he placed her in her chair—a small attention he had not discarded since the first days of their marriage.

“Wonderful little woman!” he complimented softly. “More wonderful every day.”

She gave his hand a gentle pat, but tried to put a depth of dignified remonstrance in her chiding.

“Don't forget you're a married man of five years' standing, Mr. Hugh Benton,” she urged, but the laughter in her eyes belied the dignity of her words.

“So long!” Hugh took up the carving knife and glanced along its sharpened edge. “You've a fine idea of time, Mrs. Marjorie Benton. Now I'd say five days—” His eyes twinkled suddenly as though at some sudden thought, and he nodded toward the bedroom. “Er—pardon me, my dear,—I forgot,—you have the proof on me——”

“Flatterer!” Marjorie beamed on her husband as she took the service he offered her.

“Anything new to-day?” Hugh was busy with his dinner.

“Plenty!” was Marjorie's enthusiastic answer as she let her fork drop and leaned across the table. “Isn't there always,—with such children as ours? Oh, Hugh, dear, there never were such babies,—now don't you laugh at me!” as a little quirk in the corner of Hugh's mouth betrayed he was not becomingly solemn. “You know I'm not like other mothers,—brag about my children just because they're mine—and yours—but you also know they're extraordinarily bright.”

Hugh nodded, but there was that in his satisfied expression before his wife had completed her résumé of the day's doings of her wonderful infants that quite persuaded her that he was of her opinion. As he laid aside his fork after his last bite of pie, his was the beatific expression of the inwardly satisfied male.

“Want help with the dishes?” he asked. Marjorie smiled at him.

“If I didn't already know you were the best man in the world,” she complimented, “that would prove it. Don't I know how you hate dish wiping? No, dear, there are only a few,—I'll do them.”

“Thereby proving your own wonder,” was Hugh's praise. “Not another woman in this town would refuse such an offer.”

Marjorie laughed and gave him a playful shove toward a chair as she handed him his paper.

“There!” she exclaimed. “Take that,—and read it. Maybe you’ll find something in it to make you appreciate your own wife and babies. I’ll be through in a minute, and there are lots of things we can do—interesting things—like sitting on the porch and looking at the moon or something. It’s been splendid for the last few nights. Have you noticed?”

Hugh yawned contentedly. “Hasn’t it always been whenever we’ve seen it together?”

It had been. Marjorie Benton was sure of that,—surer now than during any of those five years she had been married. Everything had been splendid. She could not help considering how much more they had of the worth while things in the world than any of the friends they had as her bright head bent over her dish-washing and her glance darted through the steam of the hot water occasionally to where Hugh sat absorbed in his paper.

Perhaps the Benton romance had not been as spectacular as some, but Marjorie inwardly thanked the Providence that guided her that it was more *real*. Hugh was right, too. It did seem such a short time that they had been married. Then, anomalously came the thought that she could not seem to remember distinctly any time when she and Hugh had not been one. She had vague memories of the time she had been teaching school in this very town—that seemed so long ago. She had been used to hearing people say she was wasting her youth, her beauty and her brains in such an occupation, but it had in a way satisfied her. Then had come Hugh. He had come to Atwood to be cashier of the bank, and, though she did not know it then, he was as much alone in the world as she herself. All those nearest to them were gone. From the time of their first meeting at a dance, Marjorie remembered that life had taken on a different meaning to her. Her thoughts flew back to those beautiful days that followed. Her lips were tender in their smile of reminiscence as she thought of that time. There had been only Hugh and Marjorie. That was how it was to-day,—except that there were two young and tender Hughs and Marjories to bind them still closer together. Marjorie’s smile grew more wistful as she thought, her mind far from the bright glasses she was burnishing as they came hot from their pan of scalding suds. Hugh’s mention of the moon to-night—He remembered it, then—She, too, remembered how they so often sat under that big elm in the moonlight, and Hugh softly, huskily singing,—Poor Hugh! Wasn’t it too bad he never could keep to the same key for two consecutive bars. But he never noticed, and she knew she never cared. What was that he was always humming?

“What’s the matter with the moon to-night?”

Again he was right. There never *had* been anything the matter with it where they were concerned. It had helped them tell their love, and so——

“Seems like the end of a story, instead of the beginning,” whispered Marjorie Benton to her flowered salad bowl, “but——”

And so, in three months, they had been married. There hadn’t been much money; there wasn’t yet, but what did it matter? They had their bungalow; it was their own. What happiness they had had in planning all the details just as Marjorie had always planned them for herself when she put herself to sleep nights planning for that “sometime in the future.”

“Money!” Marjorie Benton sniffed as she swirled her dish cloth about the pan, and with one damp hand flung back a recalcitrant bright curl that tickled her small nose. “Humph! I’m the richest woman in the world! What else——”

“Something to tell you, sweetheart, when you’re through.” Hugh looked up from his paper and broke in on his wife’s reverie. “Something you’ll like, maybe.”

“Oh, Hugh, dear! Are they going to raise your salary again?” she asked eagerly.

Hugh laughed, but there was a rueful shrug to his shoulders.

“Nothing so exciting,” he declared. “Have you an idea that’s the Atwood Bank’s chief occupation? No, dear, but it’s just as long a chance. I got my patent from Washington to-day, and I believe I have some real people in New York interested in it.”

Casually as he spoke, there was in Hugh Benton’s manner that which would imply that he fully believed he was offering to his wife the equivalent of fur coats and jewels and estates so large that extra sized depot wagons would be required to transport the servants.

“Clever boy!” Marjorie flew to him excitedly. “Oh, I am so proud of you!”

“A bit early to be too proud yet, little one,” Hugh replied in the choppy way he bit off so many of his sentences. “Got to wait for results. But I’ll tell you this,” and his arm slipped around her waist as he bent for the kiss she offered, “if this thing does go through, it’ll go through big, and——”

“And I’ll be the wife of the great inventor!” Marjorie could not restrain her enthusiasm. Hugh smiled indulgently. But it was good to be appreciated, —to be so completely believed in by someone. It was the instinct of the woman who loves, though, that led her to add: “But if it doesn’t go through,

dear, what of it? Won't we still be the happiest people in the whole world? It couldn't be any other way. Come on out on the porch and let the moon tell us so." And she drew him by a coat sleeve out through the open door onto the small porch that the moon was beginning to silver with its pale vivid light.

Through the trees, themselves silvered and softened from their flaunting autumnal coloring of the day, came wafted to them the fragrance of new-mown hay. On the top step, they sat down, their faces upturned to the same old moon that is for lovers the world over. Softly Hugh Benton's arm slipped about the slender waist of his lithe young wife. As of its own accord, her cheek nestled into the curve of his coat sleeve. Out of the silvered darkness, a phonograph from one of the nearby unseen homes began to play. Through the stillness came to them the voice of John McCormack:

"For this is the end of a perfect day."

"A perfect day,—yes!" sighed Marjorie Benton as the singer's voice died out. "But isn't that the way with all our days? They end and *start*—perfectly."

Hugh Benton's dark head bent over his wife's bright one. His lips placed there his kiss of reverence and thanksgiving.

CHAPTER II

There have been rumors that when the serpent in the Garden showed the apple to Eve, that it wasn't exactly an apple she saw. Some even say the forbidden fruit, as she gazed at it, did what our best movie writers call "dissolved" and slowly faded into a yellow backed bill. And so the damage was done.

At any rate, money or the wishing for it has done a lot to women of all times ever since Eve first had her vision. Marjorie Benton may have fully believed in her own heart that it meant nothing to her, but from the time that Hugh first gave her an idea that his invention with which she had long been familiar might really mean that she could have whatever she wished, and was not a nebulous dream, there subtly grew within her a spirit of discontent which she would have denied—even to herself—but which was nonetheless real.

The bungalow. Somehow it didn't seem the most desirable of all habitations as she had once thought it. She could so easily use another bathroom; perhaps two. With money, even these things were possible. And a dining room. She seemed quite to forget how wonderful had seemed that kitchen with its small alcove when she and Hugh had planned it from one of those perfect home magazines, she sitting with her head buried on Hugh's shoulder, he holding her tightly with one hand as he marked out diagrams with the other. The babies! There was so much she wanted for them now, when she came to think of it, and as for what she wanted for them in the future—there seemed no end to the wishes or the castle building.

To do her justice, Marjorie really hadn't thought much of what sudden fortune might mean to her personally. She wasn't naturally vain. That is, she had not given herself the first thought. Discontent with her own lot came upon her gradually, and, as might reasonably be expected, she had been brought to realize it through other women. Her first realization was on a day when Mrs. Birmingham and Mrs. Wallace called. Usually Marjorie had accepted these two small town butterflies with a smile of tolerance. This time it was different.

Their talk had been of clothes,—a fairly general topic of conversation with average women. Mrs. Birmingham grew positively eloquent as she described her new fall costume with its garnishings of beaver; of the smart

little hat to match; the gloves, shoes; all the little accessories necessary to an outfit to be envied. But then Mrs. Birmingham was telling of her possessions with just this purpose in view. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Wallace drawled:

“Oh, yes, my dear, but you know it is so much easier to be outfitted if one does it near home. Now I’ve had to send to New York for my moleskin stole. Harvey wouldn’t hear of anything else. Seal and the ordinary furs one sees are so common, don’t you think?”

In her usual contented frame of mind, Marjorie would have chuckled at the attempted arrogance. Now she sighed inwardly. Moleskin! And Mrs. Wallace, poor little mouse-haired nonentity, was actually going to have it while she, Marjorie— She showed nothing of her thoughts, though, as she listened, attentive and sweet as usual.

Not till they had gone and she sat curled up with one foot under her on a big floor cushion (a favorite attitude when she wanted to think) did she realize that they had given her food for thought, and that she wanted things! *Wanted* them!

“I’m frazzled and frayed—almost disreputable!” was her half bitter inward comment. “Why I haven’t had any kind of a new suit in two years, and as for a hat! Well,—” She laughed ruefully as she clambered to her feet and mechanically shook out the cushions that still bore the imprint of Mrs. Birmingham’s none too svelte figure, “I shouldn’t complain, I suppose. I had a new hat once,—some time before Elinor was born.”

Aggrieved as she felt for the moment, Marjorie Benton realized that her lack of finery was not her husband’s fault. He had always wished her to have it, and had urged that she set aside something for herself. But always something had happened to it. Once she had been on the verge of spending it, when Howard had to have his tonsils out; then had come their contribution toward building the new church.

Marjorie groaned. “Just one thing after another—all the time,” she complained, and complaining was something so new Marjorie Benton would not have recognized it in herself. “Oh, if Hugh should do something with that invention! Surely he must!”

And once again with the thought, came in a flood all the day-dreams she had been indulging since he had spoken to her a week and a half ago of his hopes. What would she not do? As she stood between the parted curtains gazing out into the street swept with a scurrying vista of whirling autumn leaves, it was not the brown and gold of fallen leaves she saw, but visions of shop windows in gorgeous colors, gowns of purple and gold and sapphire, and tissues fine as spun cobwebs. All for her. For Marjorie Benton was at

least realizing how well her beauty would accord with the vanities of femininity and she knew she wanted them—not as she had thought she had when she had so generously given of her small store, but in the light of the possibility which Hugh’s hopes had opened up to her. All these women in Atwood who had somehow seemed to patronize her, even when they told her how they envied her her happiness. She wanted to show them!

Hardly realizing it, Marjorie Benton found herself a victim of an uneasy restlessness; a rapidly growing discontent. For antidote she plunged deeper than ever into her household duties, busied herself with the babies, did everything, anything, to keep her thoughts from straying. Each night as she heard Hugh’s step on the walk, her heart beat in mad suspense—“Would there be any news to-night?” was the question involuntarily on her lips.

The only answer so far had been Hugh’s sad little negative nod, but there came a night, after he kissed her, when he handed her a letter before he vanished into the bedroom where the children were playing.

Marjorie’s hands were so unsteady she could hardly open it, although Hugh’s demeanor had been such she almost knew what to expect in advance, and therefore the courteous refusal that met her eyes did not surprise her in the least. She brushed away unbidden tears and hastened after him.

“Never mind, dear,” she soothed gently, pulling his head down to kiss him, “you have other firms to hear from yet—we mustn’t let one answer discourage us.”

“Brave little girl,” he answered. “Thinking of me as usual, when I know what that letter meant to you—now wait,” as she started to protest, “let me finish, dear. Don’t you think, sweetheart, that I haven’t noticed a change in you this past week? You haven’t been yourself at all, although you have tried to make believe—and I know it’s been anxiety over my old invention. Why, dear one,” and Hugh Benton gently smoothed his wife’s hair as he soothed her as he would one of the youngsters who were pulling at his coat tails, “if I had known you were going to take it this way—that it would have caused you a moment’s worry, I wouldn’t have told you a thing about it until everything was all settled, and we were millionaires.”

Marjorie caught a sob in her throat as she gazed at Hugh with wide open eyes. So he had noticed that something was wrong. How selfish she had been. A tear trembled on her long lashes as she glanced up at him contritely.

“Oh, Hugh, dear, dearest,” she quavered. “I didn’t think you—I didn’t know—you see—” she clutched his coat sleeve and hid her face in it as little Elinor and Howard danced about shouting with glee, each with the idea of

some new game. But mother was only searching for words. They came in a gush, and the little sob that accompanied them made grave for a moment the face of the man she held to so tightly,—a graveness replaced in a moment by an indulgent smile of understanding as she spoke. “Oh, I wasn’t thinking about the money so much, d-d-ear, but Mrs. Wallace has a new moleskin stole and Mrs. Birmingham has a be-e-aver co-co-at!”

So it was out. Man fashion Hugh hadn’t thought that Marjorie might want the things so dear to the hearts of other women. She had seemed so different. But he remembered that she was a woman, after all, and it was with a little pang that he realized how little she had really had during the past few years. His lips set in a grim line of determination to change all this as he patted her hair, but his words were as cheery and hearty as always as he whispered:

“There, there, honey, don’t fret! You shall have ’em, too! But right now, don’t you think it would be a good idea to get on the old blue bonnet and let’s take a whirl at the movies? Cheer up all around? Charlie Chaplin and Nazimova—weeps and laughs. What say? Can’t you get Mrs. Clancy to watch the babies?”

And as though the matter were settled, which Marjorie knew it was, Hugh Benton, in his usual abrupt way, resumed his interrupted romp with his son and heir and the little princess of the house of Benton.

Cypress Avenue was the rather imposing name that the dwellers on that thoroughfare in Atwood chose to use in referring to their place of residence. Why Cypress, though, was a question that was bound to present itself to the casual visitor. There were maple trees in plenty, a few dogwoods and scattered shrubs of nondescript nomenclature that grew without regard to any scheme of city gardening either inside or outside the flagged sidewalks at their own sweet will. But cypresses—stay! Yes, there was a cypress if one chose to go that far to look for it,—away out at the end of the street at the entrance to the Forest Home Cemetery, beyond the more pretentious homes of brick and concrete that housed such aristocracy as the Birmingham and the Wallaces. Mr. Birmingham was president of the Atwood Bank, and Edgar Wallace made sufficient as the town’s chief merchant to clothe his wife in moleskin. On Cypress Avenue, too, lived the Moultons, the Carvers, the Hopewells, coal and wood, hardware and grain barons and baronesses of their own small world. It was something to live on Cypress Avenue, and the Bentons, in building their shingle bungalow had felt a glow of pride in taking their place with the elect of their chosen place of residence. They were farther downtown, though, within such a short distance of Depot Avenue, the main street and business district, that they could easily see the

lights of the Princess, the movie theater, flash on each night, and could tell to a nicety the time of night by seeing when Oscar Merriman, the depot agent and telegrapher, turned out the electrics preparatory to closing up and going to his own home far across the railroad tracks in Sandy Hill.

That the farmers coming and going from the outlying districts chose to speak of Depot Avenue as the main road, and of Cypress Avenue as the short cut, in no wise disturbed the residents of that avenue. They were quite assured that their chief residential street compared most favorably with that of any street in any town the size of Atwood.

Shaded as it was, and lighted with the new lights in their opalescent globes recently installed by the city fathers—and brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts, too,—it was a foregone conclusion that Cypress Avenue should be the favorite strolling place for Atwoodites on such nights as strolling was possible. So when Hugh and Marjorie Benton closed their front gate and started toward Depot Avenue and the movie lights, they did not particularly remark the numbers of people who passed and stopped them to pass laughing comments of the events of the day. With the thoughts of money she had been harboring, and the newly arisen desire for a change, Marjorie Benton realized with something of a pang that such a change as her day dreams had led her to desire would mean a forfeiting of all this jolly camaraderie. She was not altogether sure that she really wanted it, after all. But as they turned into the principal street and the few lights in front of the main stores greeted her, her mind flew hastily to the vision of New York and its Great White Way as she remembered it on one of her few visits to the city. Yes, that was what she wanted—*must have!*

So interested was she in her own thoughts, that she did not notice the unusual quietness of the husband who walked beside her, his brows drawn into a furrow, his lips compressed with determination as he glanced once or twice at his pretty young wife, apparently noticing for the first time that Marjorie's hat *wasn't* in the least like that of Mrs. Rolfe who had just passed them with a cheery good evening; that Marjorie's gloves were undeniably mended; that in spite of the jauntiness with which she wore it, her little blue velvet coat was badly worn about the seams.

It was with a start that Marjorie Benton brought herself back to Atwood to recognize that a small car had stopped at the curb beside them. Someone was calling to her.

“You must be thinking of something very pleasant—and far away,” came the staccato voice of Mrs. Birmingham, as she leaned out of the car and shook her hand admonishingly at Marjorie. “I've called you three times.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Marjorie was earnestly apologetic. “I was thinking _____”

Little Mr. Birmingham’s snappy laugh broke in to cover her confusion. “Don’t do it, my dear,” he advised. “Bad for your pretty head. Now Matilda, here, she never thinks—and look at her——”

“James William!” Mrs. Birmingham brought all the hauteur she could command in reprimand of her spouse. Then, ignoring him, she turned to the Bentons and there was a purr in her voice as she went on:

“I only stopped you, Marjorie, dear, to see if you would not promise me—positively *promise*—to be one of the hostesses at the Dilemma Club’s reception next Friday. We’ve seen so little of you recently—everyone is asking why you are keeping so to yourself, and—oh, I know what you’re going to say,” raising her gray gloved hand protestingly as Marjorie started to speak, “—the babies, and all that, but you should not neglect your social duties so—other women have babies, too, and we need you, you know. You’re our prize ‘cultured lady,’ remember, and besides you’re much better off than so many women who *never* neglect the club. You have your incomparable Mrs. Clancy who will always come when you call her, but how you’re able to manage it when it is *so* hard for anyone to get servants,—now my second girl who has only been with me a week was telling me only to-day that she couldn’t stay, and——”

Mr. Birmingham’s sniff was loudly audible.

“Second chief cook and bottle washer,” he commented, “and twenty-fourth you’ve tried to have stay and wear a confounded white cap. Hmmp! What a woman needs of two girls to wait on her beats me, eh, Benton?”

Though she flushed angrily, Mrs. Birmingham’s control was admirable as she added, before Marjorie could voice a reply: “Then that’s settled. You’ll come—I can depend on you——”

Marjorie’s thoughts were aghast as she thought of her one all-too-worn best gown, the impossibility of wearing it,—and the still greater impossibility of getting another.

“Why, really, I—I can’t say right now——” Marjorie stammered, and she was conscious of the hot flood that crimsoned her face.

“Certainly she will go!” Hugh Benton broke in in his decided way. His single glance into the knowing depths of Mrs. Birmingham’s small gray eyes had decided him. He felt the slight twinge as his wife nipped his arm in remonstrance, but his lips were still set in that firm line of determination that had first come to him when he had learned that Marjorie wanted more than

he had been able to give her. He *would* make good for Marjorie, and this should be a beginning.

“But dear, I——”

He cut her remonstrance short.

“If it’s a new gown that’s bothering you,” he said bluntly, “then you can order one to-morrow,—from New York. You know,” and he looked squarely at Mrs. Birmingham as she lifted politely inquiring eyebrows, “my wife has been going out so little, that she has not paid the attention to frills that are usual with women, I believe.”

“Splendid!” enthused the banker’s wife, but there was a queer half smile on Birmingham’s thin lips that told of his glee that his Matilda had received one quietus to her patronizing. “Then we won’t keep you any longer. Sorry we haven’t the big car with us,” she drawled. “But it’s a beautiful night for a stroll, isn’t it?”

“We’re going to the movies,” remarked Marjorie, in the tone she might have employed at announcing an opera opening. “They’re having two splendid pictures to-night—why don’t you come with us?”

Mrs. Birmingham stifled a well-assumed yawn. “Oh, the movies,” she said languidly. “They bore me to extinction. I’m dreadfully spoiled, I’m afraid. In New York when I’m with my sister (you know I spent three months there the last time) we went to the theater almost every night. Theaters make the movies seem so—er—banal, don’t you think?”

“Hmmp!” once more remarked the snappy little banker, in a tone that led one to believe it was his favorite expression, or, rather, explosion. “Theatres every night—brother-in-law with a pull that got free tickets for everything where they couldn’t sell seats—made you forget you once wanted to dress your hair and roll your eyes like Theda Bara, didn’t they, eh, Matilda? Well, *I* like the movies—wish I could be going with you, folks, but we got to be getting along. Good luck!” His hand went toward the starter, but the hand of Mrs. Birmingham stayed him for a last word.

“Oh, I almost forgot, Marjorie, my dear,” she called, as Hugh and Marjorie turned toward the lights of Depot Avenue, “my sister sent me a lot of things yesterday—some new books and so on—and I know you’re just crazy about reading, so I’m going to send some of them over to you for you to read and tell me about. I always get *so* much more benefit out of a book when someone who is *interested* tells me about it. You will, there’s a dear?”

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Birmingham,” Marjorie began, and she was almost startled by the abrupt way in which Hugh hurried her along, her thanks half expressed.

“Patronizing old frump!” he fumed. “Well, that’s the last of it—no more!”

Marjorie laughed at his intensity.

“Oh, what harm, Hugh, dear?” she defended, and the humorous light that he knew and loved so well chased away the half wistfulness of the last few hours. “She likes it and it doesn’t do me any harm. But,” and she dimpled as she looked up at her tall husband and gleefully squeezed his arm, “did you notice she didn’t have on the beaver coat?”

“Plenty of cat, though,” and Hugh’s frown did not lighten as his hand slipped into his trousers pocket and he laid his money down on the cashier’s window in front of the gay little movie theater.

In shaded Cypress Avenue the Birminghams’ small car whirled along. Its occupants were silent—for a few moments. Mrs. Birmingham broke that silence.

“James William Birmingham,” she declared (he was always “James William” instead of “Jimmie” when Mrs. Birmingham had anything of great importance to say), “you have hurt my feelings!”

The banker snorted. “Then you know how it feels.”

“And in front of the Bentons, of all people!” She was on the verge of tears, but Mr. Birmingham believed in letting a lesson sink in.

“Well, what’s wrong with them?”

“N-nothing, nothing at all,” was the impatient reply. “But, oh, you know how it is as well as I do. Marjorie Benton is just perfect in most people’s eyes, and if anything is wanted, don’t they go and ask her instead of coming to me, the banker’s wife? All I have is clothes and theaters and things, and if you think I’m not going to make her feel that I’m superior in some ways, then you’re all wrong. Marjorie Benton hasn’t had a new thing in years. I’ve got to get even with her somehow, or she’d be thinking she was better than I am, or than anyone. All of us pity her, though, because she’s so shabby.”

Louder than at any time previously James William Birmingham exploded his “Hmmp!”

“Hmmp! Pity all you like, but it’ll be wasted, I can tell you. Unless I miss my guess, the Bentons ’ll soon be richer than anyone in this little old town, just as she’s already the brightest and prettiest little woman here, and he’s the finest man I know. Wish I had money enough to back him myself.”

“Wonderful invention, indeed!” Matilda Birmingham was disdainful. “That old rubber stamp thing! Why, we’ve been hearing about it for ages, and I for one, don’t believe it will ever amount to anything.”

“All you know about it.” The banker had the closing word. “Well, you just chew over this—if it wasn’t for a lot of little old inventions like that women like you would be finding a lot more to do keeping house and making a home instead of gadding and talking about their new clothes to someone who hasn’t got ’em!”

• • • • •

Mrs. Clancy, the dependable, was dozing in the kitchen when Hugh and Marjorie returned from their outing. But she had not forgotten to put out on the little table the bit of supper that she knew Hugh and Marjorie liked on such occasions. Marjorie’s smile was different from her usual one, though, as she recalled how often she and Hugh had sat down at their own little table thus, and over and over had reminded each other how much better it was than any restaurant, how much luckier they were than most people. To-night, somehow—well, she wasn’t so sure.

“Not a whimper out of the blessed lambs,” the old serving woman assured Marjorie’s eagerness about her babies. “Oi’ve caught forty winks, too, and—” She stopped in the careful tying of her bonnet strings, to dig deep into a pocket, bringing out a crumpled telegram. “Now, and if Oi didn’t almost forget the bit letter Tim Smith’s bye Jerry brought.”

Marjorie’s heart lost a beat.

“A telegram!” she cried. “Why, who can it be——”

Already Hugh had torn it open, and it was with a light of gladness in his eyes and a flourish as of laying at her feet the wealth of the world, that he handed it to his wife.

“We’ve won, dearest,—I’m sure of it. See it is from the biggest of all the firms I’ve wanted to interest.”

In a daze Marjorie gazed at the few typed words as though they held magic. She was but dimly aware of her mechanical good-night to the good-hearted Irishwoman who made it possible for such little pleasures as she and Hugh had to-night enjoyed. There was entrancement; the words danced in letters of gold before her eyes.

HUGH BENTON

ATWOOD, N. Y.

MEETING WITH DIRECTORS ARRANGED FOR TEN THIRTY, SEPT. 23.
EVERYTHING FAVORABLE TO DATE.

TEMPLETON, BAIRD & CO.

“Dearest!” At last she found voice. “How perfectly wonderful! Oh, I *knew* you would make me proud of you!” She flew to him and her arms reached up to cling about his neck. The man’s eyes, too, were dim, but there was in them that which showed he knew now he must not fail,—that he must do all this woman he loved and who loved him believed him capable of. His arms folded about her tenderly. With a sudden thought, though, she drew away a bit to glance once more at the crumpled yellow sheet that meant so much. “Why dear!” she gasped wonderingly, “it’s right away, too! Did you notice? This meeting is for *to-morrow!*”

Hugh Benton nodded.

“Yes, sweetheart. And I’ve been thinking while you’ve been dreaming and waking up to realities. I’ll take the morning train—I’ll telephone Mr. Birmingham—and I can be back at mid-night. You can get Mrs. Clancy to come over and stay with you.”

Marjorie drew back reproachfully.

“Mrs. Clancy! Oh, Hugh, dear! How can you think I could have anybody about when I’ll have so much to think of—so much to plan——”

Hugh smiled a bit ruefully.

“Seemed to me lately you’d already been planning a lot—got new ones to make?” he asked, half teasingly.

“Hundreds, thousands, millions of them,” declared Marjorie, sweeping her hands in a gesture to include the world. “Oh, I won’t be lonely—you can be sure of that. But,” and her eyes roved toward the table with its untouched food and the coffee pot simmering on the stove, “here we are forgetting to eat. It must be serious. Sit down dear, and let’s plan it all out. I’m going to get the chocolate cake. This isn’t to be an ordinary feast, you know!”

Hugh Benton’s eyes were somber as he watched his wife, her face flushed to a deep wild rose, her eyes shining like stars, as she flew to arrange their belated supper. His thoughts were far off.

“I wonder,” he murmured, as he closely followed her movements, his chin cupped in one hand, his elbow resting on the table with its embroidered doilies, Marjorie’s own handiwork, “I wonder if it is really what she wants. But I’ve got to do it—I *must* make good—I will!”

CHAPTER III

Hugh Benton reached out and took a large piece of the chocolate cake which his wife held toward him. He bit into it hugely with satisfaction.

“Well, little one,” he said, his mouth full of the toothsome morsel, “let’s hear what’s on your mind. Shoot!”

“Hugh, dear!” Marjorie shook a remonstrative finger at him. “You know how I dislike slang! And what if the babies should see you with your mouth crammed like that!”

Her husband grinned boyishly.

“Pardon me,” he said, with exaggerated dignity. “What I meant to say, Mrs. Benton, was, what have you been planning to do when your husband is no longer a wage slave, a poor minion whose chief duty is to watch other people’s money, and shall himself become a personage of wealth and position?”

Marjorie’s eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed rosy with excitement as she answered enthusiastically. “Oh, such heaps and heaps of wonderful plans, dear. I scarcely know how to begin to tell them all. First of all, of course, we’ll leave here and go to New York. We will purchase a lovely home—somewhere on the Drive, I think. Then we will spend days and days going about in all sorts of quaint little shops searching for rare antiques and selecting beautiful furniture and draperies. When our home is ready, we will have a nurse for the kiddies, and after a couple of years, a governess, and when they grow up, Elinor can go to a select finishing school for young ladies, and Howard can attend college and—oh, I could go on forever and ever planning, but it seems absurd, so many years ahead, and—” She stopped suddenly. “Why dear, you’re not enthusing at all, and you don’t seem to be interested in anything I am saying. Don’t my castles in the air meet with your approval?”

Hugh shook his head sadly. “Well not exactly, dear—the first time since we’ve been married, too, but our ideas are mighty far apart.”

“Well then, what do your ideas happen to be?” Marjorie was a little hurt.

Hugh contemplated his wife for a moment, as though loath to say anything that might dim the enthusiasm that glowed in her blue eyes.

“My thoughts are a long way from New York,” he began, “probably you wouldn’t be interested at all. But all my life I’ve had just one dream.”

“Of course, I’m interested in what you want, Hugh dear,” quietly answered Marjorie, but something in her tone belied the ardor of the words. “Tell me.”

“It’s just this.” For a moment Hugh stopped, and the vision he conjured brought an eagerness to his words when he spoke.

“I want to be a farmer—a gentleman farmer. I want to buy an estate or small farm not far from New York but near this place where we have always been so happy. I’ll hire men to do the rough part of the work, but I want to keep myself busy and occupied overseeing things. I never did like to be idle. You know that. Then we can have that nurse for the children so that we can run up to New York occasionally for a few days and have all the theaters and opera we want. Then when the youngsters are old enough to attend school, I should like to send them to a public school. Some of our greatest men and women have been educated in them, you must recall. I don’t believe in finishing schools—never did—they’d make Elinor a snob. As for colleges, unless a boy is absolutely sincere in wanting to be a professional man, what good would they do him? Howard would just get in with the idle rich, which in the end would surely spell disaster for him morally and financially. You see, my dear, I want my daughter to be a *real* woman like her mother; and my son, all I ask is that he be a man!” He stopped, musing.

Had Hugh Benton not been so interested in his own dream, he would have seen on the face of his wife more varying emotions than he had ever seen since he had known her. They would have been new to him. Disappointment she showed, disapproval, injury, then, swiftly following, a real indignation in the narrowing to pin points of the pupils of her wide eyes. But when she spoke, it was in a meek, cool voice.

“And what about your wife?”

Hugh laughed. “Why, everything for my wife,” he said. “You’ll be chatelaine of it all.” He glanced up at her and stopped, fork suspended in midair at the strange expression he saw. “Why, Marjorie, little girl,” he queried, earnestly, “what’s wrong? What is it, dear?”

Marjorie’s foot tapped impatiently on the bare floor of the kitchen-dining room. She gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

“Nothing,” she declared, without apparent interest. “Nothing at all—except that after all these five years of privation and hard work, now when you have prospects of actually becoming wealthy, you sit there and calmly propose *to bury me on a farm!*” The scorn in the utterance of the last words

brought a look of surprise, quickly followed by pain to the eyes of Hugh Benton. He spoke, slowly, contritely.

“I suppose I’m selfish, like all men,” he said sadly, “but, somehow, because I’ve been so happy myself, I’ve never known before that the years we’ve been married had been a burden to you.”

Then the real Marjorie Benton came to the surface. She reached over to grab his hand convulsively.

“I’m the one to be forgiven, dear,” she begged contritely. “Oh, I never meant that—indeed I didn’t—you know I’ve been happy. Oh, I didn’t realize what I was saying!” She forced back the tears.

“Of course, it hasn’t been hard—I’ve had you, haven’t I, and my babies, but somehow, I can’t make you understand how I feel—I’m all unstrung. I do want to try life in a different sphere among an entirely different class of people. I can’t help having aspirations for my children, can I, and I can’t see anything ahead of them if they are narrowed down to a life like ours has been. And what could I do if we go to live on a farm? Just routine—monotony—forever!”

“You could do a great deal of good, dear,” Hugh answered gently. “Think of all the poor and needy that you could aid. You could be a ministering angel right here in our own little town, for you know as well as I do how many there are who would be grateful to have a helping hand.”

“So you think being a ‘ministering angel’ could fill my life?”

“Combined with the love of your husband and children, it most assuredly should. Why, dear, there isn’t anything in the world that can bring you such happiness as helping someone in distress.”

“Well, couldn’t I do that in New York?” Marjorie brightened a little. “There’s lots of room for charity there—I could go in for settlement work or something. Think how much larger a field I would have to ‘minister’ in!”

So earnest was his gravity, that he passed his wife’s bit of levity unheeded.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “The field’s too large—and there are already too many in it—workers of all kinds,—sincere and insincere. I guess you could find enough to do, if you want to, a lot nearer home.”

With his usual manner of having settled a matter, Hugh Benton rose from the little table and yawned broadly. He never even thought as he saw his wife fingering a doily, nervously folding and unfolding it in creased patterns, that this was a symptom of nervous tumult.

“Oh, well, I guess we’re a couple of kids,” he told her with a laugh. “Day dreaming,—fussing over make believes. We haven’t any money—yet—Time enough to argue when the papers are signed. And if I don’t get to bed pretty quick I won’t be in much shape to talk to those people, either. Coming along?”

Marjorie shook her head.

“Not for a few minutes. I must put the cake away. Butter and eggs still mean something, as you’ve reminded me. So run along.”

Deeply in love with his wife as he was, Hugh Benton would not have dropped off to sleep so quickly had he known how long his wife was to sit where he had left her, brooding over their talk, telling herself of his unfairness, wearing herself into a mood so entirely unlike herself. There was indeed, something radically wrong with Marjorie Benton,—and money was at the bottom of it. Already it had made her almost quarrel with her husband. Now the prospect of it had roused in her a bitterness and resentment of which she would not have believed herself capable a few short weeks before.

When at last she crept softly in beside her sleeping husband, it was with the determination that she would not be put aside in the way Hugh had put her—that she was going to have one great big say as to how that not-yet-earned money was going to be spent. And none of her plans included any farms or ministering angels. Restlessly she turned from side to side, unable to sleep. She was filled with smoldering indignation. Surely she was right about Hugh treating her unfairly. Wasn’t it his duty to live where she would be happiest, if he could afford it? Was it right for him to want to please himself only? And besides—all that talk about the children. Surely she, their mother, should know what was best for them. With her last troubled waking thought a determination to let Hugh understand exactly how she stood in the matter before he left for New York, she dropped into an uneasy slumber.

A dream came. She was walking through a narrow path in a beautiful garden. On each side of her were rows of magnificent roses. She gathered them as she walked along. Repeatedly a voice whispered to her to turn back, but she ignored the warning, and went on her way blithely. As she reached a bend in the path and was about to turn into it Hugh suddenly appeared before her. He, too, implored her to relinquish her roses and return from whence she came. She eyed him haughtily from head to foot, and disdainfully brushing aside his detaining hand, went forward. Then it was that the ground gave way under her, and she found herself slipping downward—downward, with startling rapidity. The weight of the roses in

her arms became unbearable. It was impossible to free herself from their overwhelming odor of sickening sweetness; she was submerged beneath them. In desperation she commanded her last ounce of strength and screamed aloud for Hugh to save her.

She awoke to find him bending solicitously over her.

“What is it, honey?” he asked gently. “That nightmare must have been dreadful—you screamed so you awakened us all.” Marjorie sat up in bed dazedly, rubbing her eyes. Through the open door she saw Elinor and Howard peeking at her through the bars of their cribs. “Did I scream?” she asked wonderingly. “How silly—I did have a dreadful dream, but,” she sat up wide awake, “what time is it?”

“Half past six.”

“Already?” She yawned a bit, but strangely was not sleepy. Sudden memory of her determination came to her. “Well, then, I’m going to get up and dress the babies as long as I scared them out of their sleep. I’ll start them with their breakfast, then I want to have a talk with you, Hugh.”

Hugh groaned with mock seriousness.

“Can’t a fellow even go to the big town to make a million dollars without having to carry a lot of samples to match or have to bring home an aluminum pan or something?”

But there was no answering light of humor from his wife. How little Hugh knew how serious had been their talk of the night before, she thought as she deftly swung little Elinor around to fasten her tiny rompers. Well, he would know before he left that she was not going to let him have his own way without a word from her.

As a usual thing Hugh’s not over-melodious whistling as he shaved and dressed was a pleasure to her. She thought of him as a big boy, a grown-up edition of her own small Howard, and it was with an indulgent smile that she would listen to him as she hurried the children with their breakfasts while his coffee was being prepared and the little table set for their own breakfast. This morning, however, it had a strangely disturbing effect. Somehow she wished he wouldn’t do it. He sounded so—well, so overconfident. Of course, she was glad if he felt confident of the success of his mission in New York, but he shouldn’t be planning, as she knew he was, to spend their money as he had proposed the night before.

But Hugh was so full of his plans for selling his invention, so eager in his hurried talk, that he never noticed her attitude, her unusual silence as she opened his eggs, spilling them a little as her hand trembled with the

indignation that she had nursed through the night. He hurried through the last mouthful, rose and started to put on his overcoat.

“Got to hurry a little in spite of our early start, honey,” he observed, glancing at his watch. “Hurry up with your orders for the head of the house.”

Still Marjorie Benton was silent until she had followed her husband from the kitchen out onto the little porch and closed the door behind her.

“Hugh,” she began, and there was firmness and determination in her tone and in the set of her daintily-molded young chin. “I’m sorry to have to say this, but I can’t let you go off to New York until we come to a decision about the matter of which we spoke last night.”

“What matter?” For the minute, his mind far away on what he intended to do, the master of the house of Benton had forgotten the talk which had come to mean so much to his wife. Then a light dawned on him, and he grinned. “Oh, yes, I remember,” and his light laugh only further annoyed Marjorie, “we spent several million dollars in several different ways, didn’t we?”

“It’s no laughing matter, Hugh.” At last Hugh turned his wondering gaze on his wife’s set face to see that she was really in earnest. “Why, honey _____”

“Oh, it’s all right to put me off with sweet words,” Marjorie burst out with a sudden impatience, “but we must have an understanding before you go. It’s just as well for you to know I won’t be shut up in anybody’s farm house.”

The man glanced again at his watch, and all the smile had died from his eyes as he spoke quietly.

“Don’t you think it just a little unfair to bring up unpleasant things today, of all days—when I ought not to think of anything but business. Trivial annoyances of this kind are anything but pleasant at any time, but——”

“Trivial possibly to you,” Marjorie retorted, and her face flushed darkly as she bit her lips to keep back the tears that were imminent, “but it’s a serious matter to me, and I want you to know exactly how I feel. I think it is but right that you should, before even another step is taken. It is just this. Not only do I positively refuse to live on a farm, but I will not have my children given a public-school education if I can afford to give them any other!”

“Said it all?” Hugh bit off his words, and there was a graveness and injury in his manner that was new to Marjorie, and which she did not fail to

catch. "If you have, I think I'd better be getting along, or we may not have any money to quarrel over!"

Chameleon that she was, Marjorie Benton was changed in a minute. One soft arm reached up to cling around her husband's neck, while she pulled him toward her by one overcoat lapel.

"Oh, Hugh dear, we weren't quarreling, were we? Please say we weren't! Why, we've never had a quarrel in our lives, and—oh, I just wanted you to know how I feel, and try to think as I do. You will, won't you?"

Hugh Benton bent and kissed both eyes that looked at him so beseechingly.

"I'll try, dear," was his grave promise. "You know that your happiness is all that concerns me, just as you know it is for you that I want to put this thing across at all."

Marjorie Benton sighed with happiness as she bade her husband good-bye. What a good place the world was after all!

Busy as she was through the day, Mrs. Hugh Benton often thought afterward that it was the longest day of her life. It seemed that night and the train that would bring Hugh back—back to her with the good news that she was sure he would bring—would never come.

In the afternoon there was one slight diversion. Mrs. Birmingham's big car stopped outside her gate, and the great lady herself came into Marjorie's humble little home bearing the books she had promised the day before. But for once in her life, Marjorie was not in the least interested in the chatter of the banker's wife. She did not even take the trouble to offer any prideful reason for Hugh's absence in New York. She only wanted to be alone to think what he was doing, and to plan what they would all do with the wealth he would lavish on them.

Four o'clock, five—six at last. Time for Howard's and Elinor's supper. At last they were in bed. The last question was answered, little Elinor's eyes shutting tightly in spite of herself as she crooned the last lines of her "Wock-a baby" she had had in mother's lap.

Alone, Marjorie was distinctly restless. She even began to be sorry she had not sent for Mrs. Clancy, and once even started for the telephone to send for the garrulous old lady. It was such a long time between six-thirty and mid-night. But no, she would find something to do. It was not with a great deal of success that she tried to busy herself, however. She straightened out the sideboard drawers. Another half hour gone. There was a lot of mending

piled in her sewing basket, but somehow she did not feel like that now. She contented herself with rearranging its contents. Scattered about were a lot of magazines she and Hugh had finished reading. Now was a good time to tie them up to be sent to the infirmary. She straightened up from this task to glance at the clock which had never ticked so slowly before. Why, it was only a little after seven now! Her eyes wandered to the table where she had placed the gayly bound books Mrs. Birmingham had brought. She idly turned the pages of one. It did not look uninteresting. Once more her hand reached out for a moment through habit for the mending basket. Then she laughed as she withdrew it. What was the use? They wouldn't have to be wearing mended things much longer, any of them. She might as well read until Hugh's train reached Atwood.

"I'll find out just how Mrs. Birmingham's sister's taste in literature runs," she mused, "though I doubt if Mrs. B. will ever profit very much this time by having her books read for her."

Another shovelful of coal for the fire, and with the big wicker chair drawn up in front of it, Marjorie Benton gave herself a little shake to settle down comfortably as she opened her book and slipped her fingers between its pages to find if there were any uncut leaves. For the first time that day, she forgot the passage of time. Page after page she turned as the clock ticked on, striking its hours and half hours unheeded. It was a fascinating story, at that.

The soft closing of the kitchen door caused her to look up with a start. She jumped to her feet as though she could not believe her eyes. There was Hugh standing before her, a wide bland smile on his handsome face as he drew off a brand new glove.

"Hugh, dear!" she exclaimed, "how you startled me! I didn't hear you come up the walk—why, I didn't even hear the train! Did you get an earlier one? What time is it?"

"Ten after twelve, honey," he answered. "You must have been reading something mighty good, and here I came in so quietly. Thought you'd be asleep!"

"Asleep! Oh, how could you! Don't you know I'm just perishing to know what happened! Tell me—quick, quick!"

Hugh Benton's ready grin broadened. He was teasingly slow in answering as his hand went into his pocket and he drew out a wallet, and with maddening slowness drew from it a certified check.

"Just a scrap of paper," he commented off-handedly, "but this will tell you what you want to know, and then I'll tell you the rest."

Marjorie's eyes widened with amazement at the startling figures on the face of the small piece of paper he dangled before her. She was too choked with emotion for a moment to speak. Her husband's arms closed gently around her and he drew her to him.

"We did it, dear—you and I," he whispered. "And it's all for you. This is only a starter, too, for if you think this is big, you ought to see the contracts I've made for royalties."

"Hugh! Hugh!" Marjorie's voice was a sob as she kissed him again and again. "Oh, I'm too happy to tell you! Oh, please don't wake me out of this wonderful dream!"

"Well, I, for one," Hugh laughed as he slipped the check between his fingers, "am too used to handling these things belonging to other people to think this is a dream. There is only one thing I'm thinking of, and that is your happiness." Marjorie drew back from him a step and looked levelly into his eyes.

"Are you quite, quite sure, Hugh dear?" she begged earnestly.

"Quite." In that one word Hugh Benton put a world of meaning. "I've had plenty of time to think, too—and I've decided. You shall do with this money just exactly as you please. Whatever your plans are, they must be for the best, so I have given up all thoughts of the farm. And now that's settled," he said, in the old way, giving himself a little shake of renunciation.

"Oh, Hugh, you *are* a darling! And you'll never regret it—never regret letting me have my way in this one big thing. I promise you!"

For a moment the big man's eyes were solemn. Into them came just a hint of that far-away look of wonder. But his voice was tender, if a bit grave as he spoke:

"Let's hope not, sweetheart—let's hope not!"

CHAPTER IV

Christmas Eve in the new home!

A Christmas tree that glittered and dazzled with its festoons of twinkling little bulbs of sapphire and gold, ruby, and orange, and violet, and pale lemon from its wide-spreading base in the center of the Bentons' upstairs living room of their fourteen-room house on that most wonderful of driveways, Riverside, in New York—to the top-most branch that swept the high creamy ceiling jostling the fine bisque cherub that adorned that branch— And a house warming.

As Marjorie Benton with a long-drawn sigh of contentment looked for the hundredth time about this one new big room with its sweeping spaces, its gay cretonnes and deep, cushion-piled wicker chairs and out through the row of French windows across the dusky blue of the Hudson to the Palisades with their twinkling starlights, she felt that life at last was worth living. All this—all—and her arms moved in a comprehensive gesture impelled by her thoughts—was hers! Her home! What more fitting than that they should have their house warming on Christmas Eve. Marjorie's tired nerves and body that ached a bit, too, in sympathy, reminded her that she had not been able to have all this ready for Christmas Eve without effort. But how glad she was that she had done it! Glad!

True, Hugh was glooming a little—sentimental glooming for a time he should be glad to have put behind him, but he would get over that she was sure. He would come to see that her judgment was best, and that this was the way to live. Once more she sighed with utter contentment as she rearranged a heavy strand of silver tinsel that dangled inartistically. It was all ready for the children now and she could take time to breathe. In a deep chair in front of the sputtering open fire on its quaintly tiled hearth she dropped down for a moment's rest and retrospection.

How busy and interesting had been the few short months that had passed since the night Hugh had come home to her in Atwood with his wonderful news!

They had been most fortunate in securing the services of a capable and competent nurse for the children, so they could catch the early train to New York every day on their house-hunting expeditions. Their reward had been this beautiful little house on the Drive, with its view of the Hudson. To

Marjorie it seemed a mansion with its fourteen rooms, its servants' quarters in the attic, their garage with space for three cars, and oh, so many more things she had not at first thought of herself.

Then had begun the real work and pleasure of furnishing it. What a never-changing miracle it was to Marjorie to be able to select whatsoever she wished without having to hesitate and consider the price and durability of each article as she had always been obliged to do.

Every detail had been completed a few days before Christmas, when they bade farewell to their friends and the little village with its memories of five happy years, and moved into the new home.

Stretched lazily on Marjorie's wicker *chaise longue*, smoking his after-dinner cigar, careless of his tumbling of his wife's carefully selected new pillows, Hugh Benton let his gaze rove over the vivid scene. It paused as his eyes reached his wife sitting before the cheery fire, her slight smile telling of what she saw in the blazing logs. Because they were so close, so much to each other, Marjorie Benton felt this and as she turned in Hugh's direction, her smile broadened as her features lighted up with expressed happiness. In a moment she was by his side, kneeling on a cushion in the old familiar child manner her husband knew and loved, and her fingers were running caressingly through his shock of dark hair.

"What do you think of it all, dear?" she asked exultingly. "Isn't the tree wonderful? I think those decorators were marvelous, but I guess I'm not quite used to money yet, for I almost dread to think of the bill they'll present."

Slowly Hugh sat up, and reached for her hand. He patted it gently as he spoke.

"It has all been wonderful, dear," he answered, "and you mustn't forget you're to forget the bills—but honey-girl," and there was a little droop to the corners of his mouth and unmistakable yearning in his earnest eyes as he voiced his plaint, "somehow I can't help missing the little old Christmas Eves we always had at Atwood. Remember how you and I would sit up nights ahead stringing popcorn, gilding walnuts, tinseling cotton to represent snow, and doing everything we could to have a pretty, effective tree for the kiddies, without hardly investing anything?"

Marjorie laughed as she gave his hand a playful squeeze. To her it was incomprehensible, with all this grandeur before him, that Hugh should regret the Atwood days.

"How funny, those other little trees were compared with this one, weren't they?" she wanted to know.

But there was no gleam of answering mirth from Hugh.

“Umm, funny, maybe,” he agreed with an air of reservation. But there was a fuller meaning than Marjorie caught, as he added: “You’re right—one couldn’t possibly compare those other trees with this. Still,” and he was so plaintively appealing that his wife’s clear laughter rang out more bubblingly than ever, “still, we got a lot of happiness out of those funny little trees, didn’t we, dear?”

Marjorie was not going to commit herself too far.

“Yes—I suppose we did,” was her reluctant admission.

“And say, do you remember,” Hugh rambled on, his eyes aglow with animation, “the night we cut out the movies to buy two whole ornaments the next day—I’ll tell you——”

Marjorie stopped him a little impatiently. She playfully placed her hand over his mouth.

“Now, Hugh darling, don’t lecture—there’s a good boy! I’m not going to let you on Christmas Eve. You’re just not used to things yet. When you are, you’ll just be bound to admit you have the wisest little wife in the world—” She stopped his protest with a quick caress as she got to her feet, and went over to the tree to place a life-like big doll and a “really, truly” railroad train in more conspicuous positions.

“It is beautiful, though, isn’t it, dear?” she repeated, and without waiting for his reply, hurried on: “There are two people I know who’ll think so if you don’t. Just wait till you see their eyes in the morning!”

She stifled an unwelcome yawn with the pat of fingers.

“More tired than I thought, dear,” she admitted. “I really must get some sleep. There’s so much to enjoy to-morrow. Coming along, or are you going to smoke for awhile?”

“Believe I’ll finish my cigar. Don’t stay awake waiting for me now—good-night, dearest, pleasant dreams, and a world of happy Christmases before you,” and he kissed her as he opened the door for her, in the old-world manner he never neglected.

Alone, Hugh Benton extinguished all the lights in the room, even those on the tree, and seated himself in the rocker before the fire. For a long time he sat smoking his cigar, gazing into the dying embers. His thoughts were of many things—of his years of unalloyed happiness—of his great love for his wife and babies, and then of this newly-acquired fortune. Marjorie’s theory of living he at last concluded appeared to be more sensible than his own, after all, and when he finally arose, it was with the full determination to use

every power within his grasp to meet all the requirements due this new position of his. He would mold his life anew; become a man of affairs. With all that was in him he would strive diligently to reach the pinnacle of success that his ambitious wife had planned for him.

Boredom has long been the common complaint of the idle rich. Many things are excused because of it; many useless and reckless occupations condoned for and by that favored class on the ground that the time passes so slowly that they must have something to do. Whether or no this is exactly the case, however, is a moot question. To come right down to it, time generally passes a great deal more quickly for those who have more store of worldly goods than they would wish. To the woman of fashion and wealth months and days seem actually to have flown by from the time she made her more or less blushing *début* until she suddenly wakes one day to realize that there is gray in her hair, and that it will take arduous hours at the beauty parlors to smooth over the ravages of time in a once-unwrinkled countenance. Men, too—more often than not the man of unlimited means comes to know that middle life is upon him and that he has not accomplished any of the great things that he had once planned, always having known that with wealth to back him he could accomplish them. It is all the fault of time. It flies rapidly—too rapidly for those who have the means for gratifying every wish and whim.

The Bentons were no exception to the rule. Time flew by on such light wings for them that it was hard to realize that so much had been accomplished, so much changed in the three years that might have been so many months since they had left Atwood for New York. Of them all, though, the children had most readily accustomed themselves to the change and long since had become seasoned little New Yorkers with little noses turned up at less lucky youngsters who had no nice warm closed car to command whenever they wished a ride.

Hugh, too, at the end of the three years (though his change had been more gradual), might always have lived on Riverside Drive and known club life since his salad days. Unlike his wife, who in the first flush of her good fortune had elected play as her life work, Hugh had turned his attention to work. Ambitious as he was, and before his first success with his invention with no outlet for it, he had not let grass grow under his feet since he had changed his cottage in Atwood for a house on Riverside Drive. Personal attention to the details of the manufacture of his invention had brought him in contact with business men of wealth and solidity and deep down Hugh

Benton was not the sort of man to neglect what opportunity threw in his way. From manufacturing to Wall Street had been but a step. Had Hugh Benton's lucky fairy been with him day by day to wave her magic wand, he could not have had more fortune in his ventures. His was not the story of the ordinary novice. It was the thousandth one that daily draws more and more grist to the mills of the "big men" who rule so autocratically in that small street called Wall;—the story that draws adventurers with all the fascination that fishermen who daily cast their lines off the bathing beaches know because of tales of a solitary tide runner that some time has been known to become unwary.

So it was, that at the end of three years, Hugh Benton was a rich man. He was becoming richer. He might have been a blood relation of Midas, said those who had come eagerly to watch for a tip that might fall from his lips unguardedly, for in so short a time his had become the platitudinous but nonetheless expressive sobriquet of "Lucky Benton."

With success, came all that it usually implies. His, too, had become the pleasures of the rich. Almost without knowing it, so subtle had come the transformation, home no longer held the joys it once did for the former bank employee. Roadsters of high speed, cards at any of the many clubs where he had been eagerly welcomed, fishing and hunting expeditions from the base of a hundred-thousand-dollar "shack" in the Adirondacks had taken the place of more homely pleasures. It had all come about so easily too. Looking back in one of his few retrospective moods Hugh Benton smiled as he recalled the thought he would never accustom himself to New York. He smiled a bit disdainfully at his own small viewpoint when he remembered how once he had believed he would be content as a gentleman farmer.

Only Marjorie Benton was dissatisfied, though she was queerly conscious that she ought not to be—that she had everything that she had once so sincerely believed necessary to her happiness. The artificiality of all about her had come to her with a shock, an eye opening all the more distressing because of its suddenness. Marjorie Benton had found out she did not know how to play. More, she had discovered she did not want to. At least she did not want to play as did those with whom she came in contact and who had, from the horizon of Atwood, seemed all that was most desirable in the world. For instance, one of her most eager plans when she once put herself to sleep planning was to play bridge and spend wonderful afternoons in the company of cultured and delightful women such as those of whom she had read and whom she hoped to emulate. One of her first steps had been to get an instructress, so that she would be prepared to enter "society."

It had not been hard for the Bentons to enter the charmed circle. It had been surprisingly easy, in fact, for Hugh's financial success opened many doors that might otherwise have been barred, and present-day "society" may well be trusted not to overlook the tales the journals have to tell of sudden wealth (and Hugh had proven good copy) however much they may profess to scorn it.

So she had met a great many people, as the wives of Hugh's friends had called and invited her to one affair after the other. At first she had been fairly beside herself with joy. But it was of short duration. Try as she would, she simply could not "take" to any of these new friends. They were all so frivolous and petty. Life held nothing for them obviously but bridge, dress, theater and gossip.

Then had come the day of her own first bridge party and her first real shock and mute protest. Somehow the thought of playing for money had never entered her mind. She had imagined that they played for a prize, the same as they had done at home at their little whist socials; or perhaps society matrons simply played for amusement.

"You must be particularly nice to Mrs. Gregory," Hugh told her when she was starting off for the bridge party at the exclusive Mrs. Arnold's Fifth Avenue home. "She's one of 'the' Gregorys, you know, and it will mean a great deal socially to have her good will."

Marjorie promised. This would not be hard, for was it not her way to be particularly nice to all her own and her husband's friends and acquaintances? It was Mrs. Gregory who gave Mrs. Hugh Benton her surprise and shock, however. At the table where she sat with three other players, including Hugh's Mrs. Gregory, Mrs. Allen cut the cards languidly and remarked:

"Well, what shall it be? May I suggest a quarter of a cent?"

Mrs. Gregory suppressed a polite yawn.

"Oh, my dear!" was her reproof. "How can you suggest wasting our time so! You know I never play for anything less than two cents—it's boring enough even then."

So Marjorie Benton played for money. She had not in the least intended to, but she was too embarrassed to utter a protest. She played, and with a mind perturbed, of course, played badly. At the end of the afternoon she had lost sixty dollars. Her cheeks burned as she made out her check and laid it on the table.

All the way home as she sat comfortably in her limousine she thought of it. It wasn't the money—sixty dollars meant nothing to Marjorie Benton—she would have felt precisely the same had she won. It was the principle of

the thing that worried her—she felt utterly debased to think that she had spent an afternoon *gambling*. She couldn't imagine just why it should affect her that way, unless it was her puritanical upbringing that arose to the surface, despite all her efforts to force it back.

When she told Hugh about it, he laughed, and called her a "little old-fashioned country girl."

"Have you forgotten about 'living in Rome,' honey?" he said lightly. "Don't let it upset you. You'll get used to it!"

But Marjorie knew better. There was only one thing to do. So never again did she play bridge. Bridge bored her, she insisted, and she didn't enjoy it.

With everything else it was the same. She couldn't accustom herself to seeing the women drink cocktails at a luncheon, and the first time they passed their cigarette cases she almost gasped. But the thing that disgusted her above all else was the deceit that she discovered all about her.

Her eyes were opened to this. One afternoon she called on Mrs. James, society matron, and the wife of one of Hugh's friends. When she entered the room, three women she had met previously were seated at the tea-table. Their conversation ceased as abruptly as if a curtain had been rung down in the middle of an act. She paid little attention to the matter at the time, as they were all so charming in their manner toward her, and greeted her so effusively.

For a while they discussed inconsequential topics, and then their conversation drifted to another woman, a member of their own set. At first there wasn't anything really offensive in their remarks. It merely brought to the surface a feline quality unsuspected. But the conversation changed suddenly. To Marjorie it seemed these women surely couldn't realize what they were saying. Like a pack of hungry wolves, they tore the woman they discussed into shreds.

Dumfounded, Marjorie sat and listened. She couldn't believe it possible that four women could say such scandalous things of another they called friend. She was sure their assertions were untrue, as they insinuated things impossible for anyone to know. They surmised merely, and it was upon such scant evidence that they set about to wreck a woman's reputation. She felt that she could tolerate it no longer, and was about to protest, when the woman who had been under the hammer entered the room.

To Marjorie's consternation and amazement the four eager talkers welcomed the newcomer with open arms. Their terms of affectionate endearment seemed revolting, but it was when one effusively gushed: "Your

ears must be burning, dear, we were just discussing you and remarking how unkind you were to deprive us of your charming society for so long a time," that Marjorie felt that she had reached the limit of her endurance, and pleading an important engagement, hurried away.

Before she reached home, she remembered how strangely they had all acted when she entered the room. Like a clear light it dawned on her that they must have been discussing her just as they had this other woman.

Instances of this sort taught her shallowness and insincerity of the people with whom she had chosen to mingle, so she managed to see less and less of them all. Instead, she tried to interest herself in charity, and again she failed. Whenever she decided to do a kindness, a reporter would rush in, demand her picture for the front page of the society section, and make a sensation out of nothing at all.

Many women would have craved that very thing, and derived great pleasure from it. But not Marjorie Benton. With true gentility she shrank from publicity. If she wanted to help those in distress, she wanted to do it alone, in her own way, without having the whole world know of it.

She spent as much time as she could with the children while they were small, but as they grew older and tutors and governesses took the place of nurses, she found herself more and more lonely.

Once when Hugh asked her if she were happy, for a moment the inclination was strong to open up her heart and tell him exactly how she felt—but the thought of the children forced her to conquer it. For their sakes she would utter no word of complaint; her own feelings must be sacrificed for them and for her plans for their education and futures.

At the expiration of the five years' lease on their home, Hugh purchased a magnificent home, within easy motoring distance of New York. A small army of servants were engaged to take charge of it.

Then for a time, Marjorie Benton was again happy. Always she had wanted just such gardens as Hugh's increased fortune made possible on their new estate. Exquisite rare flowers diffused their perfume; shaded walks wound serpentinely through long vistas of greensward and shrubbery; miniature lakes, crystal clear with water lilies on their shining bosoms; fountains that spouted and sparkled in the sun that seemed never to shine so fair as on this wonder garden. At last she had one place of dreams-come-true. Only the fine stone benches that Hugh had imported were not part of the picture to her. They were so cold and hard—so reminiscent of the people for whom they were made. So, old-fashioned as she had come to admit herself to be, Marjorie Benton had her little rocker placed out in her garden

and it was here that her happiest hours were spent, among her cherished flowers, wandering about, or sitting idly, reading or sewing. It disturbed her not one whit that Hugh found cause for mirth in her sewing.

“You can have a dozen women to do that for you, my dear,” he reminded her. “I thought you wanted to get away from all that sort of thing.”

But Marjorie only smiled her slow smile and made no attempt to make Hugh understand that she wanted to do something—that she must feel that her time was not all being wasted.

It was at this period that Hugh Benton branched out as a host. His dinners were becoming famous; his week-end invitations favors to be eagerly bid for. The big new house became the scene of many a social event, and the Bentons’ hospitality a thing to conjure with. When her husband’s friends were invited for the week-end, a dinner party, or any other sort of entertainment, Mrs. Benton was a charming and considerate hostess. Somehow, though, she was always in the background—she was with them, but never of them. She had given up even trying to enter into the spirit of their pleasures and amusements.

Her clothes, always of the finest materials and expensive, lacked style. Her evening gowns all had lace or net yokes, with sleeves reaching to the elbow. She wouldn’t wear a décollete gown, and to her innermost self she was forced to acknowledge that she could not overcome her old-fashioned notions of propriety.

Marjorie couldn’t realize that Hugh, now the ultra-modern host, was the same man who once had protested with bitterness against their present manner of life. While Marjorie stood still, his steps dashed madly ahead. He fairly reveled in it all. As a prince of good fellows he was hailed among his friends. Money he lavished at home and abroad; every whim of the children was indulged with a recklessness that was ruinous.

He couldn’t comprehend Marjorie’s attitude. Surely this was what she had insisted she wanted. What was the matter with women, anyway? He pleaded with her to take her place in society and mingle more among people, but uselessly; he became angry and impatient, and called her attention to the fact that it was she who had planned their new life and not he, and at last had come the settling down, the acceptance of things as they were, Marjorie going on in her strait-laced conventional way, not as unhappy as she might have been had there not come that subtle rift between her and her husband which in five years had reached undreamed-of width; Hugh resigned and indifferent, always kind and courteous, but seeking his own pleasure, and living his life in his own way.

To Marjorie Benton had come one final pang when Hugh had decided it would be more agreeable and comfortable all around if he had his own suite of rooms. She had dropped a few tears of regret as she arranged those rooms for him, and in the general upheaval she had come upon his old ebony military brushes that had so long reposed on their joint bureau in their bedroom in the Atwood cottage. Marjorie remembered how she had got them for his birthday, and hers was a twisted little smile as she laid the little brushes down to compare them with Hugh's new ones of ivory. How insignificant they looked! And how dear! She turned and her wide eyes roved through the big room in search of familiar objects. Yes, there was his smelly old pipe, the slippers she had embroidered herself, a little shabby now from much wear and with their gay flowers faded, but— And the little beaten metal humidor. It was with a start that she looked up to find Hugh in the room, giving instructions to his impeccable English valet. He saw the little pile on a big wicker table. His hand shot out to sweep them all from their resting places and Marjorie Benton heard the little metal clang of protest as they piled into a waste paper basket.

“Here, take all this old junk out and burn it,” he coolly advised. “Enough stuff around here without all this old junk——”

His wife's smile was wan. “Old junk——” How far Hugh had gone from the dear sentimental old days! It seemed like so much of the days of Atwood were in the same category. Was everything to go the same way—everything of that old time, only five years as men counted time, but still so infinitely of a long, long ago to go the same way, become “old junk.” It was with a little gesture of benediction that Marjorie laid the little ebony brushes in the basket with the rest.

Hugh turned to her a little querulously.

“My dear,” he observed, “don't you think it would be just as well to let the servants attend to this? They probably think it strange that you so often show such inclination to do their work.”

And meekly the woman left what was to her a labor of love. She would have liked Hugh to remember when he was in his suite that it was her care that made him so comfortable. She could have thought of him in his deep arm-chair before his blazing logs glancing at the wide mantel where she had placed photographs of herself and the children; of his smile when he saw how carefully she had arranged his smoking materials as he had once liked her to arrange them. But Hugh preferred differently. He preferred the cold, stolid, mechanical efficiency of his expressionless English serving man. Long Marjorie Benton sat before her own little fire in her gold and ivory

boudoir and thought it all out. What had happened to them in these five years?

After Hugh's removal to his own quarters there came times that his wife often did not see him for two or three days at a time. Late returning from his club, he said he did not care to disturb her; mornings he would leave too early or else so late that he would not take the time to see her. And so, these two who had once been soulmates, were slowly drifting apart.

Marjorie had not even the consolation of her children now partly to assuage the loneliness that she had come to admit was the one thing in her life amid all the gaud that was real. But there was some consolation in their very absence. She was accomplishing for them all that she had long ago planned.

Elinor was attending a select school for young ladies, and Howard had been sent to prepare for college. She counted the days until Elinor should grow up and once more be at home. Then she would have a real companion. What wonderful times she and her daughter would have together. Of course, Elinor had been willful and stubborn as a little girl, but she was confident that she would leave all that behind her when she finished school.

And then some day Howard would return from college, ready to take his place in the world, and perhaps after that he would bring a dear, sweet girl to her, and she would have another daughter to love.

Dreaming of days to come, putting from her mind all she could the days that were gone, Marjorie Benton sat gazing into her fire until the clang of the dressing chimes reminded her that she must dress. That was something Hugh always insisted on. And she got languidly to her feet with a sense of being far from happy over the prospective dinner as she recalled the two effusive, pompous business friends Hugh was having to dinner.

She smiled as she saw her children's pictures looking up at her with answering smiles from their gold frames in their places on her gold-strewn dressing table, the toilet things Hugh had given her the past Christmas with far less interest than he had her celluloid set long ago, the little set she kept tucked away in a bureau drawer so that she might use them when she chose.

How sweet Elinor was!

How manly Howard!

She smiled in her old mother way as she lifted each picture and kissed it in turn. And some day— It could not be long now—time flew so——

“Things are not so bad after all, dear ones,” she whispered as she set them down. “They could not be with any woman who has such lovely

children as mine—so much happiness to look forward to.”

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And so were bridged the years between.

CHAPTER V

The Benton mansion fairly blazed with lights. Everywhere there was suppressed excitement. Even from under the dignity of speckless uniforms and brightly shining buttons, there was evidence that something unusual was in the air. Hurrying back and forth servants inspected minor details. Liveried attendants stationed at the door beside his majesty, the butler, were in readiness to announce the army of guests expected to celebrate the début of the young daughter of the house—Miss Elinor Benton.

Sixteen years had passed since Marjorie and Hugh had come to New York to live—years that had brought vaster changes to them both than either would have believed possible.

Awaiting the arrival of his guests, Hugh, proud father and man of the world, stood in the center of his elaborately-decorated ballroom and gazed about with satisfaction. The years had dealt more than kindly with Hugh Benton. His appearance told nothing of his forty-four years. There was no trace of gray in his thick dark hair. His love of athletics, and the splendid ministrations of his valet had kept his figure in excellent condition. Now his handsome face wore an expression of self-satisfaction. He might have been taken for his own son's brother as he stood there waiting.

He did not at first see the movement of the trailing vines and flowers that formed curtains to one of the room's great entrances. Nor, until she spoke and came whirling into the room to drop a deep curtsy before him did he see the girl who had parted those curtains—a girl of such flower-like beauty that she might have been sister to one of the blossoms through which she made her way. She looked at him with eyes that sparkled above delicately flushed cheeks. And Hugh Benton gazed on his débutante daughter with a joy that was greater by far than he had ever contemplated any of his wealth of possessions.

“Well, dad!” Elinor Benton exclaimed breathlessly. “How do I look for my first formal introduction into society?”

For a moment the father did not speak as he looked at her. He was trying to realize that this gloriously beautiful girl of eighteen, bubbling over with the exuberance and enthusiasm of youth was his daughter. Her hair was the same that Marjorie's had been when he had married her. It was a mass of spun gold with the sun glittering upon it. Features, complexion, figure—all

were flawless, and Hugh's eyes beamed with pride as he answered tenderly, truly; "You're as beautiful as an angel, dear."

"Oh, how dear of you to think so, dad!" was her answer, then her manner changed to an impishness as she added: "It's certainly fine to have such a verdict to fall back on first, because there's going to be a cataclysm hereabouts in a few minutes about my angelic appearance. Mother's going to have a spasm or two when she sees my dress." Her eyes were full of mischief as she placed her hand on her father's arm wheedlingly. "But you'll stand by me, won't you—there's a good dad?"

Hugh was surprised.

"Why, what's wrong, little one?" he asked. "Looks to me like a very wonderful little gown," and his eyes, trained to admire feminine adornment, took in with admiration the details of his daughter's dainty creation of cream lace with its garlands of pink rosebuds.

"Oh, there's nothing the matter with the dress, but *look* at my neck and arms," Elinor hastened to explain as she held out the discussed members for inspection. "Don't you see they're actually *bare*. Oh, what a crime!" She shook her finger admonishingly at her roundly-molded young arm. Then her mocking turned to more of seriousness as she went on: "I can tell you things, dad, and you'll understand, so you might just as well be told before the explosion how naughty-naughty your little girl is. The facts are these: When we went to Madame Felice's for my last fitting, the dress was just as you see it now, but mother wouldn't have it at all. She said it was positively indecent for a girl of eighteen to expose her neck and arms, and she ordered Madame to fill in the neck with lace and add sleeves to reach the elbows. Madame declared that it would ruin the entire charm of the gown, but mother was as firm as a rock and she couldn't sway her an inch. Well, when we reached home, I decided to take the matter into my own hands, so I called up Felice and told her mother had changed her mind and she was to leave the gown as it was—well—and here it is!"

Hugh's half humorous expression was still entirely admiring as he looked over the troublesome garment. He laughed as his shoulders shrugged in dismissal of something not understood. "Well, child," he added, as he took her hand and patted it, "as far as I'm concerned, I am still of the same opinion—both you and your gown are beautiful. Your neck and arms are perfect, and I don't see why you should have to hide them—I do wish," and there was a hint of impatience in his voice, "that your mother would get over some of her old-fashioned ideas."

“Not any more than I do, dad. Why for years mother has been writing me that after I graduated she and I would be real chums, and now that I am home we do nothing but argue all day long. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been on the verge of quarreling with her. We haven’t a single taste in common, and we positively clash on every subject. Why, I’ve found out mother is simply years behind the times and I—well, you know, dad, that none of the girls I’ve been to school with are that, to say the least. I don’t think mother has any conception of modern girls—and I can’t help it if I’m one, can I?”

Hugh shook his head. “You suit me, dear,” he answered consolingly. “I wouldn’t be a bit surprised, either, if there isn’t a good deal in your argument. But I expect you’ll have to do what I have for a long time, and make the best of it. Your mother is too set in her opinions to attempt to change her now—so you’ll have to be content with me and your girl friends for chums.”

Neither of them saw Marjorie Benton as she came slowly down the wide flower-banked stairway and drooped across the hall to the door leading to her ballroom. With one hand holding aside the blossom curtain, she stopped and gazed wide-eyed at what she saw, as though she could hardly believe what the glittering chandelier lights revealed. It was a picture that some might have called appealing and beautiful—that fairy-like girl of eighteen with her neck and arms of marble whiteness and smoothness nestling in her handsome father’s arms. To Marjorie Benton, however, the beauty of the picture was lost. It was something else she saw that brought a stern light into eyes faded by years of unrequited yearning, and hardened the features with which time had not dealt so lightly as it had with her husband. As she stood there for the moment unseen, ready for her daughter’s debut, Marjorie Benton could not by any stretch of the imagination have been placed in the picture class herself. Sixteen years of loneliness and weary waiting had wrought havoc with her delicate beauty, and where now, at forty, she should have been at the full blush of womanly beauty, she might have been a woman of sixty-five. Golden her hair was still—but it had lost its sheen and taken on instead the dull luster of carelessly-kept gold and silver. There was as much silver as gold at forty, too. The corners of her mouth drooped pathetically—all the starlight had long since departed from her eyes that bore an expression merely of weariness. Now, too, her gown of amethyst velvet with lace of the same shade, cut in severely plain lines, would have been most appropriate for a woman of sixty-five.

Hugh and Elinor turned with a start, the girl to take on an expression of defiance as the mother’s voice came low, tense, compelling, from the

doorway: "Elinor! Your dress!"

"Well," was the pert retort. "Don't you like it? Dad does. Don't you, dad?"

But Marjorie was not to be placated.

"I suppose I'm not to believe this is your fault, my daughter," added the mother as though unaware of the interruption. "I take it that Madame Felice has ignored my orders. To-morrow I shall 'phone her and withdraw my patronage from her establishment."

Hugh had made no move or word as he calmly looked his wife over. But there was now distaste in the closing of his eyes as though to shut out the vision in the doorway, and veil the disappointment he feared he could not hide.

Gaining confidence in her father's presence, Elinor Benton answered her mother calmly, but with little show of due respect.

"Now, mother," she implored, "don't get so excited—this isn't a tragedy, and don't you go and 'phone Felice—because it wasn't her fault. I called her up and told her to leave the dress as it was."

"Of course, you're aware she had no right to take orders from you contrary to mine," Marjorie persisted, with lifted eyebrows.

"Oh, I just told her the orders came from you—that you had changed your mind."

"You dared!" Marjorie fairly gasped. "You are admitting you lied about it. I wouldn't have believed my daughter capable of such a thing."

Hugh believed the time had come for his promised interference.

"Now, now," he soothed, "I fail to see what all this fuss is about. If the child wants to display her pretty neck and arms, I can't see where the harm is—and as for her telephoning to Madame Felice, I can readily understand her doing that in order to evade an unnecessary argument."

Marjorie Benton looked her husband over as though he were an interfering stranger.

"There have been many things which does not surprise me at your attitude," she said icily. "However, that is aside from the point. Come, Elinor, we will go upstairs and see what Marie can do in arranging some sort of scarf about you."

"We will do nothing of the kind. I won't! I won't!" Elinor stamped her foot angrily. "Once and for all, mother, you'll have to understand that I'm not a baby, and I refuse to be ordered about in that manner. I'll wear this

dress as it is to-night, or I'll lock myself in my room and you'll be obliged to give my debut party without me."

Hugh walked over to his wife and placed his hand appealingly on her lace-covered arm. "She means it, I'm afraid," he whispered. "Hadn't you better permit her to have her way this time? Remember, we have two hundred guests coming."

Just for a moment Marjorie was silent, fighting what she knew was a losing battle. How bitter it was that she should have to battle with these two she loved so dearly. She turned away her face that they might not witness her struggle. When she spoke it was in her usual cool, expressionless voice—not the voice of the Marjorie Benton of Atwood, but one which the years between had evolved.

"Very well," was her surrender, but neither Elinor who was daintily whirling about the polished floor in exuberance over her triumph over the mother she was coming to think an oppressor, nor Hugh Benton who was looking at his watch with a slight show of impatience, saw the tears in the mother's eyes which she was heroically forcing back.

Elinor stopped suddenly in the middle of a pirouette to cock her head daintily to one side listening.

"There they come, Dad," she cried eagerly, "Miss Elinor Benton is about to be introduced to society. I wish Howard would hurry. He promised not to be late for anything."

Hugh Benton's face wore an annoyed frown.

"I can't understand what's keeping him," he complained. "He should have been here at five o'clock."

"Professor Anderson positively promised to grant him a leave of absence for to-night, didn't he?" Elinor asked. "I know he said Howard was not deserving of any favor, but I will certainly be happy when my big brother finishes sowing his wild oats."

"Reckon we all will be, little girl," her father laughed. "But we must have a little patience. 'Spose he's just got to sew a little crop or two."

Marjorie's level eyes looked deeply into her husband's as she asked him calmly, meaningly: "You mean to say you believe it absolutely necessary for a boy to sow 'wild oats' as you call them? I don't remember ever having heard of your doing so."

Hugh shrugged.

"Different with me," he answered. "I didn't go to college—I didn't mingle with a set of boys such as Howard is thrown in contact with, and I

hadn't a father who could afford my indulging in any escapades."

"I'm afraid there will be an escapade too many one of these days."

"You're such a confirmed pessimist, my dear! The boy's all right—leave him alone." And Hugh turned aside indicating he had said his last word. "He'll turn up any minute, so don't think any more about it."

The arrival of the first guests ended further discussion, and shortly the reception hall, drawing room and ballroom were thronged with the merry assemblage.

Promptly at 9:30, the first strains of music floated out from a balcony screened with ferns and roses. The dance was on.

To say that Elinor was having a glorious time would be putting it mildly. She fairly reveled in it all. She felt that she had attained the heights as the center of attraction, with a bevy of young men surrounding her, politely fighting for the privilege of a dance.

She exulted in the thought that this was only the beginning of wonderful days and nights that lay before her. Surely she possessed everything to make her happy—Youth, beauty and riches. Life was so wonderful seen through the rosiest of glasses.

Eleven o'clock! Still no Howard. Elinor took a few moments to cast some resentful thoughts Howard-ward, but the fun was too fast and absorbing for her to worry more than that few moments over her brother's dereliction.

In spite of her husband's admonishing, Marjorie was acquiring a worry that momentarily gave evidence of becoming panic-stricken as she watched the doors with eager eyes for the boy who did not come. She felt she could not stand it any longer. She must know—must do something. With a hesitancy that would have been most strange in the Atwood days, she approached Hugh where he stood talking and laughing in a care-free manner with a group of his guests. He excused himself to speak to her as she laid her hand on his arm to ask for a word.

"Hugh, dear," she begged, "don't you think we had better call up Professor Anderson and find out about Howard—when he left, and——"

"And get him in bad, I suppose," Hugh blustered, but there was worry in his own handsome face as he once more glanced at his watch and then at the entrances. "No—he's probably loitering, and——"

Griggs, his valet, touched him on the arm. He turned to hear the few hurried whispered words.

“Important ’phone call, my dear,” he explained. “Make my excuses. Back in a minute——”

But Marjorie’s sharp ears had caught the word “sick.” Griggs must have been talking about Howard. Oh, where was he—her boy! She could not stand it! She had to find out.

Careless of guests, of hospitality, of everything, she hurried after her husband, but already he was out of sight. He must be at one of the private telephones, she thought, as she stumbled blindly along the passage.

But her way would have been still more blind had she seen her husband with her son at that moment.

At a side entrance two men were trying to persuade Howard to leave a taxi. In a maudlin state of intoxication, he refused to budge an inch, muttering to himself something about “a date with a lil’ blonde.”

Ordering the passageway clear, Hugh and Griggs managed between them to convey the indignantly-protesting Howard upstairs to his room.

From the telephone, the boy’s mother hastened to his room. They must have brought him home and told her nothing about it. Inside she heard voices. She knocked softly, and was about to enter, when it was opened and Hugh stood before her, quickly closing the door behind him.

“My boy?” she asked breathlessly. “What has happened? Is he here? Is he ill?”

Hugh was uncomfortable—flustered. “Ill?—No—yes—that is, he is ill—but he will soon be all right.”

“I will go to him at once,” and Marjorie started to brush by Hugh.

“You will do nothing of the kind,” he answered sternly. “You will return to your guests, and act as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. I will join you as soon as possible—we can’t both remain away.”

“What do I care about my guests, or anyone, if my boy is ill. My place is at his side, and I’m going——”

From behind the guarded door, came a volley of oaths, flung at the faithful Griggs, followed by the incoherent singing of a popular song.

“Oh—Oh!” Marjorie shuddered, and covered her burning cheeks with her hands. “So that is what his illness—I can’t believe it—My son intoxicated— What shall we do? I can’t bear it.”

“There, there, Marjorie,” Hugh patted her shoulder consolingly. “You must control yourself, and not create a scene. I’m sorry if any of this has leaked out among our guests, but I’m afraid it has. Now we must save the

situation by making as light of it as possible. It really isn't anything so terrible. He will be himself in the morning, and then I'll lecture him good. It seems he met a crowd of the boys when he came in from college and they persuaded him to go to dinner with them. This is the result. He is only a boy after all, you must remember, and is easily led."

"That's just it," Marjorie answered tragically. "He is only a boy, and can be easily led—God only knows where to."

"Come, now, it isn't as bad as that. You're making a mountain out of a mole hill as usual, but I must go back to him," as disturbing sounds again issued forth. "Go downstairs and brave it out. You *must*—if not for your own sake—for the sake of the boy himself."

"For his sake I'll do the best I can." She dried her eyes and turned toward the stairs. "But, oh, Hugh, how can you view this so lightly? How you've changed!"

Marjorie never remembered how she managed to get through the rest of the evening, going about among her guests with a smiling face and an aching heart. When Hugh joined her, he whispered to her that Howard was sleeping soundly, and would probably not awaken until late the next afternoon.

Eventually everything, pleasant or unpleasant, has its ending, and at 3 A.M. the last guest had departed, and the servants were extinguishing the lights.

"Wasn't it splendid?" Elinor enthused. "I had a wonderful time—I didn't have nearly enough dances to go around. All the boys were wild about me and I know the girls all envied me. Wasn't I a great success?"

"You certainly were, you little egotist," Hugh laughed.

"What ever in the world happened to Howard? I heard a couple of the boys talking, and from what I gathered, he came home soused."

"Elinor!" Marjorie was shocked. "Where did you ever acquire such slang? Surely you didn't learn it at Miss Grayson's? I can't understand half of the things you say, but I do know that they sound shockingly vulgar."

"No, mother of mine," Elinor laughed lightly. Nothing—not even her mother's disapproval could worry her after her evening's triumph. "I didn't learn any slang from Miss Grayson, but you must remember that I knew lots of girls there. Most of them thought it modern and up to date to use slang. Oh, but I can't explain it to you, you're so old-fashioned."

As Hugh closed his eyes, his thoughts were of his beautiful daughter and the brilliant match she was sure to make. But Marjorie—poor little mother—

all night she lay alone, in her darkened room, her hands pressed to her throbbing temples, the hot tears scorching her cheeks. Two thoughts ran riot through her mind—one was that her son, her boy, was lying a few rooms down the corridor in a drunken stupor. The other was, that Elinor, her baby, had gone to bed without even attempting to kiss her good-night.

CHAPTER VI

Elinor Benton's social success was all that she had seen envisioned on the night of her *début*. In the months that followed whirls of teas, luncheons, dinners, dances all but dizzied her sophisticated little head as she dashed madly from one to the other. Vague hints in the society columns linked her name with eligibles who were the despair of the mothers of other girls in her set. But blonde young Elinor took it as her meed and due, and laughed to her dimpled face in the mirror when she told herself how far wrong they were. She had no intention of entering the ranks of young matrons yet. Life was too full; too sweet. Homage was too dear to her, and the sway she held in one man's heart, her father's, too complete to think of exchanging him for any other man; her own wonderful home for that of another.

True to his word, Hugh Benton had made himself a real chum to her. It was to him she took her petty worries; her secrets. Though not often referred to, they had one thing in common not usual between father and daughter—their disapproval of the mother and wife, their intolerance of what they chose to call her old-fashioned ways, of her Puritanism, her love of the good and upstanding orthodoxy.

Busy at his desk one morning, Hugh frowned at the soft opening and closing of his door. He did not like even his confidential employees to disturb him when he was answering personal letters. But he knew it was no employee when he felt two soft arms about his neck, felt the softness only less so of rich furs against his cheeks and caught the subtle perfume he had come to associate with his daughter.

“Guess who!” whispered Elinor's voice. Then she answered her own question with a kiss. Aloud she added with a pretended pout: “Aren't you glad to see me—and surprised——”

Hugh laughed as he pulled her to his knees.

“Yes, a little—to that last part,” he said, hastening to add gallantly: “But delighted, nevertheless. What brings you into town at this time? You must have had an early start.”

“Oh, a lot. First, there's a luncheon engagement at the Biltmore with some of the girls, and then we're going to the *matinée*. But those are small matters. The principal thing was to see you all alone—I have a lot to talk to you about that I decided would be much better to say here at your office

instead of at home, so I came in an hour ahead of time.” And Elinor, settling herself in a comfortable easy chair, sat facing her father with an air of being ready to spend the hour.

Hugh Benton, his keen eyes taking in every detail of her appearance, thought he had never seen his daughter more beautiful. Her taffeta gown of navy blue, her drooping picture hat with its one touch of color, her graceful squirrel scarf, all went so naturally into the making of the picture. As had become usual with him when in the presence of this daughter the man before whom kings of finance bowed, glowed inwardly with the pride of possession.

“Well, baby girl, how much?” He smiled as his hand went towards his check-book.

“No, Dad dear, it isn’t money this time.” Elinor’s face dimpled deliciously as she shook her head, “strange as it may seem to you,” she added. Then seriousness chased the dimples away. “No, dear, it’s something uncomfortably serious. It’s—it’s about mother!”

“Your mother!” Hugh’s face, too, became serious. “Not ill, I hope.”

“No, she is perfectly well,” the girl answered, as a dull red crept into her cheeks. “Oh, dad, I’m so ashamed of myself to sneak to you in this way, but dear, you might as well know the truth. It is utterly impossible for me to get along with mother. There! It’s out! Do you think I’m so dreadful?” anxiously.

Hugh was solemn as he listened. Then he nodded.

“I believe I do know your difficulty, dear,” he answered, as if uncertain just what to say in this moment he had been in a way prepared for. “And,” he added, “of course, I don’t think you’re dreadful——”

Without waiting for him to conclude, Elinor burst out passionately:

“Oh, Dad, surely you can see I simply cannot be the old-fashioned, namby-pamby bread-and-butter school-girl that mother wishes me to be. Why, everything I do meets with her disapproval—we can’t agree in a single instance. Really, Dad, it is unbearable, and I’m just sick about it!”

Tears which had been valiantly withheld began to trickle down her cheeks. From his pocket Hugh took his handkerchief and wiped them tenderly away. “There, dear, you mustn’t cry and spoil your pretty eyes,” he soothed. “Remember your luncheon and matinée—I’m sure your misunderstanding with your mother can easily be straightened out. Calm down and tell me about it. What do you do that she objects to?”

“Oh, just everything.” Elinor’s sigh was one of resignation as she completed restoring, with a small dab of lace and linen, the ravages to her complexion her father had begun. “For instance,” she went on, “mother looks upon my playing bridge for money as a dreadful calamity. My drinking a cocktail is an utter degradation, and if I attempt to light a cigarette in her presence, she nearly collapses.”

“Do all the other girls in your set do these things?” Hugh asked. His brows met in a slight frown.

“Why, of course, Dad. All modern girls believe in having a good time. We never go to extremes in anything; but if you want to be thoroughly up to date you simply can’t be a prude.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he admitted slowly, “but just the same, when I was a young man——”

“When you *were* a young man!” Elinor interrupted indignantly. “You’re as young as a boy now, and you’re the handsomest man in New York, Dad.”

Her father, flushed, pleased as he always was, at this compliment. “Little flatterer,” he joked, pinching her cheeks. “You can’t lead me astray by paying me compliments. The things that you now call modern and up to date, in my day, would have been considered—fast.”

“No doubt they would have been too—just that,” was the girl’s composed retort, “but you know that we’re living in a progressive world, and no one needs to tell you how rapidly things have changed since your days.”

“Guess you’re right, baby,” Hugh replied. “I must admit that my own ideas of life have greatly changed since we came to New York sixteen years ago. I know one thing—all your friends come from the best of families, so if you do as they do, I can’t see where objection should arise.”

“Bravo, Dad!” Elinor clapped her hands in glee. “I knew you would see things in the right light. You’re so broad-minded about everything—and you’ll speak to mother?”

“Yes, dear, I’ll speak to your mother to-night, and try to reason with her a little——”

“Just a minute, Dad. I almost forgot the most important thing that I want you to try to make mother be reasonable about, and that is—Geraldine.”

“Geraldine?”

“Yes, Geraldine DeLacy. She’s a distant relative of the Thurstons, and she is visiting them at present. We girls are all crazy about her—she’s an adorable young widow, just twenty-six, and she makes the most wonderful

chaperone imaginable. That's the very thing mother so strenuously objects to."

"I can't see why," Hugh seemed surprised. "The Thurstons are most desirable and surely, any relative of theirs must be an aristocrat."

Elinor threw out her hands in a gesture of despair.

"Haven't I wasted hours and hours trying to make mother realize that very thing," she exclaimed, "and with no success whatever! For some unaccountable reason, she has taken an aversion to Geraldine. She objects to her age—says she's too young to be a chaperone—she calls her frivolous for permitting the girls to address her by her Christian name and all in all there isn't a thing the poor woman does that meets with mother's approval."

Hugh considered deeply. "I fail to see anything objectionable in what you have told me," he said finally. "The only thing I can do is to judge for myself when I have the pleasure of meeting your perfect chaperone. In the meantime, precious, don't you worry—your old Dad will always stand by you. Run along now, and have a good time."

He extracted a bill from his wallet, and reaching for Elinor's mesh bag tucked it in.

"Thank you so much, Dad dear, you're so wonderful to me." Elinor looked at him with grateful affectionate eyes. "The Thurstons are giving a dance for Nell on the 17th—mother received the invitation for it this morning—she says she is going to decline, but you must arrange to take me, and then you'll meet Geraldine. I know you'll agree with me and admit that she is adorable."

"Splendid—you may count upon me to act as your gallant escort to the Thurston dance," and Hugh kissed his daughter affectionately, as they walked to the door.

Late as usual, Elinor reached the Biltmore to find Nell Thurston, Rosebud Greely, and Josephine Wyeth, three of the season's débutantes, patiently awaiting her. They were in especially fine humor and willing even to forgive Elinor since their beloved Mrs. DeLacy was chaperone. Pretty, happy, light-hearted girls were these friends of Elinor Benton's, with but three aims in life—a good time, endeavoring to spend some of their parents' too great wealth and to make at last "a brilliant batch."

Mrs. DeLacy, the youthful widow, was remarkable principally because of her knack of mentioning her late dear husband at the right times, deftly to manage to secure sympathy and admiration. It had been remarked, too, that this was most generously forthcoming from men.

She was prepossessing—there was no denying that—and with a strange fascination that made her singularly attractive.

The luncheon was a jolly little affair, the girls were permitted to indulge in as many cigarettes as they wished, and relate stories worthy of a demi-monde.

It was no wonder her charges considered Mrs. DeLacy a wonderful chaperone. She placed no restraint whatsoever upon any of their actions, coincided with all their plans and arrangements, and managed to make herself thoroughly agreeable at all times. The mere fact that she was *Mrs.* DeLacy sufficed to make her a perfectly proper and legitimate chaperone in the eyes of the world.

The curtain was rising as they were ushered to a stage-box. The play, a modern society drama, in its eighth week, playing to capacity at every performance, was featuring the popular matinée idol, Templeton Druid, in the stellar rôle.

During the intermission, between the first and second acts, as the girls discussed the play and the star with animated enthusiasm, Mrs. DeLacy exploded a bombshell in their midst when she calmly remarked:

“You children seem so fascinated by Mr. Druid—would you like to meet him?”

“Do you know him, Geraldine?” The question was chorused eagerly.

“I have known him all my life,” was the reply. “We were neighbors in Richmond, raised together as children, attended the same high-school, and graduated from the same class.”

“Well, why in the world didn’t you say so before?” Rosebud Greely pouted as though she had been personally injured, as she pulled her skirts higher for more comfort for her crossed legs with their bare knees visible above her rolled-down silk stockings. “Pigging it, I’d call it—wanted him all to yourself, I suppose. And you knew what play we were coming to see, and who was starring in it?”

Geraldine DeLacy smiled tolerantly.

“Don’t fly off so quickly, dear,” she advised. “I didn’t know myself till just now, for how could I imagine that Thomas Temple, a boy from my home town, whom I haven’t seen in years, was this Templeton Druid, popular Broadway star. I knew he always had a soaring ambition to become an actor, but I could never dream of his going this far in so short a time.”

“Isn’t it wonderfully interesting and romantic?” Nell Thurston, her eyes aglow with excitement, wanted to know more.

“You asked about our caring to meet him. Can you manage it, Geraldine?” Elinor Benton was all eagerness.

“Easily enough,” Geraldine shrugged her handsome shoulders as she replied. “I’ll send back a note asking him to join us at the Waldorf for tea after the *matinée*. He’ll be there—” There was a worldly meaning in her last words that even her sophisticated charges failed to get.

“How positively thrilling!” Rosebud giggled. “Do you know I’ve never talked to a real actor in my life?”

With the prospect of meeting the star, interest in the play increased tenfold. Romantic revelries ran riot through four foolish little heads. Geraldine sat back and smiled cynically. “Young idiots,” she thought contemptuously, as her roving glance settled upon Elinor Benton. With tightly compressed lips and eyes aflame with envy, she stared at the girl. Only for a fleeting instance, however, did she permit her expression to betray her chaotic emotion. She leaned forward in her chair apparently absorbed in the people on the stage.

As she had expected, Templeton Druid’s reply to her invitation was a delightfully affable little billet expressing his pleasure at the hope of seeing Mrs. DeLacy and meeting her friends. He promised to arrive at the Waldorf as expeditiously as possible after the *matinée*.

After their drive to the Waldorf in the Thurston limousine, it was Geraldine who maneuvered to walk behind with Elinor, as they strolled leisurely through the hotel lobby. Young as she was, Elinor Benton could not help but notice that something was disturbing her chaperone as Mrs. DeLacy glanced nervously from side to side.

“What is it, Geraldine?” she asked in concern. “Is anything wrong?”

Mrs. DeLacy shook her head half-heartedly, then her fine eyes came to rest appealingly on Elinor’s.

“No—no,” she began, then hurried on with nervous suddenness. “No—er—well, yes, there is, Elinor dearest. I hate so to tell you, but—but—well,” she lowered her voice to a whisper: “I’m afraid, dear, you’ll have to come to my rescue. Here I have invited you all to tea and asked Mr. Druid to join us, and I have just discovered that I lack the necessary funds——”

“Not another word, please, Geraldine,” Elinor interrupted hastily. “It’s a pleasure to be of any service to you, dear.” And opening her bag, she extracted the fifty-dollar bill her father had placed there, and pressed it into Geraldine’s hands.

“Thank you so much,” beamed the chaperone, glancing hurriedly at the bill before she thrust it into her purse. “I’ll return it at the earliest opportunity.”

If anyone had dared assert that Geraldine DeLacy was a social parasite, Elinor would have defended her with emphatic loyalty.

Nevertheless, that was an appellation Mrs. DeLacy justly deserved. It was no great secret how she subsisted luxuriously upon the generosity of friends and acquaintances. Habitual borrowing had become her source of income, and she was well known to mention her inadequate memory as extenuation for failing to repay her obligations.

At their table for six in one of the tea rooms, it was again Geraldine who adroitly managed to leave the vacant seat for the actor between Elinor and herself. They had barely fluttered into place before Templeton Druid entered pompously as was his wont. His appearance caused the mild sensation he always hoped for. Heads turned in his direction; there were whispered comments. To the unbiased onlooker, it was clear as light the actor was not displeased.

“This is indeed an unexpected pleasure,” he told Geraldine as he reached her table and bowed low over her hand. “I would have known you anywhere. If there is a change it is that you are more beautiful than ever, if that is possible.”

“And you, I find, still retain your aptitude for pretty speeches,” Geraldine answered laughingly but not ill pleased herself. “Let me present you to my friends.”

He acknowledged each introduction with studied gallantry, retaining possession of each little hand a fraction of a second longer than necessary.

With the tea, toasted muffins, and marmalade Mr. Druid talked, but regardless of what angle his conversation started from, it invariably reverted to the one subject uppermost in his consciousness—Templeton Druid! He spoke of his managers, his contracts, his popularity, of the requests he received daily for autographed photos, of success, fame, showered upon him.

To his young auditors, so sophisticated in many ways, so little in others, all this was something to be eagerly devoured, to be remembered. To them he was a figure of fame, of romanticism. But as she listened, Geraldine DeLacy turned her head that they might not see the smile of cynicism she could not suppress. For to her, as he would so obviously have been to any worldly person, Templeton Druid bore no romantic glamour. He stood out through his own words for what he was—a figure of unvarnished petty

egotism. It was during a lull in his lecture on the subject of Templeton Druid that the owner of the name bent over Elinor Benton as he replenished her plate with marmalade.

“Haven’t I met you before, Miss Benton?” he asked, his deep romantic eyes apparently filled with perplexity. “Your name is so familiar——”

Before Elinor could voice a regretful negative, Geraldine DeLacy interposed hurriedly.

“Aren’t you thinking of her father, possibly?” she inquired. “Miss Benton is the daughter of Hugh Benton, the Wall Street magnate, you know, whose successes have earned him many a column in your favorite literature—the newspapers.”

“Indeed!” Templeton’s tone assumed a note of deference. “Of course, I know of your father, Miss Benton. He is a recognized celebrity in the financial world.”

Across the room, three women seated at a table, were bowing and endeavoring to attract the attention of Geraldine’s party. Nell Thurston was the first to see them.

“Do any of you know any of them?” she asked. “They seem to know someone at this table.”

“Why yes, I do,” Josephine Wyeth answered quickly. “They are friends of mine from Baltimore. I know you will pardon me if I go over to their table for a few moments. Come with me, Rosebud, won’t you? Don’t you remember meeting Mrs. Powell, the time you motored to Baltimore with us?”

“I’ll say I do,” was Rosebud’s slangy reply. Slang for this one débutante was a favorite medium. “I’m keen for saying ‘hello’ to her. She sure is a bully little sport.”

Geraldine moved over next to Nell Thurston.

“You two keep on talking and forbear with us for a few moments,” she advised Elinor and Templeton. “I am anxious to discuss my idea for a new evening frock with Nell.”

As though the change had been prearranged between them, Templeton Druid threw a grateful glance at his old-time friend. She must have her own reasons for giving him this opportunity with the wealthy débutante, and he would make the most of it. He threw all the magnetism he possessed into his voice as he said:

“This is more than I had hoped for, Miss Benton—one little word with you. The gods must have heard my prayer. From the minute I first saw you,

there was something I knew I must ask you. May I not hope to see you again?"

Elinor flushed, as she looked shyly up from the diagrams she was drawing on the table cloth with her fork. It was not the girl the others knew who only stammered, for once at a loss: "Why, I—I—oh I should so like to have you call, Mr. Druid, but I am just out, and my mother is—is—rather——"

"Please——" Templeton Druid looked just properly pained, and oh, such an unjustly misunderstood man,—“I understand perfectly. Your mother naturally would be particular with so charming a daughter, and a man in my profession——”

"No, no, it isn't that," Elinor hastened to interrupt. She felt apologetic, too. "My mother's ideas are rather peculiar. She's a dear, but she is old-fashioned and——"

"I wonder," he said slowly, placing his hand over hers as if quite by accident and allowing it to remain there, "if we couldn't manage to meet in spite of—mother's precaution. I have a perfect little speed marvel of a roadster. Can't I take you for a drive?—Say Tuesday afternoon?"

Elinor's heart thumped madly, and struggle as she would, she could not control the trembling of her hands beneath his. But she replied with seeming carelessness, after what might have been due deliberation. "Well—er—possibly. I know I should enjoy it immensely—still——"

Templeton Druid half suppressed a sigh as of deep joy and delight.

"Then that's settled," he breathed, "and I'll be at the 57th Street entrance to the park at two o'clock—Ah, kind—so kind!"

And his eyes, as Geraldine DeLacy caught a quick glimpse of them from across the table and smiled, said unutterable things as he gazed into the misty blue orbs of Elinor Benton.

CHAPTER VII

Elinor Benton's worldly intuition that a crisis was imminent in her home, an inevitable clash with her mother in which one or the other would have to admit herself vanquished was not without foundation. Neither the girl nor her father were able to comprehend the mother's attitude nor why she should herself be, or wish them to be so different from all those with whom they were in these days thrown in contact. Sixteen years of suppressing her emotions, of unsatisfied longings had made her incapable of showing her inner feelings, the tenderness that so passionately wished only for the good of those dear to her. From some remote ancestor she must have inherited the coldness and intolerance she showed outwardly, and which was to her husband and children their only criterion. Cold and hard outwardly, intolerant to the extreme of anything that did not agree with her puritanical convictions which the years of self-communing had made all but fanatical, Marjorie Benton did not, could not open her heart and plead with those she loved to understand her, to meet her half-way in her efforts to make them see all she wished was to stand for what was good, pure and true. A faulty reasoning, aided by that inherited stubbornness, had persuaded her her best source was to assert indomitable authority as wife and mother—to force her own to bend to her will, with no idea of the give and take that makes worlds go around smoothly. She had forgot to reason, too, that her children were her own, and had without doubt inherited some of that very stubbornness which so momentarily threatened the Benton ship with going on the rocks.

Elinor had felt—seen—the clash coming. But she had not expected it quite so soon after her confidential chat with her father.

The lateness of the hour—(it was past seven) when she arrived home from her afternoon at the *matinée* was the signal—the beginning of it all. Her father and mother had finished their dinner and were in the library, the father absorbed in his evening paper, but the mother sat with her hands idly clasped in her lap, her eyes never wandering from the clock in the corner until her daughter rushed in apologetically.

“Sorry to be so late,” she deplored. “I hope you haven't waited dinner for me.”

“Your father and I have had our dinner.” Her mother seemed not to notice the breathless apology. “I have ordered yours kept warm for you.”

“Thanks, mother, you are very kind, but I can’t eat a mouthful. We had a rather sumptuous luncheon, and it was 6:30 when we finished having tea at the Waldorf.”

Marjorie walked across the room and pressed the bell. When the butler entered she ordered him to inform the cook that “Miss Elinor had already dined.” Then she turned and faced her daughter.

“It strikes me, Elinor,” she said slowly, “that for a young girl so recently introduced into society, you are assuming unwarranted privileges.”

Though he at first attempted to assume a neutral attitude and kept his eyes on his paper, Hugh Benton stirred uneasily, his very attitude showing that the scene he felt sure would ensue was most distasteful to him. He set his jaws at a belligerent angle. Well, if it must come——

Elinor Benton flushed dully at her mother’s words. Her glance sought her father, and what she saw there apparently gave her courage. With a calmness and coldness matching Marjorie’s own, and with her dainty chin tipped at a dangerously belligerent angle that showed her as much like one parent as the other, she faced her mother, and, as though addressing an insolent stranger, her answer came icily.

“I fail to understand you, mother,” was what she said. “As usual you are speaking enigmatically.”

“In that case I shall lose no time in making myself clear,” the mother began, but her words were cut short.

“I say,” Hugh interrupted hurriedly as he dropped his paper, and glanced up with a smile as though some remarkable idea had come to him. “How about you two dressing as quickly as you can and driving into town with me. We can make one of the Roof shows! Eh, what?”

Elinor clapped her hands delightedly.

“Fine, Dad!” was her enthusiastic acceptance. “It won’t take me five minutes to dress. I’m dying to attend a Roof revue—I hope you can get tickets.”

“In case I can’t, we will go over to ‘The Palais Royal,’ ” Hugh answered, with a man’s natural eagerness to avert the inevitable argument between Marjorie and Elinor.

“One moment, please,” Marjorie cold, wide-eyed, forbidding, addressed her husband. “Your attempt to silence me, Hugh, is obvious. Besides, you know perfectly well I never attend a Roof show, and I surely will not permit my daughter to do so.”

With a pertness she had not before considered when addressing her mother, the daughter exclaimed with a toss of her head:

“Well I can’t see why *you* should object if Dad proposes taking us!” Angry tears rushed to her eyes.

“I consider it unnecessary to state my reasons. It should be sufficient that I do object—most strenuously. There are a great many things that I wish to say to you, Elinor. This is probably an opportune time. Perhaps it would be better for you to come with me to my room.” Marjorie rose and started toward the door.

All signs of neutrality vanishing and with a sternness and a fire in his eyes his wife did not recognize, Hugh Benton threw down his paper and rose, too. He made his way to his daughter’s side.

“Elinor!” he said gently as he placed his arm about her. “Please go to your own room for awhile. I wish to speak with your mother, alone.”

“You just heard me request Elinor to come to my room?” Marjorie was astounded. “Surely you——”

“Elinor, do as I say,” Hugh repeated. His wife he ignored.

Marjorie’s glance at his white face and tightly compressed lips showed her a new Hugh. With an indifferent shrug of her shoulders she sat down to wait.

Frightened by what was occurring, Elinor’s arms went up to close about her father’s neck. Marjorie winced unconsciously as she saw the gesture. It proclaimed so plainly who her daughter believed to be her best friend—which one she loved.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” the girl stammered with a sob as she slowly left them.

Marjorie Benton’s eyebrows went up in disdain as the door closed behind Elinor and her husband came over to stand before her wordless, hands in pockets.

“I suppose,” she commented, bitterly, “you are greatly elated at having humiliated me before Elinor.”

“You know that is not true!” Hugh’s voice was tense as he gave his wife the lie for the first time in his life. He was thoroughly exasperated, out of patience with her and what he believed were her ideals. “I am only sure of one thing. You have got into the way of making a tragedy out of every little thing that does not suit you, and this is just another example. But if you are looking for tragedy, something real to dramatize over,” and his lips tightened into a grim line as he accentuated every word, “I just want to tell you that this time you may succeed beyond your wildest expectations!”

“Why, Hugh—what do you mean—I—” Marjorie’s voice was tremulous as she sought to understand what had brought this storm of her husband’s about her ears.

“I think this time you’ll have no cause to complain about not understanding what I mean. And for once, I expect you to listen to every word I say!”

There was no doubting the earnestness of Hugh Benton’s tone, or that he was wrought up to a pitch rarely known to his easy-going nature. For once, the cloak of her authority dropped from his wife’s shoulders and she shrank in her chair as her meek reply came.

“Very well—I’m listening. I suppose,” and there was a flicker of her sternness and sarcasm, “I may as well try to comprehend you and your very peculiar attitude——”

Hugh Benton flicked his cigarette into the wide fireplace, staring after it a moment before he turned to face his wife. With arms folded, he towered over her, his whole manner that of a stern, unyielding judge.

“Marjorie,” he began, “I realize that you are my wife, and as such, entitled to many privileges. But there is such a thing as carrying your prejudices too far. The way matters have been going on in this house for some time now simply cannot continue. Not only the children, but I, myself, have reached the limit of my endurance. We came to New York sixteen years ago at your suggestion, not mine. I always wish you to remember that. When I realized that your one ambition was for me to become a success in this great metropolis, I determined to use all my energies and capabilities to satisfy your desires. Financially and socially I believe I have reached your expectations. In everything else my life is a complete failure.”

“Failure?” Marjorie’s voice trembled as her face showed her genuine surprise.

Hugh nodded emphatically. “Yes, failure,” he emphasized. “My children love me, not for myself, but because I am able to gratify all of their whims and desires, and strange to say, I am perfectly willing to pay for their show of affection, because it is the only tie that binds me to my home.”

Tears of distress which in spite of her pride forced themselves to unwelcome eyes, trembled on Marjorie Benton’s eyelids and splashed down on the hands folded so quietly over her somber gray gown.

“Hugh!” she cried, distressed. “Surely you don’t know what you say! What about your wife?”

“You asked the same thing years ago, Marjorie,” Hugh answered bitterly, “when we discussed the advisability of coming to New York. You were all the world to me then, and——”

“And *now* I am nothing.” Marjorie’s quivering lips completed the sentence. “I—I understand, Hugh.”

“You are still the mother of my children, despite the fact that they are both disappointments to me.”

Hugh was calm in the face of his wife’s tragedy, but his very calmness gave back to his wife some of her fighting spirit.

“If they are disappointments to you, it is your own fault,” she flared. “You humor them beyond all reason. I try to enforce strict discipline, and you invariably interfere. This very evening when I attempted to reprimand Elinor, you resorted to almost childish subterfuge to prevent an argument.”

“I’ll tell you why I interfere.” Hugh was getting to the gist of his lecture. “It is for the simple reason that I consider you the real culprit. The children are not to blame because they are selfish, worldly, way beyond their age, and lacking in love and respect for their parents. You raised them both in schools and colleges where they were thrown in contact with the wrong companions. Had you kept your children with you and reared them in the environment of home and love, everything would have been different.”

“How like you to put the blame on me.” Marjorie’s lip curled in scorn, and her foot in its common sense high shoe tapped impatiently on the soft-toned rug. But Hugh Benton was in too deadly earnest to be switched from his main topic by a side remark. He went on, as though his wife had not spoken.

“And now, you expect a girl and boy, grown up, to obey you implicitly, and change in a few days the training they have received for years. I tell you, Marjorie, you are employing the wrong method. You must realize it is too late for you to command, and if you persist in continually arguing with Elinor, and criticising her every act, you will drive her to desperation, that’s all. She is a self-willed and headstrong girl, and it is necessary to handle her with caution and the utmost diplomacy.”

Marjorie could not forbear one bitter reminder. “As long as you find so much fault with your family, why don’t you devote less time to your club and try to remodel them?”

“If you were the kind of a wife I once believed you to be I shouldn’t have to find diversion at my club,” Hugh answered sadly. “But what do I ever find at home now, save criticism.”

“You really are a badly abused man, Hugh. First it is your children, and now your wife—I don’t see how you manage to bear up under your heavy burden.”

The tinge of sarcasm in Marjorie’s voice stung Hugh to the quick. His fist banged down on the table with rage.

“What *is* the use?” he exclaimed violently. “I may as well try to reason with an infant. We have been drifting further and further apart until we haven’t a single idea in common. Our lives together under this roof is a mockery, but up to now I have always remembered that you are my wife and have never as much as permitted myself to indulge in the thought of another woman; but from this moment I am *through* with conventionality. I am going to drift wherever the tide takes me. If you don’t care to be a wife to me, to interest yourself in at least some of my interests—I can’t find happiness in my own home, I shall seek it elsewhere!”

In his old manner of having said the last word on a subject, Hugh Benton jammed his hands in his pockets and stalked to the door. Marjorie heard him call out an order to have the limousine at the door in fifteen minutes. Then she looked up to see him standing with his hand on the door knob as he looked back into the room for one last word.



Elinor Benton realizes that Geraldine (Winifred Bryson) has stolen her father’s affection.
 (“*The Valley of Content*” screened as “*Pleasure Mad.*”)

“And another thing!” He fairly bit off his words. “I understand you’ve decided to decline our invitation to the Thurston’s ball on the seventeenth through some foolish notion of not approving of some of their relations or guests. You are to accept at once—understand? I intend going and taking Elinor!”

Marjorie nodded dully—and with no other word he was gone.

For long minutes after the door had banged after her husband, Marjorie Benton sat quietly in her chair, almost too stunned to think. Surely she must have been dreaming. Hugh had never before displayed such a temper. The things he had said were positively indecent. She was aroused from her reverie by the slamming of the front door and the sound of the machine going down the driveway. She sighed as she got slowly to her feet. She remembered she must talk to Elinor. She must not let what Hugh had said interfere with her duty. At the locked door she rapped softly.

“Who is it?” called the girl.

“It’s mother, dear! I have come to have a talk with you.”

“Sorry, mother, but I have a dreadful headache,” was the languid response. “You will have to wait until another time.”

“I am not going to scold—I just want to have a heart-to-heart chat with you, dear.” Marjorie was surprised at her own pleading voice as a lump rose in her throat.

“I’d rather not talk to-night, mother—please excuse me.”

“Very well,” Marjorie faltered, but as she turned toward her own rooms, the hot tears rolled down her cheeks.

On Tuesday afternoon, at precisely two o’clock, Templeton Druid parked his classy little roadster near the 57th Street entrance of the park, and paced slowly up and down. He was waiting for Elinor Benton. Time after time he glanced impatiently at his watch. He had never before waited for anyone—this was a new experience.

It was twenty minutes past two when he saw her alight from a taxi in front of the Plaza. He hastened forward to meet her. All his anger at her tardiness melted away immediately at sight of the beautiful girl in her stunning sport suit and hat of Chinese blue.

“I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting,” was her breathless greeting. “I—I—was unavoidably detained.”

She felt she just could not confess to this man her difficulties in endeavoring to get away from her mother.

Marjorie always attended a settlement meeting on Tuesday, so usually Elinor was free to do as she pleased; but to-day, the president had been reported ill and the meeting was postponed.

So it had been only through soliciting the aid of Mrs. DeLacy over the telephone that Elinor finally managed to keep her appointment. Mrs. DeLacy called for her in the Thurston car, begging that she accompany her to the dentist. Before her mother had a chance to utter a protest, Elinor had consented, so there was nothing for Marjorie to do. As soon as they were a safe distance from home, Elinor summoned a taxi and hastened to her rendezvous. But had she been able to read her dear Geraldine's thoughts as that fair chaperone lounged comfortably on her way to the shopping district, the Benton heiress might not have felt so grateful as she went light-hearted to meet her matinée idol. For Geraldine DeLacy, widow, social parasite, chaperone de luxe, was racking her clever brains for a plan whereby she might most advantageously use the confidence Elinor had been obliged to place in her.

"Nothing matters, now that you are here," was Templeton's gallant reply to the girl's apology. "I was only beginning to fear you would not come—but now——"

Elinor's eyes were on the actor's car as he led her to it. She glowed.

"What a stunning little car!" she cried, in delight.

To praise any of Templeton Druid's possessions was the next best thing to praising him. But it was with a blasé air that he consented to agree with his guest, as he turned the wheel to head toward Long Island.

"Yes, she is a good little car," he admitted, a bit boredly, as though condescending to praise the machine. "When we get out on the road, I'll let her out a bit and show you what she can do."

Elinor's eyes gained a new sparkle as the air colored her cheeks.

"It seems wonderful to be riding like this," she enthused. "I'm so tired of always riding behind a chauffeur. Dad wanted to buy me a car of my own, but mother wouldn't consider it. He is going to buy one for my brother when he graduates, and then I'll coax Howard into teaching me how to run it." And Elinor's eyes brightened with anticipation.

"You don't have to wait for that," Templeton answered magnanimously. "I'm going to teach you how to run mine this very day. Just as soon as we strike a nice stretch of road, I'll put you at the wheel."

“How perfectly splendid! But I’m afraid you will find me an awkward pupil.”

“I promise not to become impatient,” Templeton laughed, “but I warn you I may exact a tiny payment.”

Elinor caught her breath a little as she recognized the eager boldness with which the actor looked into her eyes, as they paused at a crossing at the command of the uplifted white hand of a traffic officer. But already she had determined that her companion should not put her in the class of the unsophisticated. For this one day she would put behind her all thoughts of prudishness, all the reminders of her mother’s teachings she had come so to despise, but had not quite forgotten. So her blush was belied by the boldness of her words as she pertly retorted:

“I’ve never yet heard a complaint that I don’t pay my debts!”

Templeton Druid smiled complacently as he turned in at the ferry entrance. This was going to be easier than he thought. But—oh, well, wasn’t that always the way. There was certainly something in being Templeton Druid.

It was a glorious day. The sun shone radiantly, and the balmy breath of spring with bewildering fragrance flooded the atmosphere.

Gradually her companion persuaded Elinor Benton to talk of herself and family. Before long she was telling him her life’s history without once suspecting that he had purposely encouraged her to do so.

“By the way,” he suddenly seemed to remember. “I forgot to tell you something. Through Mrs. DeLacy’s kindness I have received an invitation to a dance at the Thurstons’ on the 17th.”

“Splendid!” Elinor exclaimed, her eyes dancing her pleasure. “Of course, you’ll accept?”

The man shook his head slowly. “I have thought of declining because I can’t get there until after the theater,” he demurred, “and that will be so late, but of course, if you wish me to come——”

“Why, of course, I do—ever so much!”

“You’ll promise to save a dance for me?”

“Two,” promised the girl, her mind busily engaged with the thought of a wonderful new frock for the occasion.

True to his word, he put her at the wheel, and she thoroughly enjoyed her first lesson in driving. The rose color flamed in her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled like twin stars. Templeton Druid, glancing at her from the corner of

his eye, caught his breath in admiration. “She is only a slip of a girl,” he thought. “But what a magnificent woman she will be!”

As they stood up to leave the little inn where they had their sandwiches and tea, the actor, in his most courtly manner bent over, and reaching for her hand, pressed his lips gently to the tips of her fingers.

His was a vast experience with women. It had taught him much, enough to realize that, impetuous and pampered as this girl was, he must use the utmost discrimination in endeavoring to arouse her admiration.

Elinor’s heart pounded bewilderingly as she withdrew her hand and turned toward the car. It had not resumed its rhythmic beating even when they reached the Plaza where they were met by Mrs. DeLacy, who was true to her promise to see Elinor through her escapade. Templeton Druid found time for one confidential whisper.

“Now don’t forget your promise,” he reminded, his tone languishing as though nothing else in the world meant so much. “Be sure to ’phone me tomorrow morning and let me know when I can see you again.”

Elinor nodded but her eyes betrayed much to that wise little lady when she took her seat by Geraldine DeLacy’s side in the Thurston limousine.

CHAPTER VIII

Judged from a standpoint of society notables present, the Thurston dance was the success of the season. True, there was a notable lack of the old conservative element, the Knickerbocker strain, but no one noticed the absence of these kill-joys, as some of the younger set were wont to refer to them, and their absence was more than atoned for by the bevy of débutantes, second-season belles and attractive matrons whose doings filled so many columns in the society gossip. To say nothing of a scattering of celebrities. And to anyone who knew him, it was plain that Templeton Druid considered himself not the least of these.

The Broadway star made a late, a very late appearance—the affair had progressed to the stage where the younger set had long since abandoned their more proper dancing for the jazziest of modern Terpsichorean feats, utterly careless, in most cases, oblivious of the few frowns that met them from the few older matrons who had not accustomed themselves to seeing the sons and daughters of their own sort resort to the gyrations of public dance halls.

The Bentons, father and daughter, (it had been the greatest joy to Elinor when her mother had made a final declination of her own and her father's invitation to accompany them) were among the earlier arrivals. Elinor Benton had not yet become so blasé that she was willing to forego any moment of triumph which was inevitably hers at such an affair. Her very happiness at the thought of meeting Templeton Druid again (though that one ride had only been the precursor of others which had followed and which had led in this short time to an intimacy she had never known with any of the men in her own set), of being held in his arms in the dance, and with the added zest of being from under her mother's eyes, for she had dreaded the thought of introducing the *matinée* hero to her mother and being questioned as to her friendship, had further enhanced the beauty that made her the center of attraction wherever she went. Much thought had been spent on the gown she wore—a marvelous creation of georgette crêpe, its *couleur de rose* shading from the deepest tint to a delicate shell pink. And strangely enough for her, it had not been the thought that it would bring the usual crowds of callow youth about her that had been responsible for the careful toilette. What Templeton Druid would think of her—could she further bring him to her feet—had been the all-absorbing hope as she had stood before her long

mirror while her maid put the finishing touches to the dream she saw before her.

Elinor Benton had no worry about her father as far as her actor was concerned. She knew her father—knew his careless acceptance of anything she might tell him; knew, too, the only half hidden snobbery that would accept without question any guest of the Thurstons. Hugh Benton had reached the point where his society gods and goddesses could do no wrong.

A one-step was starting as the Bentons entered the big ball room. Hugh looked about him with as happy eyes as did his daughter. This was the kind of thing he loved; this what he had always been denied. His wife cared so little for the enjoyments of the society into which his hard work and diplomacy had landed them. But had he been a bit more observant, he would have seen that his little girl's eyes were not as care-free as usual, that she was restless; there was still something that must occur to make her happiness complete. There was the thought that three hours must elapse before Templeton Druid should make his appearance. She saw several youths making their way in her direction. Of a sudden they seemed unspeakably inane. She did not want to dance with them. She placed her hand on her father's arm.

“Come on, Dad, let's dance,” she urged. “This is a one-step; I know you can dance that——”

Hugh Benton looked down and laughed as he placed his arm about his daughter.

“What's in the baby that makes her want to dance with her old Dad, instead of these youngsters who are breaking their necks to reach her?” he asked humorously. But as they swung off, Elinor looked up at him, wrinkled her pretty nose and sniffed as she murmured: “My *old* Dad! Hmmph! Handsomest, youngest man in the room, I'll tell the world. The girls'll all be dying with jealousy——”

A light-gloved hand brushed her bare arm. A warm perfume unlike any he had ever smelt made Hugh Benton glance up quickly. A soft musical voice drawled:

“Hello, child! Do I have to interrupt your dance to make you notice me—to say good-evening. I've been trying to catch your eye ever since you came in.”

Elinor Benton swung out of her father's arms to face Geraldine DeLacy—a marvelous Geraldine in her soft clinging iridescent gown, her deep dark eyes sparkling with pleasurable enjoyment, as though seeing and speaking with Elinor Benton was the event of the evening most to be desired.

“Oh, Geraldine,” cried the girl. “Isn’t it fine to see you! And right now when I’m with Dad. Goodness knows,” and she flashed an impish smile at her parent, “when the other girls get a chance at him, I’m going to see precious little of him this evening—and I do so want you two to know each other. This is Mrs. DeLacy, Dad—you know, Geraldine, of whom I’ve told you so much.”

“She has indeed, Mrs. DeLacy,” Hugh Benton added cordially. “I feel almost as if we were old friends——”

The woman shot him an arch glance.

“Which we may be, I hope?” she queried, and there was something in that glance and appealing voice which sent a quiver through the financier’s nerve centers such as he had not known in many a day. “As I hope,” she added, playfully pinching Elinor’s cheek, “that it has been nice things this child has been saying about me.”

Elinor interrupted breathlessly.

“Why, Dad, I told you, didn’t I, that she was beautiful and fascinating and——”

“Quite the most wonderful creature alive—I admit it myself,” Geraldine’s laugh was whole-hearted, but the look she gave Hugh was one of mutual understanding. “It’s quite wonderful to be a chaperone to children who can find no fault in you because you love to see them enjoy themselves. And besides, a widow must have some admiration, and from what better source than the girls she loves?”

Hugh Benton had appreciated the glance of understanding, but now he could not restrain his gallant: “She wasn’t half eloquent enough, Mrs. DeLacy.”

Geraldine smiled and lowered her lashes over her wonderful dark eyes.

“It’s so fine to hear such things—even if one is not a *débutante*, and of course, has to take a back seat at such affairs as this.”

The music was beginning for a new dance. Elinor saw Frank Joyce, whose name was on her card, approaching.

“Oh, Dad,” she said, regretfully, “we’ve missed our dance, but we’ll have another later. Take good care of my family, Geraldine,” she called laughingly as she whirled away in young Joyce’s arms, her mind still on the slow moving time that separated her from Templeton Druid.

“Would you care to dance, Mrs. DeLacy, or would you prefer sitting it out?” asked Hugh.

“Oh, let’s talk,” Geraldine replied eagerly. “I can *always* dance, but—” Her eyes were full of meaning. Hugh linked her arm within his and led her out to one of the verandahs.

“Will you have a wrap?” he inquired solicitously.

“Thank you, no,—the night is glorious.”

“This seems cozy,” Hugh said, as he drew up two wicker easy chairs beside a row of potted palms.

They were at the farthest end of the verandah. Music floated out from the ballroom, the soft rays of the moon slanted toward them, and the fragrance of the sweet peas and roses was wafted up from the sunken gardens.

Geraldine heaved a little sigh of contentment and settled back in her chair: “I’m sorry to have made you miss your dance with Elinor.”

“The pleasure of meeting you has entirely recompensed me,” Hugh replied gallantly.

“How lovely of you to say that.” Geraldine stared at Hugh so openly for a few moments, that he found himself blushing like a school-girl.

“I—I—beg your pardon,” she stammered. “I didn’t mean to stare so rudely, only I just *can’t* realize it.”

“What is it that you can’t realize?”

“Why, that you are Elinor’s father—you are so—so young!”

“I’m forty-four years old,” Hugh answered smilingly.

“Really, Mr. Benton! Surely you have discovered an elixir of youth. I’ve met Mrs. Benton, and I can’t understand how you—oh please—forgive me—I have an abominable habit of thinking aloud.” Geraldine lowered her eyes while she waited anxiously to see what effect her thrust had taken.

“My wife is four years younger than I,” Hugh replied gravely. “You must remember that time deals more lightly with a man than it does with a woman.”

“You won’t think I’m presuming if I say that anyone would take Mrs. Benton to be many years your senior. Has she been ill?”

“No, Mrs. Benton has not been ill,” he sighed. “She is quite reserved, and a bit old-fashioned. Don’t you think it rather difficult to keep one’s youth without indulging in a few modern pleasures?”

“Indeed, I do,” Geraldine answered, and her sigh asked for understanding as she added, as though reluctantly, “and I can sympathize with you—my husband and I were—er——”

All the world—all his own world of finance and business, at least, gave Hugh Benton credit for being a clever man. It was a common expression among his club and business associates that anyone would have to get up early to put anything over on Hugh Benton. But there would have been smiles, contemptuous, tolerant, amused, could those men have seen Hugh Benton in the hands of a woman as clever as himself, cleverer by far, in her own sphere. For Hugh Benton had never lived by his wits. Geraldine DeLacy's daily bread depended on hers. She molded him like wax. In her hands he was pliable as a child. It would have astonished even him could he have stood off in an astral body and heard himself discussing his most intimate domestic affairs with a total stranger. He did not know that Mrs. DeLacy was but satisfying her curiosity concerning the rumors she had heard of incompatibility in the Benton family, but Geraldine knew that it took her but one-half hour to discover all she wished to know.

But as he talked, becoming each minute more confidential, it seemed less and less that this beautiful woman was a stranger. It was so much to have her sitting next to him, looking at him tenderly, with eyes expressing sympathy and warmth. Her complete understanding of everything he said seemed so thorough. Her capability to grasp intuitively his innermost thoughts amazed him.

Geraldine adroitly turned the conversation to herself. She spoke of marriage to a man uncongenial to her every way—a marriage described as a sacrifice to save a home for her people—one of the old families of Virginia,—and then of her widowhood; how Mr. DeLacy had passed away six years ago, after losing his entire fortune, and leaving her a mere pittance of an income, barely enabling her to keep up a respectable appearance.

Hugh unconsciously cast a look of surprised inquiry at her magnificent gown.

Geraldine shrugged and laughed a little bitterly.

“You are looking at my gown,” she interposed quickly. “I’ll tell you a secret, one that I have never confided in another soul—I make all my own gowns. But what is one to do?” She spread her hands in a gesture of mute helplessness.

“Remarkable!” Hugh was genuinely admiring. “But it must keep you very busy.”

“It does—sometimes I sit up until four in the morning sewing—I can’t let it interfere with any of my social engagements, and still I must do it—it is the only way I can manage at all. Why the price of the gown your daughter is wearing this evening would provide six for me.”

“Wonderful little woman!” Hugh reached out daringly to pat her hand. “So few women would be content under such circumstances.”

“Oh, but I’m not always content. Sometimes I become very much discouraged, and heartsick—I’m so terribly alone in the world. The Thurstons are good, kind people, but somehow I just can’t unburden myself to them. We Lees, of Virginia, are so terribly proud, you know. If I only had someone to take a little interest in my affairs—the small amount of money that I have invested properly would mean so much to me.”

Had this bald bid come from any man he knew, Hugh Benton would have smiled his understanding smile and put it from his mind. But now so thoroughly had Geraldine DeLacy hypnotized the man who for years had been without sympathy or the flattery that is man’s meed that he did not even see that it was a blatant asking for aid. All he could see was that here was a beautiful, a sympathetic, an understanding woman in financial straits, that she, proud as she was, had confided in him, had given him confidence for confidence in the short time it had taken them to be such good friends, and that he knew he could aid her. Why, he could make it possible for her to be independent of any of these friends or relatives. It would not be necessary for her to sit up late at night, dimming her wonderful eyes, pricking those dainty fingers making gowns in which she looked so amazingly well dressed. He could imagine how hard it was for her to have to depend on even such relations as the Thurstons. Here was his opportunity to show himself a real friend—not the casual acquaintance of a few idle hours at a dance, talking while the music purred and the moon made it an hour for confidences.

“Why not let me help you?” he asked eagerly. “You know, investing money is my business, and when I hear of something good, let me double or triple that little sum for you?”

“Why, Mr. Benton!” Geraldine exclaimed, concealing her delight with well-feigned emotion. “You surely wouldn’t bother with me! I couldn’t let a busy man like you.”

“It would be the greatest pleasure, Mrs. DeLacy.”

“But it—it seems like such an imposition! Oh, it—it actually looks as though I—I was hinting—Oh, Mr. Benton, I wouldn’t have you think that for the world!”

“Nonsense! I don’t think anything of the kind. You happened to mention your affairs and I happened to be in a position to render you a little assistance—that’s all there is about it.”

“All?—Why—I—I—” Geraldine covered her eyes with her handkerchief and began to sob softly.

“Oh, please,” Hugh drew her hands from her eyes and patted her shoulder consolingly. “I can’t bear to see a woman cry.”

“You’re like all men in that respect,” Geraldine dried her eyes obediently and smiled up at him. “But in every other way you’re so different—I never met anyone like you—my friend. I won’t attempt to thank you now; I should only cry again. Hadn’t we better join the others?” Geraldine rose from her chair.

“Yes, I suppose we must.” Hugh reached for her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. “But,” he added, meaningly, “remember this—you have called me your friend and—we shall meet again.” He finished abruptly as he led her toward the brightly-lighted windows, and there was determination in his tone.

Nell Thurston was just taking Templeton Druid, who had but made his belated pompous appearance, over to meet her father and mother when Mrs. DeLacy re-entered the ballroom on the arm of Hugh Benton. They made their way toward Elinor who stood alone for the moment, her eyes fastened with all the fascination of a bird on its natural enemy on the tall, lithe figure of the Thespian. So interested was she that she did not even see her father and friend, though she had taken occasion two or three times to wonder a little at their prolonged absence. “He’s here just to see me—me!” was her exultant thought. “Oh, what would they all think if they knew,” proudly.

Like nearly everyone else the big room, so effectually had Templeton Druid learned to make his entrances, Hugh Benton saw the man, and his brows twisted in perplexity as he looked.

“Who is he?” he asked his companion. “It seems as if I know him, but I can’t quite place——”

“Templeton Druid,” informed Mrs. DeLacy.

Hugh’s “Oh,” was somewhat illuminative. “Oh,” he said, “Templeton Druid, the actor? Is he—is he a friend of the Thurstons?”

“He’s a friend of mine,” was Geraldine’s information, in a tone that removed from Hugh Benton’s mind any doubt of the matinée idol’s eligibility anywhere. “We went to the same school in Richmond. He’s from an excellent family.” They had reached Elinor’s side just in time for the girl to hear the last remark of Mrs. DeLacy, and it was a look of gratitude she shot at her friend and chaperone as she quickly took in of whom they were speaking. “Ah, Elinor,” purred Geraldine, as she placed her arm about the waist of the other, “I see a friend of ours. You know,” and she turned

informatively to the father, “I introduced several girls to Mr. Druid at the Waldorf one afternoon while we were having tea. You were one of them, weren’t you, dear?” Elinor nodded, but Geraldine chattered on. “He’s really charming and cultured, but—ah, you shall judge for yourself, Mr. Benton.” Templeton Druid, his introductions to his hosts completed had straightened his tall figure in its immaculate evening garb and was looking about the room as though in search of someone. His glance caught Geraldine’s and she beckoned. He approached with an eagerness that brought a frown of something akin to jealousy to the financier’s face as he bent a keen look on his new-found friend. Geraldine held out her hand cordially.

“I’m so glad you could come,” she enthused. “You’ve met Miss Benton, haven’t you?” turning to Elinor, who felt as if the pounding of her heart must be heard above the buzz of conversation.

“I have had the pleasure,” Templeton replied, bending over Elinor’s hand.

“And this is Mr. Benton, Elinor’s father,” Geraldine continued.

“Glad to know you, Mr. Druid,” Hugh said as they shook hands. “I’ve always admired your work——”

Druid’s laugh was frank and hearty.

“And I yours, Mr. Benton,” he countered. “It’s a far more popular art.” Hugh Benton grinned understandingly.

“We artists,” he began, but the bang of jazz for the next dance drowned his unfinished epigram.

“Will you dance, Miss Benton?” Templeton turned to Elinor.

He held the girl closely to him as they circled about the room. “You’re ravishingly beautiful to-night,” he whispered, his voice vibrating with passionate tenderness. “Can’t we manage to slip away for a few moments so that I can have you to myself?”

“I don’t see how we can possibly get away,” she pouted prettily. “After this dance Nell will be waiting to introduce you to half a dozen girls, and they will monopolize you for the rest of the evening.”

“There isn’t a soul I want to meet—I only accepted this invitation in order to be near you,” he replied quickly. “Surely you can think of some way to rescue me from a lot of uninteresting girls. I can’t see anyone in this room but you—dear.”

Elinor thrilled delightedly at the “dear”—it was the first term of endearment he had used in addressing her.

“I’ll tell you what I will do,” she planned quickly. “After this dance, I’ll run upstairs for a wrap, while you manage to disappear through that French window at the end of the room—it leads into the garden and at the end of the path, you’ll find an adorable little summer-house. Wait there until I join you. But we can only remain away a few moments,” she continued as he started to voice his gratitude. “The lion of the hour will be missed, you know, and a search instituted for him.”

“Five minutes alone with the most bewitching girl in the world,” he assured her, “will compensate me for the balance of the evening.”

It was less hard than Elinor’s biased imagination had supposed for the man to slip away unobserved to the “adorable little summer-house” at the end of the path.

“My, but I’ve had a lot of dodging to do,” Elinor exclaimed breathlessly as she entered a few minutes later. “Whenever you’re anxious to avoid people, one seems to spring up like a jack-out-of-the-box at every turn!”

“Elinor,” Templeton murmured, reaching for her hand, and holding it close within his own. “Do you know why I begged you to grant me a few moments alone?”

“I can’t imagine,” she replied coyly, “unless it was for the purpose of admiring this wonderful moon.”

Elinor Benton’s eyes turned upward toward the silvery shining circle that beamed down upon them through the tangled vines of the summer house. She was tantalizingly close to the man who still held her warm little fingers. The perfume that clung about her soft young body stung all the man’s unbridled senses like a whiplash. His eyes and brain saw red as he threw out his arms and clasped her roughly to him, raining kisses on her upturned face.

“You tantalizing, wonderful little beauty!” he breathed. “Is there some vampire in you? You know very well that I’m mad about you! I adore you! The moon, stars and sun, all are eclipsed in your presence!”

Passively she remained in his arms while he kissed her again and again. He held her off at arms length and looked longingly at her.

“Do you care for me? A little?” he asked eagerly. “Tell me?”

Elinor’s head fell forward on his breast.

“I—I *love* you,” she whispered, but there was a passion in the whispered words that even Templeton Druid, past master of heart affairs, had never before heard.

“My darling!”

His voice was softly caressing. But by the light of the moon the girl in his arms could not see the triumphant gleam in his eyes.

Content for the moment only to stand heart to heart with the man she loved, feeling his caressing touch, hearing his tender words of devotion, Elinor Benton let the world go by unheeded. Then came an unwelcome thought to obtrude. She drew back from him, and stared off into space.

“Oh, what will mother say?” she wailed dismally. “I’m not a bit worried about Dad—I can easily win him over—but *mother*?”

“Why?—Why?” he stammered confusedly. “Need we tell them anything about it?”

“You foolish boy! You’re so confused,” she laughed. “Isn’t it customary for a man to ask a girl’s parents for her hand in marriage?”

“Marriage!” he ejaculated. “Oh—to be sure—only we will have to keep all this secret for awhile—that is what I meant by suggesting our not mentioning anything to your parents—just yet. You see, dearest, I must play the rest of this season according to my contract, and one-half of my popularity is centered in my being an *unmarried* matinée hero. Besides, there is another matter, it will be necessary for me to adjust—one that I cannot explain at present.”

“I understand, dear. You are suggesting that we remain secretly engaged for the present?” she asked eagerly.

“Yes—that’s it exactly. Do you mind, sweetheart?”

“Oh, I think it will be wonderful; so delightfully romantic, and my meeting you clandestinely won’t seem at all wrong now that you are my affianced husband,” she replied with suppressed excitement.

“You’re a genuine little sport,” he exclaimed, generously helping himself to more of her kisses which she unhesitatingly returned.

“We will surely be missed,” Elinor struggled out of his embrace, and began to readjust her hair. “I’ll hurry back, and you come in a few minutes later.”

“Be sure to telephone to me to-morrow, dearest.”

“It is almost to-morrow now. I’ll ’phone you to-day—instead,” she answered laughingly as she hurried away.

Elinor snuggled in the car beside her father on their way home from the dance. She was supremely happy. Her heart sang in tune to the purring of the motor.

“He loves me! He loves me!”

Templeton Druid, the idol of all the young women in New York—loved *her!*

It seemed almost too wonderful to be true. There was but one flaw. What would her mother say—when she finally told her? Her heart missed a beat in mere anticipation. “Dad will surely understand,” she told herself. She could always bring him about to her way of thinking.

She reached for his hand. “Are you tired, Daddy dear?”

“No, little one,” he replied. “I was just living over the evening—I don’t remember when I have so thoroughly enjoyed myself.”

“I’m so glad. I was afraid you might be dreadfully bored. How do you like Geraldine?”

“She is one of the most charming, interesting women I have ever met.” His answer came decisively, then there was a note of peevishness in his voice as he added: “Really, Elinor, I can’t see why your mother should object to her.”

The girl tossed her head.

“Oh, mother objects to anyone who is—well, the least bit—modern,” she replied impatiently. “Was she always so—so old-fashioned, Dad?”

Hugh closed his eyes. His thoughts traveled back over the years, until he found himself sitting on the steps of a humble four-room cottage, a beautiful girl beside him, his arm about her waist, and her head pillowed on his shoulder, their hearts aflame with love, pure, warm and, they believed, changeless.

“I don’t know,” he answered dreamily. “Your mother was very beautiful, my dear, and there was a time she meant the world to me. Perhaps—I can’t tell now—perhaps she was always—what you term—old-fashioned, but our ideas coincided perfectly in those days—now everything appears differently to me. I wonder sometimes, am I the one who is changed?”

Elinor Benton gave her father’s arm a little squeeze.

“Well, if you were ever like mother is to-day, all I can say is, thank heaven you have changed,” she said, with fervor. “But Daddy, dear, you never could have been like mother; you’re so wonderfully broad-minded about everything.”

“Am I, baby girl?” Hugh smiled. “Perhaps I appear that way to you, because as yet there has been nothing to warrant my acting otherwise.”

“That’s just it. The things that you consider perfectly all right, are the very ones that meet with mother’s disapproval. I wonder how she will act

when the time arrives for me to choose a husband?" She seemed to ponder aloud, but in reality feeling her way cautiously.

"Why wonder about anything as distant as that?"

"Surely, you don't wish me to be an old maid?" Elinor demanded indignantly.

"An old maid," Hugh laughed heartily. "You are only a baby, and just beginning to see the world."

"I'm past eighteen—please remember that, and——"

Her father turned her face upward to look at her quizzically.

"Who is the man, Elinor?" Hugh asked playfully.

"What—what do you mean, Daddy?" She could not quite hide a feeling of alarm, but her fears were calmed as her father queried: "Young Bronlee?"

"How ridiculous!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Does the fact of my having expressed an opinion, necessitate there being anyone in particular? And why should you immediately suggest Paul Bronlee? No," and she shook her head sagely, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Dad, but I shall never marry Paul Bronlee even if he is one of 'the' Bronlees and so desirable in your own and mother's eyes. He bores me to death. In a year's time, I should be obliged to divorce him. But why discuss anything so silly? Here we are home at last and I'm dead tired."

Her father walked with her to the foot of the stairs and kissed her gently.

"Hurry up into slumber-land; I'm going to have another cigar. We can talk about your marriage another time. I don't want to think of losing my girl yet, nor must she think of leaving. Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, Dad," she replied as she returned his caress perfunctorily, anxious to hurry away, to be alone.

Elinor Benton closed her door softly, though her impulse was to slam it. She flung her opera coat at a couch across the room and kicked a silver slipper into another. She stamped the still shod foot.

"Paul Bronlee, indeed!" she muttered.

She crossed over to her escritoire and from a locked drawer took out an autographed photograph of Templeton Druid. Her heart leapt as she gazed at it. Ah, there was a man! And he loved her! She held the pictured likeness to her lips, then held it at arm's length as she half whispered:

"And they would talk to me about Paul Bronlee when I have you, dear heart! But never fear—I'll show them I have a mind of my own. Looks as if

I was going to have trouble with dad, too, but we'll both show them. Marry first and tell them after—that's the idea."

Tenderly as though the pictured likeness were a living entity, she placed it back in its drawer which she carefully locked. Then she turned to ring for her maid. When Marie's soft knock came on the door, Elinor Benton was lounging in a deep easy chair, her fair head nodding, but her thoughts wide awake, her mind filled with the image of one man.

In his favorite nook in the library, Hugh Benton was doing some thinking on his own account. What Elinor had said about an eventual marriage had disturbed him a little, but he passed it over hurriedly as a thing of the future. His great ambition was for his daughter to make a good marriage,—in which respect he was still like his wife, but to-night any future marriage of Elinor's was of minor consideration. It was himself, what he was to do with his own life that had suddenly risen to stare him in the face. He felt that he was facing some sort of crisis, vague, it was true, but nevertheless imminent. He had paced the floor for a long time, till his subconscious mind had taken in every detail of the thick rug before he realized he was tired. He sank into his deep leather chair and sat facing the fire which, even in summer, was kept lighted here in the evenings. He must face squarely the thing that was worrying him—be honest with himself, at least. His lighted cigar fell into ash as he moodily stared before him, recalling the past, dreaming of what the future might be, if only——

He had been married to Marjorie for twenty-one years; now, the plain fact of the matter was he had fallen in love with another woman at first sight, precisely as a boy of twenty might have done. At first he severely criticised his own weakness, and then, suddenly and furiously, he blamed his wife for it all. She alone was responsible for the indifference existing between them. Their lives together under the same roof had been a mockery for the past few years. Had an atmosphere of congeniality and warmth prevailed in his home, he would not have been so susceptible to the charms of a beautiful and fascinating woman. Only a few weeks before he had threatened Marjorie that should the opportunity present itself, he would grasp elsewhere the happiness he could not obtain in his own home, little dreaming at that time how soon he would lose his head.

Dawn showed grayly through the half-drawn curtains. Completely worn out, he rose and went slowly up the stairs to his room, his perplexing problem still unsolved. It had left him utterly at sea. Well, matters would have to readjust themselves as best they could. He was in the hands of Fate, and would drift wherever the tide carried him. He realized, with just one slight pang of a resisting conscience that he did not feel the shame he

should. The alluring prospects of an exciting adventure only caused him to experience a sensation of keen rebellion and joyous anticipation. So had actually changed the Hugh Benton of the Atwood days of sixteen years before.

CHAPTER IX

That all Hugh Benton's problems were not concerned with his own troublesome heart where the fair Geraldine DeLacy was concerned, or with his daughter whose willfulness he feared might lead her into a marriage less desirable than the one he hoped for with Paul Bronlee, came home to him in a cataclysmic rush a few days later when Howard, his son, appeared on the immediate horizon. Howard had been so long at college that Hugh had got into the habit of thinking of him as merely a financial annoyance, the personal equation of which was luckily distant. There was not much affection between the two. There could not have been, since Hugh Benton had seen his son so rarely during those portions of his vacation the young man chose to spend in his home. But Hugh Benton never forgot his fatherly duties. He remembered that Howard was his son. And how, indeed, was he to forget it after that blithe and dashing young man had been home from college for a few weeks.

It was shortly after the Thurston dance that Howard had been graduated. It had been rather as much of a surprise to Howard that this had been accomplished as it had to anyone else—nevertheless, it had been done. He had flunked in everything the beginning of the term, but mysteriously he had managed to get through by an amazingly close margin.

Marjorie was very proud of her son. Mother-like, she overlooked all of his faults—saw him only through eyes of love, and did not attempt to look beneath the surface. To his father, though, Howard was not a young god. He saw him as he was: egotistical, reckless, a selfish young spendthrift.

Hugh called him into the library one evening after he had had time to consider the young man's case.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Howard," he told his son with a firmness that presaged no casual talk.

"All right, Dad, see that it is a *little* talk, as I have a date in town." Howard dropped lazily on the davenport, extracted a cigarette from his new platinum case and blew rings of smoke toward the ceiling.

The parent eyed his offspring critically. He was considering him from all angles. Handsome enough, he thought, and there was self-satisfaction in his recognition of his own features in those of his sprawling son. But another thought came to drive away pleasure in any personal appearance.

“And insolent, too,” was the further thought, and an ominous frown accompanied the mental comment. But when he spoke aloud, it was slowly and with the dignity he always used when addressing Howard. He indicated the sprawling attitude.

“I prefer to have you sit up while I talk,” he said with unmistakable reproof, “and as for your—er—date—it will have to wait.”

“I say—” Howard began, but as he caught sight of his father’s stern countenance, he slowly straightened out of his reclining position, and sat waiting.

“Howard,” Hugh went directly to the point, “I haven’t been at all satisfied with your conduct during your three years at college——”

“Why, what’s the matter?” Howard’s tone conveyed genuine surprise. “Didn’t I graduate?”

“You did. God only knows how. Neither Professor Anderson nor I have been able to fathom it.”

Howard flushed angrily: “Maybe you think I cheated?”

“I am so glad that you’re through I don’t believe I care how you managed it. You know without my having to tell you how you wasted your time; but I didn’t call you in here to discuss past performances or lecture you. I merely want to know what you intend doing now that you are a college graduate and have fully satisfied your mother’s ambitions?” Hugh himself did not realize the tinge of bitterness in his voice.

“Doing? Just what do you mean by that, Dad?”

“Do you care to come into the office with me,” Hugh answered, “or would you rather go to work for one of my friends?”

“Work!” Howard sat up like a shot. Amazement rang in his voice. “Surely, Dad, you don’t expect me to work!”

“Well, what do you expect to do, now that you can’t go to school any longer?” Hugh remembered his cherished dignity and sought to control himself, but with ill success.

“Why, you have so much money, Dad, I thought I’d just be a—a gentleman.”

Hugh turned fiercely. His anger had leapt bounds. “A gentleman?” he sneered. “You mean, you want to be a good-for-nothing idler. Well, I won’t stand for it—do you hear—I won’t stand for it!”

Howard languidly lighted a fresh smoke. “Any need to get so excited?”

All semblance of dignity gone by this goading of his nonchalant, indifferent heir, Hugh Benton towered over him, an apoplectic flush on his usually calm face.

“Yes!” he shouted. “Yes! To hear you talk of being a ‘gentleman’—would you infer that I am not one? Have I been too good to work? To hand out money to you hand over fist to gratify your mother’s desire for you to be college-bred? And now what do I get! You sit there calmly and announce your intention of being a ‘gentleman!’ You, who have cost a small fortune to put through college, to say nothing of the escapades I’ve had to get you out of——”

Hugh’s explosion ended in a splutter. Howard coolly blew another exact smoke ring into the air. He almost yawned in his intense boredom as he answered:

“Haven’t I heard you say, Dad, that there is no use in going over past performances?”

“What else is there to do when you propose going on the same way?” Hugh calmed himself to better his argument. “I can’t help saying, too, that your lack of respect and air of impertinence surprise me,” he added coldly.

“I didn’t mean to be impertinent, Dad, honestly I didn’t—only this rôle of the stern parent is so foreign and unbecoming to you, that it strikes me as a sort of joke. You’ve always been such a good fellow, and regular pal. However, I’ll come into the office with you, if you wish,” he added condescendingly.

“Very well, report at nine o’clock Monday morning—I’ll have Bryson assign some work to you.” And it was Hugh who turned away abruptly, ending the argument.

“I’ll be there,” Howard assured, magnanimously. At the door, he turned suddenly: “Say, Dad, how about the roadster you promised me when I was through college. Can I have it?”

“Yes,” Hugh answered listlessly. “Order it whenever you please.”

“Thanks, Dad, you’re great!” And Howard ran upstairs, whistling the air of a popular song.

For a few moments Hugh paced about the room; then, coming to a sudden standstill, he threw back his head and laughed bitterly. “What is the *use*?” he murmured. “If I attempt to reason with my children, they become insufferably insolent, or else they endeavor to win me over with subtle flattery.”

The jangle of the telephone bell on his desk startled him.

“Is this Mr. Benton?” a sweetly low voice came over the wire.

“Yes.”

“This is Geraldine DeLacy, Mr. Benton.”

“How do you do, Mrs. DeLacy,” he replied, but he was not unconscious of the quickening of his heart.

“I fear you have forgotten me. Don’t you remember promising to arrange for me to call at your office?”

“Forgotten you, Mrs. DeLacy! You suggest an impossibility. On the contrary I’ve been waiting to hear from you. Do you happen to be at leisure to-morrow?”

“Why yes—I—” she began, but in his masterful way Hugh Benton took matters in his own hands.

“Well, then, suppose we say eleven-thirty, at my office, and after our little business conference, perhaps you will do me the honor to lunch with me?”

“I shall be delighted.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, as he hung up the receiver, Geraldine’s musical “good-by” singing in his ears.

When Hugh entered the breakfast room the next morning, he found all the members of his family at the table. This was an occurrence so unusual as to cause surprise. Of late years while the children were away at school, Marjorie and Hugh breakfasted together on an average of about once a month. Since Elinor’s return, she had ordered her tray sent up at least five mornings out of seven, and Howard had not shown himself one morning in the few days that he had been home. Therefore, Hugh’s inquiring glance was to be expected.

“Good morning,” he said, as he pulled out his watch. It was just 9:30. “What a lot of early birds!”

Marjorie laid aside the letter she was reading as she answered: “Good morning, Hugh. I don’t believe I am any earlier than usual. I breakfast every morning regularly at 9:15.”

“I wasn’t referring to you, Marjorie,” Hugh laughed good-naturedly. “I know your life is one long martyrdom of punctuality.”

“Your sarcasm isn’t especially appreciated, Hugh.” Marjorie flushed deeply, as she resumed the reading of her mail.

“I hadn’t the slightest intention of being sarcastic, my dear Marjorie,” he replied, seating himself at the table and reaching for his folded paper, “but as

usual, you prefer to misconstrue my meaning.”

“Good morning, Dad,” Elinor interrupted, anxious to prevent a needless argument. “You’re looking fine, and you’re all dressed up. Is that a new suit?”

“Practically new. I’ve had it about a month, but this is the first time I’ve worn it.”

“Well, it is vastly becoming, and your shirt and tie harmonize beautifully.”

“Maybe Dad has a date,” Howard interposed mischievously.

“Howard, flippancy is distasteful to me,” Marjorie again looked up from her letter to reprove coldly.

“Why all this discussion?” Hugh demanded. “I happen to wear a new suit, a thing I have done innumerable times without causing the slightest comment, and for some unknown reason the family proceed to hold a conference terminating in a general wrangle.”

“I’m sure I meant it all right, Dad. I don’t see why Howard had to interfere—I wish he’d mind his own business,” Elinor remarked peevishly.

“Oh, is that so?” Howard returned. “You think you’re mighty clever, don’t you? I’ve as much right to speak as you have, and I’ll tell you one _____”

“Children—children!” Marjorie intervened.

“Well this a *pleasant* little party,” Hugh exploded, throwing down his paper in disgust. “If I had dreamt that things were going to be so agreeable, I’d have had my breakfast in town. You must have all stepped out on the wrong side of the bed. It evidently doesn’t agree with you to rise so early. Anyway, what happens to be the occasion?”

“I’m anxious to get into town to order my roadster,” Howard replied. “Will you give me a lift, as far as the Circle, Dad?”

Hugh nodded absent-mindedly. “And you, Elinor?” he asked.

“Oh, I have an early appointment—one of the girls I knew at Miss Grayson’s is visiting some friends in New York, and I am going to spend the day with her.”

“Who is she?” Marjorie inquired, coldly concerned. She had not yet accustomed herself to Elinor’s doing as she pleased without consulting her.

“You don’t know her, mother, so there wouldn’t be any use in my telling you.” Elinor tossed her head defiantly.

“Just the same,” Marjorie began, “I want to know.”

Hugh arose hastily. "Come on, Howard, if you want to ride into town with me," he called. It was plain he was anxious to escape from listening to one of Marjorie's catechisms.

"Righto, Dad," answered the boy. "Try to improve your disposition, Sis," he called back over his shoulder. "I'm going to get a swell roadster, and you may want to ride with me."

"Howard," Hugh began, as soon as they were seated in the car, and headed for town, "how is it that you and Elinor can't be together half an hour without quarreling?"

"Oh, I don't know," Howard sulked. "She always starts things."

"You should remember that she is a woman, and women are nearly always difficult enigmas," Hugh sighed rather deeply.

"You must be right, Dad," Howard's voice was full of sympathy. "I know you're speaking from experience."

"What do you mean by that?"

To which Howard replied, innocently enough: "Why Elinor and I were discussing you the other evening, and we agreed that you must have a pretty tough time of it, trying to hit it off with mother."

Hugh fidgeted uneasily. "I don't see what could have given you that impression," he said.

"Oh everything. You're such a real sport, Dad, and mother is," Howard waxed confidential, "so very——"

"Stop!" Hugh commanded. "Your attempting to criticise your mother to me is very bad taste, Howard. I must refuse to listen to you."

"All right, Dad. Here's where I get out!" He called to the chauffeur to stop. "But," and there was unmistakable meaning in the eyes of the son, "I'm all for you, and you know it."

Hugh leaned back and closed his eyes as his car whirled toward his office.

"Even my children pity me," he meditated resentfully. "What a mess Marjorie and I have made of things!" But it was a commentary on the changed Hugh Benton that only for one solitary moment did he blame himself. Surely, he reflected morosely, Marjorie was anything but a successful wife or mother.

At precisely 11:30 his clerk announced Mrs. DeLacy. She swept into the room gracefully, and extended her hand. "Good morning," she said brightly. "I think you will find me exactly on time."

Hugh glanced at the clock. "To the minute," he answered, taking the offered hand. "You are one of earth's rarities—a punctual woman."

"You would consider me very unappreciative if I kept you waiting," she smiled, as she sank languidly into the easy chair which Hugh had drawn up for her.

Sitting opposite her, his arms folded across his chest, Hugh stared at her approvingly. She seemed neither to notice nor resent the scrutiny as she chattered on for a few moments about commonplaces. She was bewitchingly charming to-day, he thought. Her dress, a symphony in brown from head to foot, was flattering in the extreme.

With reluctance, the man forced himself to recall that Mrs. DeLacy's visit was on business. There was so much more he would rather talk to her about. But then he remembered that it would be to her advantage—that it was in his power to aid her. He pulled a pad of paper toward him and dipped his pen into the wrought bronze ink-well on his shining desk.

"Let us get down to business," he said abruptly. "Tell me just how much money you have, how it is invested, and all the particulars."

"I have so little, I'm almost ashamed to mention it. It's so good of you to bother with me at all," she replied. She reached into her bag, extracted a number of papers and placed them upon his desk.

In short order he had made a note of everything. Placing the memorandum in his desk's drawer, he said bluntly: "Leave it all to me, my dear Mrs. DeLacy. It won't take long to double or triple your money for you."

"How powerful you are," she murmured admiringly, "and how wonderful to have found such a friend!"

"Thank you." He found himself blushing. "And now, where shall we go for luncheon?"

"I don't know," Geraldine stammered confusedly. "We must be discreet—people are so unkind—especially to a widow. Can't you suggest some place where we wouldn't be apt to meet anyone who knows us?"

"If you don't object to a little ride, I think I know the very place," was the prompt reply. "It is an inn on the road to Jamaica. I have stopped there on my way to the races."

"Splendid," she enthused. "The ride will give us an appetite, and I adore inns."

"You had better go down ahead of me," he said. "I will join you in a few moments after I give my clerk some instructions for the afternoon. We will

go out in a taxi—my chauffeur—you know——”

“I understand,” she saved him from further embarrassment. “You are more than considerate, and I appreciate your kind protection. I’ll wait below.”

But Hugh Benton could not see the exultation in her eyes, nor know her no less exultant thoughts as she rode down in the elevator.

At Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, they were halted by congested traffic.

Fate, or the imp that has so much joy in arranging just such contretemps must have laughed with glee that day when Marjorie Benton had felt the urge to go into town shopping. And it was that same imp who must have led her out onto the sidewalk to her waiting limousine just at the moment that a taxi halted in front of her,—and in that taxi were Geraldine DeLacy and Hugh Benton—a different Hugh than she had known in a long time herself, a Hugh so raptly attentive to his handsome companion, so joyously laughing at her witty sallies, so light-hearted that his attention did not swerve for one single moment to the pathetic figure on the sidewalk, an unattractive figure at best in her gray gown of severe cut.

Marjorie Benton’s knees almost gave way under her at the sight. It was only her indomitable will power that helped her survive the shock. Realizing at once that they had not seen her, a thing for which she was truly grateful, she slipped back into the entrance of the store and from that concealed position, gazed with uncontrollable fascination at the two before her. Her eyes were blinded with tears she could not force back, but her cheeks burned with indignation.

The traffic officer flashed the signal and the taxi vanished from sight. Still Marjorie remained rooted to the spot. Strange as it may seem, through all the years of estrangement, she had never once associated Hugh with deception of any kind. Somehow, she had always believed he would remain the gentleman she had married.

Struggling to regain her composure, she summoned her car to be driven home. Lowering the shades, she sat wearily down upon the luxuriously upholstered seat. The mere rocking of the car caused her to place her hands to her wildly throbbing temples. A hot uprush of jealousy not unmingled with scorn overwhelmed her. How was she to bear it, was the one thought that ran frantically through her head. An overburdening sense of inexpressible bitterness against the woman began to manifest itself within her. Could the sensation of dislike and mistrust with which she always encountered Geraldine DeLacy have been a presentiment? The all-important

question was: What should she do? If she went to him and told him what she had seen, he would probably face her calmly and say: "I warned you, Marjorie, that I should seek my happiness wherever it presented itself." She could not leave him. That would leave an indelible stain upon Elinor and Howard just as they were being launched forth into the sea of aristocracy. There was under the circumstances only one thing left for her to do, and that was willfully to close her eyes and stoically endure this, and presumably more insults to follow. It would not be so very difficult for her to disguise her feelings. She and Hugh had arrived at the point in their lives where they merely exchanged conventional civilities.

By the time the car reached home, she had her emotions under control. Going directly to her own room, she removed her wraps and methodically put everything where it belonged in her usual manner, hoping thereby to regain composure sufficient to enable her calmly to review the situation and reach a more logical decision.

It was late in the afternoon when she calmly walked to the telephone, called the Thurston home and asked to speak with Mrs. DeLacy.

"Yes, this is Mrs. DeLacy," Geraldine drawled. "Who is this, please?"

"Mrs. DeLacy," Marjorie answered, her voice distinct and serene, while her heart throbbed, "this is Mrs. Benton. I have a request to make of you."

"Why—Mrs. Benton," Geraldine with difficulty disguised her surprise. It was the first time Mrs. Benton had deigned to telephone her. "What can I do for you?"

"Will you call to see me to-morrow, and give me a few minutes of your time. There is something I wish to discuss with you. I would come to you only the matter is quite confidential, and I think we shall be freer from interruption here."

"You fill me with curiosity, Mrs. Benton. I shall be glad to come, only to-morrow happens to be a very busy day for me. As long as it is to be a short interview, will it be convenient for you to see me at six o'clock, on my way home from a five o'clock tea at the Woodsons?"

"That will be all right. I shall expect you at six to-morrow. Good-by—and—thank you," Marjorie added reluctantly.

Geraldine hung up the receiver in a marked state of disconcertion. What in the world could Marjorie Benton wish to see her about? She had never telephoned to her before. In fact, she had barely treated her with formal civility when they happened to meet. She couldn't understand why she should be at all perturbed unless perhaps it was a twinge of conscience. At all events she would put it from her until to-morrow. No doubt it was

something concerning Elinor—she knew that Marjorie strongly disapproved of their intimacy. Well, she——

The dinner gong interrupted any further soliloquy. She hurried down to the dining room. The Thurstons were having guests for dinner, one of whom she was most desirous of knowing, a wealthy, distinguished bachelor. True, she had had a remarkably interesting start with Hugh Benton, but after all, he was married, so it could do no harm to exert her affability in Mr. Tilmar's direction. One could never tell just what might happen. She could not afford to allow a single opportunity to escape her.

Marjorie Benton was satisfied. She had carefully debated all afternoon, and had finally concluded that her only course lay in facing Geraldine DeLacy. She would be different from other women and come out into the open. Perhaps she could reach the DeLacy woman's sense of honor. At all events, she would not permit her to imagine that she was a poor, deceived wife, the victim of a cheap and tawdry triangle. Those things were all very well on the stage—but in real life—Well, she would handle the situation differently.

All the next day, she rehearsed in her mind just what she would say, and at a few minutes past six, when Griggs announced Mrs. DeLacy she was calmly waiting for her.

Geraldine entered apologetically: "Am I a few minutes late, Mrs. Benton? My dressmaker detained me this afternoon, and consequently I was tardy with all my engagements."

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. DeLacy." Marjorie motioned to her to be seated. "I should have come to you, but as I told you, when I telephoned, I thought it would be easier to arrange a private interview here."

"How interesting. Sounds as if it were to be quite confidential." Geraldine sank languidly into a comfortable chair and extracted a cigarette from her case. "Have one? Oh—I forgot—you never indulge. No objections to my having a puff or two, I hope? It rests my nerves so—after I've been rushing about."

Marjorie merely nodded. The insolence of the woman was almost unbearable.

"Well, now, Mrs. Benton, what is this secret? I am fairly consumed with curiosity. Is it about Elinor? I hope the dear child has not been,—well—let us say—indiscreet?"

"I am perfectly capable of managing my daughter myself, Mrs. DeLacy—and I would hardly send for you to advise me concerning her," Marjorie answered freezingly.

“Why is it, Mrs. Benton, that you dislike me so?” Geraldine faced her squarely. “From the moment of our first meeting, you have shown me plainly just how you feel toward me.”

“You’re right,” Marjorie realized that without undue maneuvering, the cards were on the table, “I never liked you—you will pardon me for having to say this in my own house—indeed, I mistrusted and disliked you, but I never feared you, until yesterday—because I have always had faith in my husband.”

“Your husband?”

“I was shopping on the avenue yesterday, and I saw you and my husband in a cab. I immediately hailed another and—followed you!” Marjorie felt the blood mounting to her cheeks, and she turned her head in order to conceal her embarrassment as she brought this bit of strategy into play. “So you see there isn’t any use for you to deny it.”

“So that’s it.” Geraldine DeLacy threw away her cigarette and faced her accuser defiantly. “Well, there isn’t anything for me to deny. I called at Mr. Benton’s office on business. He is a broker and attending to some of my affairs—surely I have a right to employ his services. It happened to be lunch time and he invited me to go with him. I must confess that I am surprised to think that the honorable Mrs. Benton has stooped to spying.”

Marjorie was struggling for calmness.

“I’d do more than that, Mrs. DeLacy,” she said, with feverish meaning. “I’d fight to the bitter end for the man I love.”

“You love?” Geraldine’s laugh ended in a sneer. “Why, you don’t know what love means—you, with your haughty air of superiority—your repellent coldness. What can you mean to any man—particularly a man like Hugh Benton?”

Marjorie faced her proudly: “Something that no other woman in the world means—I am the mother of his children.”

Geraldine coolly lighted another cigarette. She seemed to be considering. “When two people reach the climax in their lives, when they mean as little to one another as you two,” she commented insultingly, “then even children do not count.”

“What do you know concerning our lives?”

Geraldine’s shrug was expressive, and she half yawned in a bored manner.

“What everybody else knows,” she enlightened, “that you are mismatched—that you haven’t an idea in common—that your husband believes in living

while you have stayed at home—and—well,—” She eyed her rival insolently from head to foot,—“have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror? When Hugh Benton told me he was four years your senior I wouldn’t believe it. You’re more like his mother. Why, you’re forty years old, Marjorie Benton, and I’m thirty-six—yes—I know I tell everybody I’m twenty-six (I’ve been taken for twenty-three) *that’s* the difference between us. I’m being brutally frank with you because I want to show you how impossible it is for you to hold your husband.”

Marjorie gulped as the stinging words flayed her.

“Perhaps all you say is true, Mrs. DeLacy,” she admitted slowly. “I may be as you say—decidedly unattractive,—but I do know that until you came into my husband’s life, I was the only woman in it.”

“How ridiculous,” Geraldine laughed. “You mean I am the only one you happen to think you know about.”

“It is useless for me to waste words with you.” Marjorie Benton, usually so calm, so cool, so complete mistress of herself, lost all control in this crisis. She spoke bitterly. “I can never bring you to see things from my viewpoint, and I could never stoop to your level to discuss them.”

“Stop!” Geraldine commanded angrily as she hurriedly rose. “You may go a bit too far—even with me, Mrs. Benton. I came here at your request, and have submitted calmly to your insults because, in my heart, I pity you! But I refuse to allow you to presume any further. Up to now your husband has simply been my friend and counselor. But he cares for me—I know he does—and I shall act accordingly!”

Marjorie eyed her disdainfully. “So it’s threats, now!”

“Merely fair warning.” Gaining confidence in herself each moment, Geraldine DeLacy was twisting the iron.

“Then you will deliberately step in between husband and wife?”

For her, Marjorie Benton was almost pleading, but her plea was made to a woman soulless, caring only for what might best further her own interests.

“I cannot come into Hugh Benton’s life,” answered that woman, weighing each word with cruel deliberation, “unless he is willing for me to do so—therefore, I think the matter rests entirely with him, and neither you nor I have a right to discuss it.”

Mrs. Hugh Benton, her self-control all miraculously returned, an unaccustomed red spot on either pale cheek, rose in all her dignity.

“Your impertinence, Mrs. DeLacy,” she commented dryly, “is beyond comprehension. I regret exceedingly having requested you to call, but

having done so, I now request you to leave!”

CHAPTER X

As though at the prearranged signal of the same imp that had been taking such a hand in Marjorie Benton's affairs, it was at this dramatic moment that Hugh Benton entered the room. He was mystified, worried, at what he saw; uneasy, too, at seeing the woman he believed he had come to love in an obvious altercation with his wife.

Two angry women, almost too intent on their own belligerency to notice his appearance, faced each other. His own wife, those two angry red spots on her white withered cheeks, stood like some accusing goddess with hand pointing to the door, her eyes never leaving those dark flaming ones of Geraldine DeLacy. What could it mean? Had Hugh's conscience been a clear one, he could not have been more dumfounded at the scene that greeted him.

It was Geraldine DeLacy who saw him first. She turned to him appealingly, her eyes asking for sympathy and understanding. She laughed nervously as she answered the question he had not found voice to form.

"Your wife has just requested me to leave, Mr. Benton," she told him.

"Requested you to leave? Why Marjorie," Hugh turned to his wife perturbed, "what does this mean?"

"I prefer not to discuss it now, Hugh." Marjorie replied as calmly as she could. "I will explain to you—when we are alone."

Geraldine flared angrily. "Well, I will explain it to him now," she cried. "Your wife sent for me, Mr. Benton, to accuse me of luring you away from her. She happened to see us driving together yesterday, and immediately reached her own conclusion. I have never been so grossly insulted in my life."

More confused than ever, Hugh searched for words.

"I can't believe it," was his inconsequential reply. "Marjorie, you must be insane to do a thing like this. I demand that you apologize to Mrs. DeLacy at once."

Trembling from head to foot, white as death, Marjorie Benton drew herself up to her fullest height. One long, searching look she turned on each and it was still with the dignity of the avenger that she turned and swept from the room.

Hugh stared after her in utter astonishment. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. DeLacy, I'm sure you know that," he said, in pained confusion. "I can't understand it. The only thing I can do is to apologize to you for Mrs. Benton."

"Please don't say a word, Mr. Benton." The change in Geraldine DeLacy was an instantaneous one. A light of mirth danced in the eyes that had been so wrathful, the hard voice purred. "It is you of whom I am thinking. You don't know how I feel for you. I don't believe Mrs. Benton realized what she was doing. She was just beside herself—I can only pity her."

"You are indeed generous," he murmured.

"It must be a dreadful thing," she said so softly that she might have been thinking aloud, "for a woman to feel that the man she cares for, is slipping away from her, even though she is to blame."

"Understanding as usual," was Hugh's admiring comment, "but," and the words tumbled over themselves in their eagerness to be voiced, "why is it, I wonder, that life always holds just one thing from us to make our happiness complete? I've had more than my share of good fortune in all things except the love and companionship—and——"

"You're just in the prime of life," answered the woman dreamily. "Who knows what may be waiting for you—just around the corner?"

She turned toward the door, but stopped to smile, as she observed: "I'm staying at home to-morrow evening—alone. The family are going to a concert which would bore me to death."

"You may look for me about eight-thirty," was the man's quick answer. "I am anxious to have you expound more of your marvelous philosophy."

She held out her hand. "I think you will find that we have many thoughts in common. Good-by."

In her car, homeward bound, Geraldine DeLacy reflected exultingly. Fate had brought about the very situation she longed for but would have found difficult to arrange. How fortunate for her that she had held herself discriminatingly aloof at the luncheon yesterday. Hugh could only judge her to be a greatly wronged and unjustly accused woman. She congratulated herself again and again upon her cleverness in assuming the attitude of magnanimous generosity. His admiration and respect she knew she had attained, and she would determine upon her next move to-morrow night.

With Mrs. DeLacy gone, Hugh Benton lost no time in searching out his wife. He went directly to her room. He opened the door unceremoniously and walked in. Marjorie was seated in a rocker by the window, her eyes

inflamed and swollen with weeping. She glanced up surprisedly as Hugh entered—quite an unusual thing for him to do without knocking.

“I suppose you have come to apologize,” she faltered, “for the dreadful way in which you humiliated me.”

“Apologize!” he fairly exploded. “I should say not—I have come to ask you how you dared to insult Mrs. DeLacy in that manner?”

“So that’s it!” Marjorie bounded to her feet. “You should be ashamed to mention her name in my presence—your——”

Something in his eyes forbade her finishing the sentence as it had been intended, but she went on, instead: “A woman who comes into my life for the sole purpose of wrecking it—I wasn’t afraid to face her with the truth.”

“But that’s just it,” thundered the husband, “it wasn’t the truth.”

Marjorie Benton laughed her hard laugh. She dropped into the chair from which she had risen, but her hand trembled as she searched for a magazine. Her thin shoulders shrugged, her eyebrows lifted. “So?” she inquired coolly. “Then perhaps I spoke just in time to prevent it from ever becoming—the truth.”

Hugh stared at her in blank amazement. “Marjorie, I believe you are going insane—it is so utterly ridiculous for me to attempt even to argue with you.”

With no further word, he rushed from the room, colliding with Howard at the door, and almost knocking him over.

“Good evening, Dad—you’re just the one I want to see. I’ve got my car. Come down to the garage and——”

Hugh brushed by his son without deigning to reply. Howard pursed his lips in a long whistle.

“Gee whiz, mother—what’s eating Dad?” he asked, as he gently pushed open his mother’s door. “Have you been telling him tales about me?”

“No, dear, I haven’t mentioned you.” The mother’s reply was listless.

“Well, what’s wrong with him—he didn’t even answer me, and almost threw me off my feet! I was going to ask him——” He stopped short at a sudden idea. “I say, mother,” he urged, “what’s the matter with you doing it? Come on downstairs with me for a few moments—I want to show you something.”

“I am very tired and nervous, dear,” Marjorie replied wearily. “Can’t you explain what it is without my having to go downstairs?”

But the boy was insistent. “Oh, come on, mother,” he coaxed, taking hold of her arm. “I’ve just got to show it to someone, and you’re the only one home.”

Something pulled violently at Marjorie’s heart-strings, as a flood of tender recollections surged through her. She could see Howard again as a tiny boy tugging at her apron and coaxing for a lollypop. After all, he was only an overgrown, handsome boy—and her own. Obeying a sudden impulse, she placed her arms tenderly about him.

“Do you love me very much, Howard?” she asked.

Having spent so much time away from home, attending boarding school and college, Howard had experienced little real affection. For his father he possessed a great admiration. He enjoyed being designated as the son of Hugh Benton, the Wall Street magnate, and he also knew that he owed his ability to indulge in many extravagances to his father’s generosity. His mother, in his eyes, had always been a nice old lady, rather impossible and aggravating at times. He had often wondered, he was forced to admit, why a handsome, distinguished man like his father had ever married such an old-fashioned, plain woman.

He was perceptibly embarrassed at his mother’s unexpected query, but an innate kindness and generosity of which he knew little himself, bade him return her caress with a gentle pressure as he told her with careless tenderness:

“Why, of course, I love you, mother—why shouldn’t I? But come on down—be a real sport.” Gently he took her arm, hurried her down the stairs and out to the yard.

“Look,” he said proudly, “isn’t she a beauty!”

Standing in the garage was an expensive, high-class bright red roadster.

“My new present from Dad,” he explained.

“How did you get it so quickly?” Marjorie asked. “It was only yesterday morning that I heard you say you were going to order it.” Then she added, dubiously, as she walked nearer and eyed it critically: “This must have been very expensive,” she said, noticing the make.

“Well, Dad didn’t limit me; he simply told me I could have a car, so I thought I might as well get one of the best.” Howard took it as a matter of course.

“Your father always indulges both Elinor and you to a ridiculous extent,” his mother demurred.

“Dad’s all right!” Howard bristled up. “And if you’d take a tip from me, mother, you’d try to spruce up a bit and be a little more companionable to him, or some ‘chicken’ will be stealing him away from you one of these days.”

Marjorie turned ghastly as she clutched at the car for support. Could it be possible that Howard knew something, and was trying to warn her? No, she decided, as she glanced up and saw that he was busily engaged examining the engine, and not paying the slightest attention to what he had said. It was only a chance remark, but oh, how the thrust had gone home!

Marjorie Benton looked at this handsome boy who was her own son, her flesh and blood. A surge of deep feeling came over her. Why, he was no longer a boy! He was a man—her son, one to comfort and cherish her. A thought which brought the quick blood to her face, so foreign was it to her usual restraint and the way she had come to bear her burdens silently overwhelmed her. Why not tell Howard? Why not ask his aid?

She walked slowly over to the youth who was whistling as he patted the smooth shining hood of his new toy as though it were a living feeling thing, and placed her hand on his arm. Howard looked up quickly, but something he saw in his mother’s eyes brought a remonstrance to his lips.

“Why, mother—dear—what is it?” he asked. “You look so queer!”

The mother’s smile was wan.

“I feel queer, dear,” she admitted. “The whole world looks queer. Howard, my son, I must tell you something. Your father and I have quarreled and I’m afraid *seriously*.”

“So that is what was wrong with him,” Howard whistled again, but there was relief in his voice as he added, carelessly: “Well, why should he take it out on me—I can’t help it if you two can’t hit it off together—can I?”

“Oh, Howard!” Marjorie shuddered. “How can you——”

“Now, don’t you go and misunderstand me, mater—but what’s the use of being so serious? You’ve quarreled many times before, and it always blows over.”

“But this is different. Whenever we’ve quarreled before, it has always been over you or Elinor—or places to go, or people to entertain—but this time it is a—woman!” Shame brought the last word out barely above a whisper.

“A woman!—Not Dad?” Howard laughed. “Who would have believed it? How did you catch him?”

“Howard,” Marjorie struggled with her choking sobs, “*please* try to understand—can’t you see—my heart is breaking. I haven’t anyone in the world to turn to but you. You’re a man, dear, I—I thought perhaps you can help me or advise me?”

Howard’s face became grave. “I’m sorry, mother,” he begged, “forgive me. Of course, I’ll help you all I can. Who is this woman?”

“I’d rather not tell you her name.”

“Is she young and pretty?”

“She’s only four years younger than I,” was the sad answer, “but you would take her for a girl—and she is very pretty.”

Howard seemed to be considering the matter seriously. When he spoke it was with carefully chosen words.

“Mater, do you mind if I hand it to you straight from the shoulder?” he asked bluntly.

“Say whatever you wish,” she replied.

“Well then,” he said, and he could not help but see his mother’s wince of pain as her own son went on, “this is all your own fault. You’ve never been willing to go anywhere with Dad; you won’t keep yourself young for him. Why, he’s just like a boy! Whenever we go out together, everyone thinks he’s my brother. If he can’t find the companionship he needs in his own home, he is bound to seek it on the outside.”

“But Howard,” demurred Marjorie weakly, “I don’t believe in cabarets, and musical comedies, and it seems silly to fix up like a girl of twenty. I don’t believe in trying to make myself young.”

“But mother, you are young,” Howard persisted. “Why don’t you say—‘to hell with my beliefs! My husband’s love is the only thing that counts.’”

“Why—Howard—” Marjorie was shocked, but pleased nevertheless.

“Beat this other woman to it,” Howard was speaking in the sage manner of a man of the world. “Get the right kind of clothes—fix yourself up, and then do a little vamping on your own account and just see what happens.”

“Oh—I wonder—if I could,” she murmured.

“Of course, you could—take it from me, mother! You can hold your own with any woman, if you just buckle up a bit. Well, I’m going to take a spin around the block and then go downtown.” Howard Benton had been serious long enough for one day. He hesitated, then, “I wonder, mater—could you spare fifty—I’m awfully low in funds?” he wheedled.

“Yes, dear,” she answered dreamily, “come with me to my room.”

Upstairs she extracted a number of bills from her purse. “There’s a hundred for you,” she said, handing them to him.

“Thanks awfully!” The boy kissed her, and walked to the door. Something urged him to turn. His mother was looking at him with eyes filled with longing. He grinned at her cheerily. “And I say, mother,” he offered, “ask me anything you wish to know—I’m the best little advisor you ever met. Good-night.”

Marjorie Benton locked her door, walked straight to her dressing table, and sitting down before the mirror, gazed at herself long and intently. It was time for an inventory. But even she was shocked at what she saw.

Surely, she thought, that pale, drawn face with its drooping mouth, lusterless eyes and severely arranged hair didn’t belong to her! She had been pretty and attractive once, she knew.

“Buckle up a bit.”

The words seemed to stand out before her in letters of fire. Perhaps Howard had been the instrument by which her problem would be solved. She would try it at any rate. Probably when Hugh saw her looking as other women, he would lose all desire for anyone else and she would regain her place in his heart.

It was a new Marjorie, one rejuvenated and enthused who hastened down the corridor to Elinor’s room, where she found Marie, her daughter’s maid, mending a party frock.

“Marie, will you help me a little?” she stammered in evident embarrassment.

Marjorie had never possessed a maid of her own. She could not be bothered with someone fumbling about her, and besides, her style was so simple she had always declared. It was different with Elinor. She had written to her father asking that a maid be installed for her before she returned from school. Marie arose and put aside her work.

“*Oui, Madame, avec plaisir,*” she answered, smiling encouragingly.

Because of Marjorie’s kind and courteous manner with all of the servants, they were genuinely fond of her.

“Do you think you could dress my hair, massage my face and—oh—sort of fix me up in general?” Marjorie blushed. “I’ve taken a notion to—to _____”

“I understand, Madame,” Marie beamed. “And oh, I am so glad—you are ze very pretty woman, and when Marie feenish you—oh—la—la— You

will be lovely!”

“Thank you, Marie, but I haven’t a thing except a little powder—I want to be dressed when Mr. Benton comes home for dinner—just to—just to—surprise him. My dresses are all so—well, so——”

“Nevair mind—you leave everything to me. Go to your room—I bring all ze things you need—and your dress—well—a needle, ze thread, a scissair—and zere you are, Madame!”

“All right, I shall remember you for this, Marie,” and Marjorie returned to her room, her heart beating like a trip hammer.

“Here we are,” Marie announced, entering a few minutes later, carrying a small box filled with an array of bottles and jars which she plumped down rattling on Marjorie’s dresser. Then, with her small head cocked birdlike on one side, she surveyed her prospect.

“First of all, Madame,” she declared with authority, “you must have ze nice warm bath.”

“Everything is in your hands, Marie.” And Marjorie, smiling so brightly that it transformed her expression, started for the bathroom.

“No, no, Madame,” Marie gently forced her back to the chaise longue. “I do everything—draw ze watair—put in ze perfume—just like I do for Mees Elinor. You rest here, and be comfortable—so.” She proceeded to remove Marjorie’s gown and shoes, and arrange the cushions at her head.

Marjorie closed her eyes and nestled down contentedly. She really believed she was enjoying this new experiment of being waited upon. Only yesterday she had been quite disgusted with Elinor, when upon entering her room, she had discovered her stretched lazily in an easy chair, with Marie on her knees lacing her boots. Surely, she had thought, a healthy young girl like Elinor should be able to do such things for herself. It was all right to have a maid, if you desired one to dress your hair, or fasten an intricately arranged frock, but to lace your boots—that was a different matter. And here she was, the following day, permitting Marie to fill her bath and actually remove her shoes.

Marjorie, emerging from her bath, tingling and greatly refreshed, placed herself completely in the maid’s willing hands. After a delightful massage, the array of jars and bottles came into play. Then a tiny tweezer came into view. At the first pluck of an eyebrow, Marjorie almost jumped out of her chair: “Oh—that hurts! What are you doing?” she demanded.

“I pull out ze ugly thick eyebrow and shape heem magnifique,” she replied calmly, as she yanked out another.

“No, no,” Marjorie remonstrated. “I can’t allow it—it is too—well—silly.”

“Seely?—Why you say seely?—Eet is stylish, and what all ze well groomed women she have. You say you leave everying to Marie. Why not now you do as you say—*pourquoi?*”

“Very well, I’ll go through with this thing, now that I’ve started—have it your own way.” Marjorie settled down resignedly, clenching her fists as if preparing for a serious operation.

When the brows were carefully arched, Marie started in with the bottles. First, the grayish complexion was transformed into a pearly whiteness, to which was added a slight tinge of blush rose, from a tiny jar, at the sight of which Marjorie shuddered inwardly and closed her eyes. Then came a touch of carmine to the lips, and a carefully studied tracing of mascara to the eyes.

“*S’il vous plait*, Madame. Do not look in ze mirror until aftair I have you feenish. I want zat it be—surprise.”

Marie began a vigorous brushing of the heavy strands of hair, the lifelessness of which she remedied considerably with a little brilliantine. After arranging a most becoming and modish coiffeur, she entered the clothes closet and carefully surveyed the dresses.

“*Mon Dieu*,” Marie groaned inwardly, as her eyes wandered over the rows of unattractive garments. Finally, after much deliberation, she selected a gown of black lace. The skirt with its double flounce swept the ground evenly, and the V-shaped neck was filled in with silk net, which formed a high collar, boned to run up behind the ears. The same material was gathered from the elbow sleeve of lace to the wrist.

“Now, Madame will please to slip on ze dress while I make ze alteration.”

Marjorie stood patiently, while Marie measured and pinned up the flounces so that they hung gracefully just above the ankles.

“So zat is bettair. Madame will sit here and relax.” Marie wrapped a dressing-gown about her mistress and seated her in a comfortable lounging chair.

“It will take me about half an hour for ze work. In Mees Elinor’s room I have all ze things necessaire, so I feex heem in zere,” the maid explained.

When Marie had departed with the dress, Marjorie tilted her head comfortably against the headrest of the chair and gazed intently at the ceiling. “How surprised the family will be when I go down to dinner,” she reflected anticipantly. Hugh would be pleased, she felt sure. He had urged

her so often to try to modernize her ideas. Of course, her awakening as to his short-comings had been somewhat rude and sudden, but she would try to think it had been for the best. Perhaps they would drift back again into their old days of love and devotion. She smiled wryly as she thought how Howard's tactless little speech had done more for her than all of Hugh's pleadings and Elinor's criticisms.

Further reflection was cut short by Marie's enthusiastic entrance.

"Oh, Madame," she exclaimed in her enthusiastic way, "ze dress is magnifique! I hafe feex heem so good—no, no," holding it behind her as Marjorie attempted to examine it. "First I will put heem on you and zen you shall—see!"

"All right, I'll close my eyes." Marjorie laughed, as Marie slipped the gown over her head.

"Now—Madame will please to look."

Marjorie walked to the long cheval mirror and started in genuine astonishment at the apparition before her.

"Marie, what have you done to me!" she exclaimed in hushed wonderment. "I hardly recognize myself!"

"Madame ees vairy beautiful." The little maid beamed delightedly. "Eet ees just zat all ze beauty be brought out."

Wonders indeed had Marie's clever fingers worked with the simple black gown. She had removed the net from the neck and sleeves, had shortened the skirt so that it revealed Marjorie's slim ankles and graceful feet encased in dainty black satin slippers, and then around the waist she had folded a wide girdle of black maline interwoven with a double-faced satin ribbon of orchid and turquoise blue, lending an irresistible charm and certain individuality to the entire dress.

"I would not have thought it possible that you could improve me like this, Marie," said the mistress gratefully. "I shall not forget your kindness."

"Eet ees ze great *plaisir* to do for Madame—eef only Madame would buy some chic gowns," Marie ventured hesitatingly.

"To-morrow I shall shop, Marie, and you shall come with me," Marjorie announced, with unusual enthusiasm, as the dinner chimes sounded below.

Glowing with optimistic anticipation, she nodded brightly to the maid, and walked buoyantly down the stairs. Entering the dining room she found Elinor and Howard there before her. Neither had taken the trouble to dress. Elinor was absorbed in her book while Howard sat almost buried in the

evening paper, so that the first intimation they had of Marjorie's presence in the room was her low: "Good evening, children."

Howard arose to his feet with nonchalant courtesy, and Elinor languidly lifted her eyes from her book. Then came the simultaneous exclamation: "Mother!"

Both stared at Marjorie with unfeigned astonishment. Howard was the first to reach her side.

"Why mater, you're marvelous," he assured her with profound admiration. "You've been holding out on us all these years, and you sure have all the Broadway chickens I know skinned a mile."

"Oh, Howard," Marjorie blushed, but she did not chide him for his slangy compliment, instead answered laughingly: "You have such a funny little way of expressing yourself, dear."

"Funny little way!" Elinor could scarcely believe her ears. Why yesterday at the same remark, her mother would have glanced coldly at Howard and spoken of respect for her presence.

"Do I please you, Elinor?" Marjorie turned timidly to her daughter.

"I'm just trying to regain my equilibrium, mother. You've fairly taken my breath away. Like you? I'm delighted with you. You're positively adorable!" Elinor enthused, throwing her arms affectionately about her mother. "Just think what it means to me, to have a mother like other girls. What in the world has brought about the change?"

"Here's Dad," Howard interrupted, as his father's step neared. "Can you imagine his surprise!"

Marjorie's heart pounded as she flushed agitatedly.

"Evening, everybody," Hugh Benton spoke brusquely as he breezed into the room. His evening clothes indicated his intention of going out, as his wife's indifference had long since caused him to discontinue dressing for dinner unless there were guests present.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting," he apologized. "I'm due at a—a little stag affair this evening, so I thought I would save time by dressing before dinner." He crossed to the table and stood behind Marjorie's chair, holding it for her, according to his mechanical custom of years.

With a murmured "Thank you" she accepted the seat, and allowed him to move it forward. Elinor and Howard taking their accustomed places, held their breaths in suspense and eagerly waited for their father's gaze to rest upon their mother.

“Well, how’s everything?” Hugh asked cheerfully, as he unfolded his napkin. He seemed to be in remarkably fine spirits for some reason. “I noticed the car as I came in, Howard. It seems to be fine. You surprised me by obtaining one so quickly—trust you’ll make as rapid headway in business deals.” He picked up his spoon to attack the soup the butler placed before him. His mind seemed anywhere save on the things immediately before him, though his cheerfulness was exuberant. “Had a funny experience this morning, that I must tell you about,” he declared. He launched forth into a long, uninteresting business transaction lasting through the first three courses.

By the time the roast reached the table, Elinor and Howard were fidgeting uncomfortably. Marjorie had begun to wilt like a faded flower; she had scarcely touched a morsel of food.

Elinor, unable to stand the strain another moment, burst forth breathlessly: “Daddy, haven’t you noticed anything?”

Marjorie’s protesting shake of her head was too late.

“Noticed what?” asked her father curiously. His glance wandered about the room.

“You’ve been talking so incessantly,” Elinor blurted forth like a spoiled child, “you haven’t noticed mother.”

Hugh glanced across at Marjorie. “Why, you have your hair fixed differently, haven’t you, Marjorie?” he inquired, with careless indifference. “It is quite becoming.” He returned to his carving.

A solemn and awful hush pervaded the atmosphere. Howard, with diplomacy worthy of an older man, came to the rescue, and broke the tension by beginning to discuss the political affairs of the day.

Hugh Benton pushed his *mousse* away from him impatiently.

“No fripperies for me to-night, thank you,” he said. “I’m going to finish off with a cigar. No, son,” he added with uplifted hand to stay him as Howard started to rise to accompany him. “Stay and finish your dinner.”

Howard subsided into his seat, as his father stalked out.

In Marjorie Benton’s eyes two tears glittered that she tried to force back, but it was a tremulous laugh she gave as she remarked wryly:

“Old hens don’t wear chicken plumage very successfully, do they, my dears?”

She tried to go on with her own dessert, but it seemed that each mouthful would choke her. She must have one word with Hugh before he left the

house. She must make one final effort! She laid down her spoon listlessly as she looked up at Howard and Elinor.

“I think I will leave you, too, children, if you don’t mind?” she queried, with her usual careful courtesy. But they were not the light steps with which she had entered the room but a short time before that Marjorie Benton followed her husband.

Elinor and Howard stared at each other without uttering a word.

It was Howard who first found voice.

“Well, what do you know about that!” he exclaimed pityingly. “Poor mater—she didn’t even phase him, and it was at my advice she pulled herself together the way she did.”

“It’s a shame, that’s what it is!” his sister replied angrily. “I’m surprised at Dad, and deeply disappointed. I thought he’d bubble over with joy and we should be a happy and congenial family at last.”

“‘And they lived happy ever after’—that’s the way it always ends in the story-book. *Story-book* is good—only I should say plain *lie*.”

With grim determination to make one final effort, Marjorie followed Hugh into the library after dinner, where he had gone with his cigar.

“Hugh,” she ventured timidly, “must you go to this—stag affair to-night?”

“Why?” he inquired, in a tone of surprise.

“Because I should like you to take me to a—a theater.”

“Oh, my dear Marjorie,” he laughed heartily, “you know well enough that you and I could never enjoy the same play. You’d pick out some prosaic sermon that would have me snoring inside of ten minutes, and I’d select a rattling musical comedy, the mere mention of which would cause you to turn up your nose disdainfully. No, just tell me the play you have in mind, and I’ll get you tickets for a *matinée*. You can take some lady friend.”

“I haven’t any play in mind, Hugh, and I’m perfectly willing to attend any musical comedy you select,” answered his wife quietly.

“Hmm!” Hugh was almost too bewildered to speak. “That is very nice of you, but I’m sorry I can’t break the engagement I have for this evening.”

“How about to-morrow evening?” she asked intrepidly.

“To-morrow night is my club night,” he answered coldly, “and besides, it is so long since we went anywhere together I have rather systemized my evenings to suit myself.”

She flushed as she turned to go. But the thought of all that a misunderstanding with Hugh on this evening of evenings would mean, she determined on one more effort, cost what it might in pride. She came over and stood before him. "Hugh," she offered diffidently, as might a child pleading for admiration, "I have changed my style of dress—especially to please you. Do you like it?"

Her husband glanced at her casually. Then he picked up his gloves and started to draw them on.

"Oh, it's all right, I suppose," was his comment, "but pray don't inconvenience yourself in an effort to please me. You gave that up long ago."

Marjorie took another step toward him and her gesture was pleading.

"Hugh," she begged. "I'm humbling myself a great deal! Don't you think you might unbend a little?"

The man's whole attitude was as forbidding as the wide shoulders he turned from her, and over which he flung his parting words.

"It is unnecessary for you to humble yourself at all as far as I am concerned, Marjorie," was his cold rejoinder. "I might as well tell you I've become indifferent to anything you might say or do. You must see that it is impossible for you to rectify the mistakes of years."

No word from Marjorie that both might have made mistakes. For once in her life she was willing to take the blame—willing to admit anything if only——

Her husband had almost reached the door. Marjorie Benton ran across the room after him and clutched at his coat sleeve.

"Oh, Hugh, dear, my husband!" she faltered. "Couldn't we—couldn't we begin all over again! Oh, say it isn't too late! Please! I'm so willing to try!"

He shook off her detaining hand impatiently.

"I'm afraid it is entirely too late," he answered, in a voice that chilled her to the marrow. "Good-night."

Entering the library fifteen minutes later, Elinor found her mother, a pathetically crushed little heap on her knees in front of the fireplace, her face buried in her hands, her body convulsed with sobs.

In a moment she was beside her, her arms about her protectingly.

"What is it, mother dear?" she inquired anxiously. "Tell me what has happened."

Marjorie arose staggeringly, hastily dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. “Noth—ing,” she stammered, “nothing at all—I’m nervous and overwrought—I——”

“You’re never nervous, mother,” Elinor interrupted. “You’re always calm and composed—I’ve never known you to give way like this before.”

“I know,” Marjorie replied, trying to regain her self-control. “I’ve never given way so foolishly before. I seemed to be under a tension, and it snapped suddenly.”

“But mother,” Elinor persisted, “something must have caused it—won’t you tell me—I’m so sorry.”

The mother only shook her head. Sympathetically as it was offered, she strangely found Elinor’s interest unbearable. Unconsciously she harbored the thought that her daughter had been responsible for Hugh’s introduction to the cause of her sorrow and a feeling akin to bitter resentment against even her own daughter rankled in her heart.

“I think I will retire, dear,” she sighed, slowly advancing toward the door. “Rest and absolute quiet are what I most require.”

“Very well, mother,” Elinor answered indifferently. She was stung to the quick by her mother’s cold repulsion.

CHAPTER XI

Locked securely in the sanctuary of her own rooms, the wife and mother undressed feverishly, without once permitting her eyes to wander toward a mirror. She knew that she would see there only a skeleton beneath the artifices she had permitted the French maid to gloss her with. She was feeling all about her the ghosts—of what once had been, what might have been.

So this was the end! She had tried—tried after Hugh's own suggestions imposed on her so often—and had failed! This time, too, it had further been the suggestion of her son. She dropped wearily into a chair, her eyes closely examining her slender foot, but her thoughts far from it. Howard had told her—He had meant so well, too, poor boy!

What was that he had said—Oh, yes——

“To hell with your beliefs—your husband's love means more than beliefs.”

And now it was too late! Now she had nothing left but her beliefs. She must cling to them—must live her wrecked life as worthily as her conscience bade her. Slowly she prepared for bed. She would try to rest, to forget, if she could, that Hugh might be, probably was with Geraldine DeLacy while she, Marjorie, grieved over their dead love.

The feeling of the make-up on her face annoyed her. She went into her bathroom and carefully washed it all off.

She censured herself severely for being ridiculous enough to imagine for a moment that she could rekindle the fire in her husband's heart by artifice. Never again would she stoop to employ tricks worthy only of a class of women depicted on the motion picture screen, vampires, she believed they were called. But for the children's sake she would remain with Hugh and deliberately close her eyes to his unfaithfulness.

She did not even realize her own unfairness. For without attempting to investigate the situation, or obtain evidence other than the scene she had witnessed in the taxi, Marjorie had jumped to the conclusion of there being but one solution to her husband's transgression. She had forced her husband into another woman's willing arms.

When Hugh Benton left home in so ungraciously hurried a manner, he found it was a little early for his appointment with Mrs. DeLacy, so he

ordered his chauffeur to drive slowly through the park. It would at least be restful in the car and he was desperately tired of these continual scenes and arguments at home. By the time he reached the Thurston home, he had put his unpleasant talk with Marjorie from his mind.

Mrs. DeLacy was waiting for him in the living room. She wore a clinging gown of orchid canton crêpe, effectively trimmed with crystal beads. The stage had been set perfectly. All the large lights were out, and only the soft glow of rose-shaded lamps illuminated the room. It was just chilly enough to permit of a small fire in the grate, thereby lending an atmosphere of homelike comfort to the room.

"I'm so glad to see you," she greeted cordially, seating him in a comfortable easy chair, and placing a smoking stand beside him.

"This is good of you," Hugh Benton sighed pleasantly.

"On the contrary," she smiled, arranging her chair opposite him just where one of the lamps would shine softly upon her, "it is good of you to come here and keep me company."

"Mrs. DeLacy," he began earnestly, "I want to apologize to you again for Mrs. Benton's conduct yesterday afternoon. I thought perhaps I could succeed in persuading her to write you a note or——"

"Please, Mr. Benton, don't refer to it again—I assure you I——"

"Surely, it must have hurt you deeply."

"Yes," she answered, her lips quivering. "I was dreadfully hurt. You know how absolutely innocent I was and how undeserved the unkind things she said to me. I wouldn't intentionally harm anyone for the world."

"You have no need to tell me that," he assured her. "Your gentle forbearance has been magnificent—please believe me when I say—I am deeply grateful."

"Don't you think that forgiveness is best?" she asked him, ruminatively. "To me there are always extenuating circumstances. I have been thinking it over and perhaps Mrs. Benton——"

"There was no excuse in the world for Mrs. Benton's conduct," the man exclaimed decisively. He shook his head sadly. "This is not the first time I have feared my wife is losing her mind."

"I forbid you to mention this affair again," she scolded gently. "We will consider it a closed chapter."

"Very well, it shall be as you desire," he agreed, "and now I shall sit here and listen while you tell me a great many things I am anxious to know."

“Insignificant me—to tell you things,” she laughed, “how absurd. However, I’ll do my best. Just what is it you are so anxious to know?”

Hugh had his queries ready.

“First of all,” he asked, “what would you consider the most important thing in a man’s life. Take your time in answering—that’s important, too.”

The woman appeared to ponder deeply.

“I have it!” she announced spiritedly. “The most important thing in a man’s life is—his loyalty.”

“His loyalty?—To whom?” He was a bit perplexed.

“To himself, of course!” Then she went on eagerly as she leaned toward her guest. “So that he may meet the eternal problem of life squarely—to realize once and for all that his life is his own—to do with as he pleases.”

“But what about others? Shouldn’t we consider them?”

“No,” she answered resolutely. “There was a time in my life when duty figured above all else, but with the passing years, I have been forced to acknowledge the futility of it all. We sacrifice our youth, our ambitions, our desires—everything on the altar of duty, and in the end try to console ourselves with the memories of what might have been. It doesn’t pay, I tell you. Life at its best holds so little for us—the heartaches outweigh the joys—ten to one. And do you know,” she hurried on, as she saw how deeply her words were sinking in as seed in a soil all too well prepared for them, “do you know how the ones we sacrifice everything for really feel toward us?”

“Why, yes—some appreciate us, and others take things as a matter of fact. They——”

“Oh, no,” she interrupted. “You’re wrong—I’ll tell you how they feel. In their heart of hearts they hate the very ones who are continually giving up everything for them.”

“Hate?—But why?——”

“Because,” she continued gravely, “people who are willing to accept day after day the life’s happiness of another—cannot be anything but selfish, narrow-minded and little souled, and it is that very littleness that fills their hearts with envy for the big and generous. As envy is never the stepping stone to love, it must lead to its opposite, and that is—hatred. Now do you understand?” Geraldine DeLacy leaned back in her chair and waited for the verdict on the strange cause she had pleaded. It came unhesitatingly.

“I understand,” admired Hugh Benton, “that you are a most remarkable and logical little woman. But,” and the lines of thought deepened between

his brows, “would you advise a man to grasp his happiness should he see it before him, regardless of anything or anyone else?”

“Yes,” she replied slowly, “I should advise just that.”

Hugh Benton got to his feet and went over to his hostess. Eagerly he grasped both her hands as he bent over her, and his voice was choked with emotion as he said:

“Then I should grasp—you.”

“Me?” The woman sprang to her feet, her feigned astonishment complete.

“You mean happiness to me. Can’t you see that I love you!”

“Why—why—Mr. Benton,” she floundered piteously. “I hadn’t the least idea that you were referring to yourself when you asked for my advice—I thought you were speaking of men in general. You must believe me when I assure you that I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“Am I displeasing to you?” he inquired anxiously.

“No—no—I don’t mean that—only I hadn’t the least suspicion that I meant anything to you.”

“You mean *everything* to me—I love you, dear—I can’t tell you how deeply.” His arms went out to her to draw her to him, but she turned away, her bare white shoulders quivering.

“You haven’t the right to speak to me of love,” she protested chokingly. “I’m sorry if I have given you the impression that I was the sort of woman you could say such things to——”

“Why, my dear,” stupidly he tried to explain, to protest, as he sought for the hand she withheld. “I have only the most profound respect and admiration for you.”

“You—you have a wife,” she accused. As an actress Geraldine DeLacy would have made a profound success, for her simulation now was perfect. She choked back her sobs. “And yet you speak to me of love. What am I to think?”

“When I came into this room to-night, I hadn’t the slightest intention of revealing my sentiments toward you. It was you yourself, with your logical reasoning, who gave me the courage to speak. If I were free, do you think—oh my dear, answer me truthfully—do you think you could learn to care for me?” He pleaded wistfully.

“Just what do you mean?” she breathed.

“If I can persuade Marjorie to divorce me—have I a chance to win your love?”

She dropped her eyes to veil the exultation in their dark depths. “Whenever you are free I shall be waiting for you,” she answered simply.

“You care?” he whispered.

“Yes, dear.” And of her own accord, she crept into his open arms. “I care—a great deal.”

The dismal failure of Marjorie’s attempted reconciliation served to forge a new link in the chain of discord already predominant in the Benton home. More and more Hugh absented himself from the family fireside. Sometimes he remarked carelessly that he was “remaining at the club for dinner,” but more frequently he remained away without even deigning to offer an explanation.

Howard’s time was completely taken up with his car and “the boys,” a wild set of society’s idle rich, each one striving to outdo the other in some sort of asinine absurdity.

More than ever before Marjorie withdrew into her shell. She had become acquainted with the painful problems of life and brooded in silence, determining to bear her cross until the children married and launched forth on their own resources. In regard to Elinor, her aspirations were of the loftiest, and in order to assure the success of her most sanguine hopes she endeavored to demand an accounting for every minute of her daughter’s time. Elinor, in consequence, was not long in becoming a genius in the art of deception.

She saw Templeton Druid nearly every day; and each day she became more infatuated with him. When he professed to cherish an undying love and everlasting devotion for her, she trusted him implicitly. After all, Elinor was only a spoiled headstrong girl possessing a bit of imagination and an exaggerated opinion of herself. She believed she understood the ways of the world and men—particularly men—perfectly.

If anyone had ventured to tell her that a man who really loved a girl would never for a moment dream of compromising her—she would have replied defiantly that she was broad-minded enough to wave petty conventionalities—and most capable of managing her own affairs. And she did manage them—to her own satisfaction—obtaining all the pleasure she could out of life and finding after awhile a sort of fiendish joy in this continued resorting to subterfuge.

Elinor Benton may indeed have become adept at fooling her mother. At her worst, Marjorie Benton was never the dragon her daughter believed her,

and it never occurred to her that her daughter might tell her untruths concerning her comings and goings. Her duty, she believed, was done when she insisted on her strict accounting. In the Benton household, however, there was one not so easily fooled. For a long time Howard Benton, though engaged himself in pursuits far from wholesome, had believed he had cause to wonder where his sister was headed. He had never caught her deliberately, however, until one night when he happened to be lounging at home, and Elinor came in upon him. She was exquisitely attired in evening dress and a beautiful ermine wrap was on her arm.

“’Lo, sis,” called Howard, looking up from his paper. “Where’re you bound?”

“I’m going over to Nell’s,” she told him. “She’s giving a little dinner.”

Howard flung down his paper and scowled.

“What’s your idea?” he demanded.

“My idea?”

“In lying to me?”

“Why—why Howard—what do you mean?”

“I know you’re not going to Nell’s,” he sneered, “because I have an engagement to take her to dinner and a show.”

For a moment Elinor paled. “Heavens, what an escape,” she laughed, “suppose mother had been here. You won’t give me away, will you, Howard?”

“Why should I bother to say anything.” He shrugged. “Only I would like to know where you’re going that you have to be so secret about it.”

“As long as you’re such a good sport about it, I’ll tell you,” Elinor confided in a low and confidential tone, her glance flung hurriedly toward the door. “It’s Templeton Druid’s birthday, and he’s giving a little dinner in his apartment after the show. It’s going to be a jolly little affair and I so wanted to go. I knew I could never get out that late, so I’m going to spend the evening with Rosebud Greely and leave there in time to go to Templeton’s. I told mother I was going to Nell’s, because she likes her the best of all my girl friends.”

“And how will you explain getting in so late from a dinner,” Howard inquired.

“Mother won’t have any idea as to the time I get in,” she answered quickly. “She’ll be in bed—and if by any chance she should be up—leave it to me to think of something to say.”

“Well, just the same, Sis, I don’t like it.” Howard fairly growled.

“*You* don’t like it,” she laughed heartily. “Well of all things—since when do I have to cater to your likes and dislikes?”

“I know Templeton Druid pretty well,” he answered. “He’s a good bit of a rotter, and I don’t like to see my sister get mixed up with him.”

“Why, Howard! When I told you I knew him, you said he was a good friend of yours, and one of the finest fellows you knew—didn’t you?” she asked spiritedly.

“Yes; but I didn’t think you would fall for him like this. He chases after every girl he meets.”

“That isn’t true,” Elinor flared. “It’s the girls who run after him. Why, you’d be surprised if you only knew how many women in our own set write to him.”

“Yes,” Howard sneered, “and I suppose he tells you about them, or probably shows you their letters. That ought to show you just what kind of a fellow he is.”

“At any rate,” she assured him, “I’d be willing to wager you one thing. He’d prove a better friend than you are. He wouldn’t knock you—behind your back.”

“I didn’t mean to knock him.” Her brother hastened to vindicate himself, “and I wouldn’t to anyone else; but you’re my sister, and it’s my duty to warn you.”

Elinor smiled as she replied with sarcasm: “This sudden splurge of brotherly devotion is really touching, Howard. It’s a pity you developed it so late in life.”

“It’s true we’ve never been very close to one another since we were kids, but just the same,” he frowned, “I’ll not stand for any fellow making a fool of you.”

“Don’t worry about me, old dear! I’m quite capable of taking care of myself any old time!”

“All right, have it your own way!” was the brother’s retort, settling down behind his paper with an apparent indifference as though he had lost all interest and was dismissing the subject. “But,” and he peered over the sheet he turned to favor her with a brotherly frown as he shot out his advice. “But when something happens to you, remember I warned you, and—Watch Your Step!”

“Oh, mind your own business!” snapped Elinor, as she threw her wrap about her and hurried away.

She was furiously angry, as she thought about Howard's nerve, as she termed it, for daring to attempt to interfere with her. Now, she supposed, he was going to try to enact the rôle of the protecting brother and make things more difficult for her than ever. She just wouldn't have it!

The hot tears gushed to her eyes. Things in her home were disagreeable enough without having this new discordant element to contend with. Templeton must marry her soon and take her away from it all. She would speak to him this very night!

CHAPTER XII

In classifying Howard Benton as a ne'er-do-well his father had not been altogether right. So much of the young man's training was responsible for the recklessness which was making his name a by-word even among his own sort, accustomed as they were themselves to *outré* performances. Nor was his unwillingness to work congenital, but only that he had been led to believe that the son of his father—the son of Hugh Benton, Wall Street magnate—was expected to lead an idle life. What was the good of so much money if it was not to be spent?

But in spite of Howard's wild life, there was something underlying it all that would, if he had admitted it, proclaimed him the son of his mother also, and there was not a little of Marjorie's Puritanism lying dormant in the subconsciousness of her son. Howard's reaction now to what his sister had told him of where she was going and her admission of the deception she had practiced in order to do as she pleased rather amazed him, as much as the facts themselves disturbed him. Who was he, he thought, to censor anyone? But with Druid it was different. Elinor was his sister. It was his duty to see that she was not led into anything or any place where harm could reach her. He had been right in telling her he knew all about Templeton Druid and the manner of man the actor was. His fine eyebrows knit in perplexity as he considered the matter. It would not do to let Elinor go on. Quite fully he realized that. But equally well he realized that no word of his would in the least turn her from the path she had chosen. It was obviously a case where he would have to play tale bearer, no matter how angry his sister might be.

He crunched out the lighted end of his cigarette with a force that showed his mind made up, rose and crossed the room.

"Griggs!" he called down the hallway. "Is dad upstairs?"

"No, Mr. Howard," was the reply. "Mr. Benton didn't come home for dinner—I believe he said he would remain at the club."

Howard turned in the direction of his mother's room. But before he had gone many steps thought better of it and turned about, muttering to himself.

"No, she wouldn't understand—I'll see dad to-morrow."

Nell Thurston's jolly and interesting companionship drove all thoughts of Elinor from his mind, and it was not until they were seated in The Claridge, having dinner, that he was unexpectedly reminded of her again.

“I feel so wonderfully independent to-night,” Nell laughed. “Just imagine, this is the first time I have ever been out with a gentleman unchaperoned; but mother and dad, having known you ever since you were a youngster, feel toward you as if you were my brother.”

“Well, I sure do feel complimented to think they have confidence enough in me to trust me with their precious child,” he rejoined laughingly. “I didn’t know your folks went in so much for all this propriety stuff.”

“Mother’s not nearly as strict as dad. I could reason with her easily,” she sighed, “but dad is so set in his ideas.”

“Isn’t that funny? It’s just the reverse in our family. Dad’s dead easy—it’s mother who is the difficult one.”

“Oh—I know—Elinor’s talked enough about it,” Nell replied. “Your mother may have her peculiarities, but just the same, I admire her, because she has the courage to stand by her convictions. By the way, how does she feel about Elinor and Templeton Druid—or doesn’t she know about him yet?”

“Why, what is there to know about Elinor and Druid?” Howard turned to face her, as surprised as he was anxious.

“Heavens! I hope I haven’t put my foot into it!” Nell pursed up her lips, and gave her attention to her *hors d’œuvre*. “I thought you surely knew! Isn’t he a particular friend of yours?”

“Know *what*?” he demanded. There was a grimness in the boy’s tone that worried the girl.

“What’s the excitement?” she answered crossly. “Gracious, you don’t have to shout at me like that. There isn’t anything dreadful to know, only that Elinor and Templeton are going about together a great deal, and that she’s simply mad about him.”

“I hadn’t even an idea that they were seeing each other until this evening,” he replied, and then he told her about the argument he had had with Elinor just before she went out.

“What’s the matter with the little fool?” Nell demanded angrily. “Wouldn’t you think if she were going to use me as an excuse to get out, she’d at least have the decency to tell me about it. Supposing your mother should take a notion to call up my house—she’d be bound to find out.”

“Mother will never think of calling your house,” he assured her. “She’ll be in bed by nine o’clock. There isn’t any reason why she should suspect Elinor of not dining with you, is there?”

“No—none that I know of—but just the same you never can tell what might happen. I’ll warn Elinor to-morrow never to use my name again unless she is willing to take me into her confidence in advance so that I can at least be prepared to meet an emergency, should it arrive.”

“That won’t be necessary, Nell,” Howard said quickly. “I’ll see that Elinor doesn’t meet him after to-night!” The tight line of his lips as he made his affirmation showed that Howard Benton meant what he said.

At the theater later, his mind was miles away. Somehow, he couldn’t rid his thoughts of Elinor. As soon as he had taken Nell home, he ordered the taxi to return to town and take him to the club. He would probably find his father there, and he would tell him without delay about these clandestine meetings.

But Howard Benton did not find his father at his club. He found friends, though, and while he was enjoying his drinks with them could he have seen and heard his father at that hour, he would have had more to disturb him over cataclysms imminent in his own family than he was disturbed by his sister’s friendship for the Broadway prodigal Druid.

For him, Hugh Benton had returned home early.

“Griggs,” he ordered, as the man took his hat and stick, “will you go to Mrs. Benton’s room and ask her please to come to me in the library?”

As he waited for her, he fidgeted uneasily. This night, he believed was to be a great climax in his life. He wondered how Marjorie would act, how she would feel (he could not, even in his selfishness engendered and nurtured by Geraldine DeLacy through the past weeks keep from one thought of this kind)—what she would say. Oh, well, he might as well make up his mind that whatever she would say it would be unpleasant. But it would be for the last time. So thoroughly had his selfish desires gained a hold on the man who had once been so stanch and upright that the time had come when he could wait no longer. But just how much of his impatience was due to the subtle urging of Geraldine DeLacy even he did not know. So he waited nervously, picking up a book here, an ornament there, examining the intricacies of the carved woodwork during what seemed the unconscionable time it took Marjorie to appear.

But his wife had not kept him waiting. Instead, so unusual had been the request that Griggs purveyed to her that she rose at once, placed the book she had been reading on the table, and hurried down.

Hugh lost no time. He did not mean to mince matters in this interview.

“Marjorie,” he began at once when she stood before him inquiringly. “I’ll not keep you long. What I have to say may be said quickly, but the time

has come to say it and I hope you'll be reasonable."

Marjorie sat down quietly. "Yes, Hugh," she replied, outwardly calm enough, but seized with a nervous inward trembling.

Hugh dropped the cigar he had been picking to pieces, crossed over and stood facing her, his arms folded across his chest.

"Marjorie, you know just as well as I do," he went directly to the point, "that you and I haven't been congenial for a very long time."

"I tried to remedy it, though, Hugh," she answered quickly, "only a short time ago, but you refused to meet me even half way."

Her husband's brows contracted in annoyance.

"I told you at that time that it was entirely too late," was his impatient comment. "Your years of indifference have killed something inside of me that nothing can ever bring to life again."

"I—I don't understand," she ventured feebly, and the sobs she had sought to hold back shook her slender frame. The sight but annoyed the man the more.

"Please refrain from creating a scene," he admonished coldly. "It will not in the least facilitate matters."

Hopeless as she felt it in her innermost being to be, Marjorie Benton felt that she must struggle with all her might through one other battle in an effort to keep her husband—he who was all in the world to her, though he so little realized it.

She looked up at him, her hands clasped tightly for self-control (Hugh always did so dislike tears, she remembered), her eyes pleading.

"Surely, Hugh dear," she begged, "you cannot mean what you are saying! You cannot mean that your love for me is so wholly dead—why, think of all the years—" Hugh turned his face indifferently away—"no small thing like different tastes and beliefs could make them count for nothing, I know—Oh, Hugh!" and a wail crept into the pleading voice, "can it be—was I right after all? Is it—is it—that—woman?"

Hugh Benton kicked at the rug under his feet. He could not bring himself at first to look into the face of his suffering wife. Then his shoulders straightened and his level glance came to meet her defiantly. His words were cold, calm.

"If you are referring to Mrs. DeLacy," he observed, "then let me tell you, that you yourself were the indirect cause of forcing me into the realization of all that she meant to me."

"You expect me to believe that, Hugh?" There was a suggestion of a sneer on her drawn lips.

"Believe it, or not, as you please," he answered nonchalantly, "but up to the afternoon when you took it upon yourself so unjustly to insult her, I had merely liked and admired Mrs. DeLacy."

"Indeed! I am consumed with curiosity to know just how *I* happened to play the rôle of Cupid in your love affair?" Marjorie Benton's dignity was coming to her aid.

"Sarcasm won't succeed in getting us anywhere, Marjorie," was Hugh's stern comment. "Yours has lost the power to sting me in the least. But if you wish to know, after you had treated Mrs. DeLacy so shamefully, I called upon her the following evening, determined to offer some excuse for you," he went on serenely. "It was then that we discovered for the first time our exact sentiments toward one another."

"How delightfully romantic!" The wife laughed hysterically. "You—you really are foolish enough to think she cares for you? You are a rich man, Hugh."

His impatience increased. "Please permit me to be the judge," he advised, in a satisfied manner. "I want to be perfectly frank and honest with you, Marjorie—that is why I have stated the absolute truth to you."

She shook her head as she replied bitterly: "You are indeed kind to me."

"I don't want to be cruel, but I see that you refuse to permit me to be anything else," he snapped impatiently. "The problem is this: I love her! What are you going to do about it?"

"What do you expect me to do?" She shuddered and closed her eyes.

"Well, I thought—perhaps—" He found it a difficult thing to say in spite of himself, "couldn't we—er—come to some agreement, say, whereby you would consent to a—a divorce?"

"A—a divorce—Oh—no—no—I don't believe in divorce!" Marjorie Benton's voice rose hysterically. But her husband was not to be swayed from his purpose.

"But surely, Marjorie," he reasoned, "you wouldn't care to continue living under the same roof with me—knowing that I love—another woman?"

"Have you thought of the children, at all?" She grasped at the suggestion of the dreadful scandal this thing would be bound to create, knowing as she did, Hugh's horror of anything of the sort.

Parrot-like, Hugh Benton repeated the exact words of Geraldine DeLacy as she had expounded her philosophy of life to him, but had anyone told him that he was so swayed into unconscious repetition, he would have denied it with indignation. Hugh Benton was fond of declaring he was a man with a mind of his own. So, at the reference to his children, he turned and told her with calm dignity:

“For once in my life I am thinking only of myself and my *own* happiness, Marjorie. Up to now I have always considered others, but I can’t see that it has brought me very much.”

“And yet I can remember you telling me,” she hastened to remind him, “that the only real happiness in life could be derived through helping others.”

“If I said that, it must have been a great many years ago—before I became disillusioned.” The retort was bitter.

Marjorie Benton rose and herself stooped to pick up the shredded handkerchief she had dropped. There was a hauteur in her manner that conveyed her belief that humiliation had gone far enough. She must put an end to the scene before her tautened nerves snapped and she became a driveling suppliant at the feet of the husband who was so cruelly telling her he had done with her—that he loved another.

“Don’t you think we’ve said enough for one evening, Hugh?” she queried. “We don’t appear to be getting anywhere, as you put it, and—and I might as well tell you,” and the emphasis of her utterance left no room for doubt, “I will never consent to a divorce! Treat me as you please—do anything you please—I shall always remain Mrs. Hugh Benton!”

She started to brush by him, but he caught roughly at her arm as she swept by. She stopped, startled at the fury in his face.

“But that is so thoroughly unreasonable,” he urged querulously. “You haven’t cared for me in years. You want to hold me now, just because someone else has come into my life.”

“Suppose I were to tell you that I *do* care for you. What then?” she asked slowly, contemplatively.

“I shouldn’t believe you! Oh, Marjorie, please listen to me. Doesn’t it seem foolish to wreck both of our lives? I intend being more than fair with you. I will settle three-quarters of my fortune upon you.”

Marjorie’s lips curved in a slow smile. “And what does Mrs. DeLacy say to that?” was her query.

“Why we haven’t even discussed such a thing.”

“Well, then, go to her,” she commanded, “tell her exactly just what you propose doing, and see if the fervor of her devotion remains the same.”

“And if it does—what then?”

“I will be reasonable enough to acknowledge that I have misjudged that—er—Mrs. DeLacy.”

“And what will you do?” he asked eagerly.

She faced him proudly: “I will still remain—Mrs. Hugh Benton.”

Hugh fairly glared as his wife swept triumphantly toward the door. “So that is your attitude, is it?” he frothed, and he had reached the open portal before her. From outside, he hurled back his ultimatum. “Well, then, I shall be forced to use other methods. I am determined to gain my freedom, and you can rest assured I will manage it in spite of you!”

Still fighting for the dignity and self-control that had deserted her, Marjorie Benton stood still where he had left her for moments, her hand pressed to her heart. The tension broke. She swayed back and forth, staggering to the davenport. In its comforting depths she sank down, sobbing hysterically.

“Oh, I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it,” she moaned over and over again. Fully, completely, now that she was about to lose her husband, Marjorie Benton realized how much she loved him. What a fool she had been to allow her pride and her silly ambitions to come between them. Her thoughts traveled back over the years to the time she was a happy wife and mother in her humble little cottage. She buried her head in the pillows, endeavoring to crush out the memories—memories that burned and scarred. She thought her brain on fire. With futile fists she beat the air, her one moan that this thing could not be true.

In a frenzy she sprang to her feet and began to pace the floor. Up and down—up and down—she walked like an animal at bay, trying to peer into the darkness that seemed stretched before her. There might be years—God!—think of it!—Years of loneliness and heartaches waiting for her!

Thoroughly exhausted, physically and mentally, she sat down heavily. Her brain refused to think any longer. Hot, bitter tears rained down her cheeks, and then, without the slightest warning, she began to laugh, at first almost inaudibly, then loud and wildly. What a huge joke life had seen fit to play upon her. She had passed years of unhappiness without uttering a single protest, sacrificing everything for her children, and it had brought her—this!

In the hallway outside, Griggs heard the strange cachinnations. He came running in.

“What is it, Mrs. Benton?” he inquired anxiously.

“Why—why—” she began, looking at him in bewilderment.

“You’re here all alone, and laughing so. Are you ill?”

“Ill? Why no—I’m all right. Only something struck me as being very funny. We don’t have to read the comic sections of the papers, Griggs. All we have to do is look for the comedy in our own lives.”

“Yes—Madame—I suppose so. But don’t you think you had better let me send for Marie? She will help you to your room. You are——”

“No, Griggs, I’ll pull myself together in a moment, and I’m not going to my room. I shall wait here until Miss Elinor or Mr. Howard come in.”

“But it is only ten-thirty,” Griggs protested, “and they may not come for hours.”

“Miss Elinor is bound to come in early. She is at the Thurstons’. Just put another log on the fire, and I’ll wait.”

“Very well, Madame,” Griggs attended to the fire, and left the room, turning as he reached the door. “I shall be just outside should you wish me.”

“Thank you, Griggs,” she murmured, gazing intently into the flames.

With only a dulled pain she was able to visualize what Hugh was doing, where he had gone since he left her. Her instinct told her he had gone straight to Geraldine DeLacy. And, right as is so often the case with a woman who loves, Marjorie Benton’s instinct had been right.

Straight as a homing pigeon, the infatuated man had rushed from the room where he had had his aggravating and unsatisfactory interview with his wife, and, waiting long enough only to telephone to be sure that she was in, he had hurried to the woman who had taken his wife’s place in his affections. No thought of the pain of the woman he had left behind. Only an eagerness to be with the new love—to hear her soft voice whisper words of love and compassion, to tell him there was nought else in the world beside their love, to reassure him he had been right.

Geraldine DeLacy, alone, as she told him, since the Thurstons were in Atlantic City and Nell, the daughter of the house, was out with Hugh’s own son, carefully hung up the receiver after her telephonic interview and rushed to arrange her hair and to slip into a becoming negligee. From Hugh’s tone, she knew that something was wrong. She did not need his further assurance that he was “frightfully upset,” but she shrewdly suspected the reason for his being so.

She had known right along that Marjorie would prove difficult, but Hugh had been so sure of being able to reason with her. “Like all men,” she

thought impatiently, "he believes he can handle any situation. Hmph! Men!" There was a deep sarcasm in the gesture with which she shook out a clinging flounce. One thing she was assured of, however. She must be cautious and most tactful in everything she said to him, as he would probably be in a trying mood.

She met him with an encouraging smile: "What has happened, dear? I have been terribly worried about you. You seem so unnerved!"

"Darling!" he replied. "My one comfort in a comfortless world!" He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. "I've been through a dreadful scene—I just had to come to you to talk it over."

"There, there," she soothed him, "everything is bound to be all right. Sit here beside me and tell me all about it."

"Well—I went to Marjorie to-night, as we discussed doing,"—Geraldine smiled inwardly when she remembered who it was who had suggested the interview,—“and asked her to divorce me.”

"Yes—and—?" The young widow's hand trembled beneath his.

Hugh threw out his hands impatiently. "She positively refuses to give me my freedom, and you know that I, myself, haven't a chance in the world of obtaining it."

"What did she say—what reasons did she give?" Geraldine purred softly to hide her chagrin.

"Oh, she used every argument available," was the despairing reply. "Said she loved me and was anxious to start life anew. Then she brought up the children—their futures, and what this scandal would mean to them."

"Perhaps you went about it in the wrong way. You may have been harsh when you should have been gentle," she ventured.

"I tried hard to control myself and reason with her, and I didn't actually lose my temper until she intimated that you didn't care about me—it was only my money."

"How dared she say that?" Geraldine sat up indignantly. "What have I ever done that has given her the right to consider me mercenary?"

"It was in answer to a proposition of mine."

"What was it?" She leaned toward him anxiously.

"I tried to—to bribe her," he confessed, somewhat shamefully. "I offered to settle a—a very large amount upon her, if she would consent to free me. She jumped up excitedly and asked me what you had to say to that."

"Yes—yes—and——?"

“I told her I hadn’t even discussed it with you, and then she said I should go to you and tell you what I proposed doing, and I should soon see whether or not your devotion remained the same.”

“So that is her opinion of me?” Geraldine DeLacy’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Well, you can tell her from me—that I’d marry you to-morrow, Hugh Benton, if you hadn’t a dollar in the world!”

“My own darling!” he exclaimed, as his arms went out and he held her close to him. “I knew it—I knew it.”

She lay in his arms passively submitting to his caresses, but inwardly she boiled with rage. So Marjorie Benton thought she could spoil her game, did she! Well—they should see—they should see! The cleverest one in this case would have the last laugh.

“I am so grateful for your wonderful love, dear,” he whispered, “and had Marjorie considered my proposition, I should still have plenty left with which to surround you with all the luxury you so richly deserve.”

“Oh,” she breathed, “as if that mattered!” But the light in her eyes shone radiantly as a weight of lead dropped from her heart.

“I shall have a talk with my attorney to-morrow, and see what he advises,” Hugh assured her. “There must be some way to go about this thing.”

“Perhaps when you tell your wife that it is not your money I care about, as she seems to think, she may reconsider her decision.”

“My dear, I wouldn’t allow her to think for a moment that I had even mentioned her miserable suspicions to you.” He pulled out his watch. “It is growing late and I must hurry along before Nell and Howard return. I’ll telephone you to-morrow. Good-night, dearest.”

She clung to him tenderly: “You are so strong and forceful,” was her farewell, “your arms seem like a haven of refuge.”

He felt that he could not bear to return home, so he ordered his chauffeur to drive to one of his clubs. Never again would he return home until he and Marjorie had reached some sort of compromise.

CHAPTER XIII

Howard Benton's wait for his father had been as futile as it was long. At first he had sat slumped in a chair grumpily, watching the door impatiently for each new arrival, his whole attention given to this new emotion of his, this wakening to duty and his new sense of responsibility toward his sister. Where in the world could his dad be? He ought to be there right then listening to what he, Howard, had to divulge. No telling what Elinor was doing by now! She was such a silly—such a headstrong——

The clap of Woods Thorndyke's hand on his shoulder in no light fashion awakened him from his reverie.

"Come out of it, old top!" exclaimed the newcomer cheerily. "What's on the youngster's mind? Come on up to the card room. One of the chaps has some of his dad's best private stock and you'll just fit in for a rubber!"

Howard shook his head.

"No, thanks, Thorn, old boy," he declared, "no time for cards to-night—got an engagement—with my own dad!"

"Oh, come on," urged the other, "you can get your call down any old time, and a nice little game—one rubber——"

But the Benton heir was firm about one thing. His head shake was more decided than ever.

"No—nary a rub——" he declared with positiveness, "but," and he wavered a little as he eyed his companion. Really, he began to feel sorry for himself. What right did Elinor have to get him all wrought up like this. He felt that by now he needed, most likely deserved, a drink. "But," he went on brightening a little, "I believe I could use a little shot or so!"

And one or two in that congenial company of his boon companions led to more and more, until by two o'clock he had quite forgotten all about Elinor, forgotten many things, in fact, save his determination not to enter a card game which might last interminable hours. Somewhere in his hazy consciousness it was borne in on him that he had an important engagement with his father, but he could not just think what it was about.

He made a trip to the smoking room and learned that his father had neither been seen nor heard from. Oh, well, whatever it was he was going to talk to dad about would have to wait. He was tired; he was going home.

He started for the hat room. Just outside the door two chaps were talking. Both of them he knew well, but the "Hello" he had almost hurled at them was frozen on his lips at a name he heard. In a twinkling the haziness disappeared. He knew why he had been waiting. He stepped back into the shadow of a potted palm and listened without compunction.

"Elinor Benton!" was the exclamation he heard. "You can't be serious. She'd never fall for that fourflusher, Druid."

"But I tell you they're everywhere together," the other replied. "I meet them driving in the park nearly every day, she at the wheel, and often his arm about her. I've seen them coming out of inns and roadhouses, rather questionable ones too—if you'll take it from me. I'm surprised her people stand for it."

"Perhaps they don't know anything about it, and if they do, they may look upon it as a harmless flirtation."

"Harmless flirtation!" The man laughed. "Knowing Druid as well as you do, I can't see how you could ever imagine a flirtation with him harmless."

"Oh—well then," came the answer, "maybe he intends to marry her. He could do a lot worse, you know, than to fall in for some of the Benton money."

"I agree with you, and no doubt he does too, but I know it will take some time before he is free. His wife is suing him for divorce now."

"What!" the other exclaimed. "I never knew he had a wife."

"It isn't generally known for business reasons. Those theater chappies consider him a more profitable investment unmarried. I happen to know, though, that he married a little chorus girl about six years ago somewhere in the Middle West."

"Where is she now?"

"They couldn't get along together, so,"—and outspread hands finished the sentence. "She's out on the Coast now, working in pictures, and is interested in someone else—hence, the divorce proceedings."

Howard stepped forth from his place of concealment. His eyes blazed like coals of fire in his gray face.

"Benton!" came the disturbed exclamation.

"'Sall right, boys." He smiled feebly. "You didn't know I was there."

"Oh—I'm sorry, Benton," Frank Crimmins assured him earnestly as he stepped forward. "I feel like a silly gossiping woman. Please don't pay any attention to what I've said."

“On the contrary, I think you’ve done me a service. You see, I hadn’t any idea that Druid was a married man.”

“Didn’t you know that he has been rather friendly with your sister?”

“The news of his friendship for my sister has come to me only to-night through three different sources. Now, I am going to get it directly from his own lips,” he announced ominously.

Crimmins endeavored to restrain him: “Wait a minute, Benton, don’t make a fool of yourself! You’re not in a condition to see anyone right now—wait until to-morrow.”

“I’m going now.” He brushed aside the friendly detaining hand and demanded his things from the coat-boy. “I’ll show him that he can’t juggle with my sister’s reputation and get away with it.”

“The hot-headed young idiot,” Crimmins said, as Howard rushed from the club. “I suppose he’ll go up to Druid’s and attempt to mop up the place with him.”

“Feel sorry for him if he does,” the other replied with a meaning grin. “He’ll get the worst of it—Druid’s some athlete.”

Crimmins was still conscience-stricken. “Perhaps we should have gone with him?” he suggested.

“Nonsense! Take my advice and always keep out of other people’s quarrels. Come on, have another ball, and then I’m going to turn in.”

It was mid-night when Elinor Benton arrived at Templeton Druid’s studio apartment—a delightful hour, she thought, shivering deliciously, to be arriving anywhere, and unaccompanied. Since she had made her *début*, it was not at all unusual for her to be dancing in the small hours and twelve o’clock usually saw the top of the excitement. But always she had conventionally arrived at dance or reception or whatever gayety along with those of all her set at much more seasonable hours. Templeton and all his friends were so excitingly different. But still when she had thrown aside her ermine wrap with the solicitous aid of her hero himself, who did not neglect to give her arm an affectionate squeeze, she found herself, among the bizarre appointments of the actor’s home—and his astonishingly elated and at ease guests, a bit diffident and shy. But not for long. For an *ingénue*, Elinor Benton found she was able with great ease to adapt herself to the unfamiliar atmosphere. Perhaps it may have been something in the weird lighting effects; perhaps the subtle perfume of the Orient that rose in hazy fumes from swinging censers, the dim reflection of the lighted sconces on mirrors that made the restless guests seem figures in a pageant and far off, with eerie faces that so effectually drowned her diffidence and made her senses whirl

with abandon like the fumes of a heady wine. Or maybe it was the possessive, lover-like attitude of Templeton Druid himself that bade her throw aside stilted convention and become one of those with whom her hero surrounded himself. However, it may have been, Elinor Benton, débutante, at the end of ten minutes of her first visit to Templeton Druid's apartments might have been long a woman of the world, the stage world, which, until the time of his opportune recognition by Geraldine DeLacy had been the man's only world.

Introductions, had she but known it, were of no account in that assemblage, but Templeton Druid remembering her social training, did not dispense with them with his favored guest. To each, as he made the circle of the long studio room, he introduced her as "his dearest little friend"—not forgetting to add that she was the daughter of Hugh Benton, the financier.

Another round of cocktails was served. The somewhat blasé guests took heart. Dinner was announced, and the fun began to wage fast and furious. Elinor was enjoying every minute of it. Here was a party worth while, she thought. What a wonderful crowd of whole-hearted, happy-go-lucky people. And she would soon be one of them—after she and Templeton were married! She would give all sorts of dinners and parties, and invite this same crowd of charming, congenial people.

As befitted the most honored guest, she was seated next to her host at the table. At first he was discreetness personified in all his actions toward her. But as the dinner progressed and he imbibed more and more freely of the various wines the possession of which only he could have explained, he threw all caution to the winds. Openly he avowed his passion for her.

"I'm mad about you, darling," he whispered, bending his head close to her ear. "Each time I see you, I want you more and more for my very own."

Elinor listened with shining eyes.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, dear," she nodded, "because there's something I want to talk to you about. The most disagreeable thing has happened at home and——"

"Won't have you telling me disagreeable things on—my birthday." He hiccupped slightly. "Going to stop that pretty little mouth with kisses." And disregarding guests, appearances, he grabbed her to him to carry out his threat.

"Please—please, Templeton." She struggled to free herself, her face suffused with blushes. "Let me go! You embarrass me dreadfully! Don't you see everyone is looking at you."

“Let ’em look. What do I care? You’re my little girl—I love you, and I’m proud of it! So there—and there!” He caught the struggling girl with one arm, swung her from her chair, as he emphasized his words with fervent caresses.

With face suffused with scarlet, Elinor Benton drew herself from the arms of the man who had so publicly declared himself her lover. But as she glanced at Druid’s other guests, in full expectation of an embarrassing few moments, she was as much bewildered as surprised to see that the episode had passed unnoticed. Each was too intent on his or her own affairs. A small stream of wine flowed redly across the white cloth from its shattered goblet that had been overturned as Marie Shaw, a Follies girl, had over-reached herself in her attempt to bombard Giles Fellowes, her own pet press agent, who sat across the table with the centerpiece of orchids which now trailed, a bedraggled mess half down to the floor. Teddy Martin, a composer, who himself admitted he was a popular one, wanted to show off his latest hit. He tipped over his chair in his eagerness to reach the piano.

Harold Westley, handsome as a screen actor should be, danced over to Elinor and pulled her away from Templeton Druid.

“Come on,” he urged. “Teddy’s giving us a fox trot,” then, as Druid put out an unsteady protesting hand, he laughed at him: “Needn’t think, just because you’re one of those ‘appears, personally, himself’s’ that you can monopolize Miss Benton the whole evening!”

Before she realized it, Elinor felt herself whirled away in the movie actor’s arms.

“Some party—I’ll say,” he drawled. “Having a good time?”

“Wonderful,” she answered. “I’ve never been to anything like this before—it’s so different.”

“How do you mean—different?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s so free from restraint of any kind. Everyone does just as he pleases, and no one seems to think anything about it.”

He laughed heartily. “If you think this is free from restraint, you should have been here at the party Templeton gave a week ago! We had some night of it.”

“I—I know—” she stammered, trying to conceal her confusion, her heart thumping madly. “I couldn’t come that night on account of a previous engagement.”

“You missed one great time—but never mind,” he reassured her, “the night’s young yet, and you can’t tell how this will wind up—although there

doesn't begin to be the number of pretty babies that were here the other night. Why you're by far the one best bet in the room to-night," and he attempted to hold her closer. But at this all the girl's training rebelled. It was one thing for Templeton to—she was engaged to him—but for this unknown actor——

"I can't dance any more—I'm tired, and I believe the wine has gone to my head," she said weakly. She was angry, too, at what he had told her about Templeton.

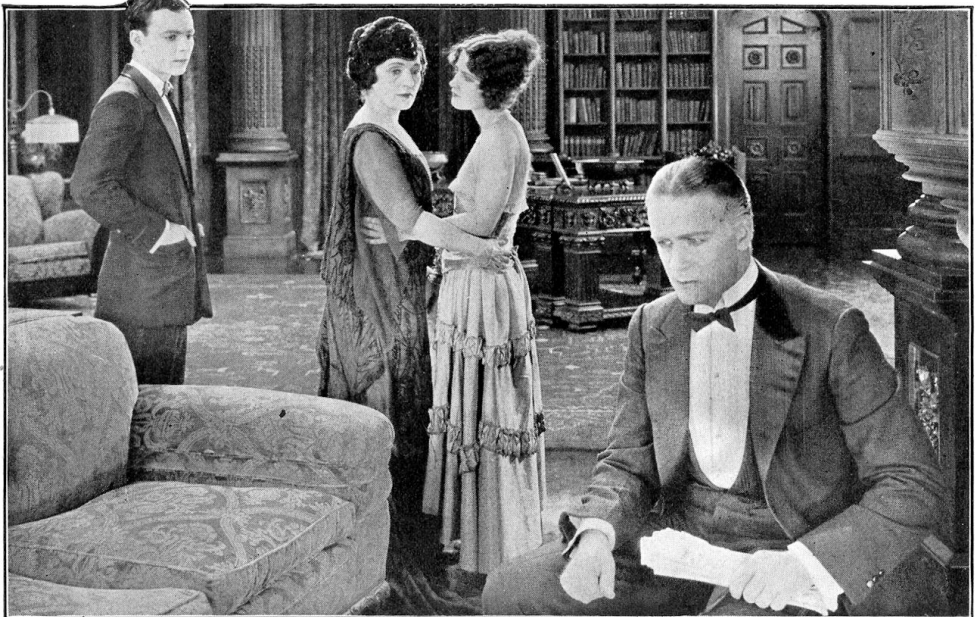
"Sit here," Westley said, leading her to a large chair in the corner, "and I'll bring you some black coffee—that'll fix you up all right."

As soon as he was out of sight, she looked around for Druid. As she caught his eye, she beckoned for him to come to her.

"Well, sweetness—did you have a nice dance?" he inquired, sitting on the arm of her chair. But she pushed him away from her, and faced him.

"You had a party here last week," she accused him furiously, "and there were a lot of girls present."

"Well—well—well! Who's been telling you the news?"



Marjorie Benton (Mary Alden) refuses to allow her daughter (Norma Shearer) to attend a roof-garden review.

(*"The Valley of Content"* screened as *"Pleasure Mad."*)

“Never mind who’s been telling me! I know it—that’s enough! I—I thought you were absolutely true to me, and now—you’ve broken my heart.” Her wail ended in a sob.

“Come now, Elinor, don’t be foolish and create a scene.” He looked around uneasily. The laugh would be on him if the bunch— “You know I love you, darling,” he added quickly, insinuatingly. “There isn’t another woman in the world who means anything to me.”

“Oh—if I could only believe you!” But the sobs still came. “I love you so! I’m insanely jealous of your every thought. When I think of you day after day—thrown in contact with so many beautiful and clever women, I am filled with the fear of someone coming between us—I couldn’t bear it now—I couldn’t, dear!”

“Listen to me, darling,” he whispered, gently drying her eyes with his daintly-perfumed handkerchief. “I love you and only you! Please remember that, and when you are my little wife——”

“When will that be, dear?” She looked up through her tears to ask anxiously.

“Soon—very soon—my own,” he murmured. Forgetting the hilarious, laughing merry-makers around her, conscious only of one thing—that she loved this man and wanted his comfort and assurance, Elinor Benton let him draw her into his arms, hold her close.

She clung to him passionately; his kisses she returned with wild abandon. Unnoticed, the pins slipped from her hair and it hung about her like a shower of gold, as she nestled in his arms.

There was a commotion at the door as someone swept by the valet and pulled aside the portieres. Elinor and Templeton looked up simultaneously.

Standing in the doorway, wild-eyed and white as death was Howard Benton!

By the time Howard had reached Druid’s apartments, he was seeing red. He refused to allow the hallboy to announce him. He was expected, he said. When Druid’s valet opened the door, he thrust him aside and made straight for the living room. It was the valet’s attempt to restrain him, and Howard’s persistency that caused the commotion that brought Elinor and Templeton Druid from their trance, caused them at glance upward to see him standing in the doorway.

“Howard!” Elinor could only gasp weakly.

“Hello, Howard,” Druid put Elinor out of his arms, and came forward, struggling to gain his self-control. “This is a surprise. Did you drop in to

wish me a happy birthday?” He held out his hand.

“No—damn you!” gritted the boy, as he brushed aside Druid’s hand. His lips drew back from his teeth in animal-like passion. “No! I came here to demand an explanation of you! And I’m—going—to—have—it!”

CHAPTER XIV

In the sudden hush that spread through the room, only the stertorous breathing of the angry young man who faced Templeton Druid could be heard. For just a moment after Howard spoke, Teddy Martin, at the piano, jangled out a bit of jazz, but it had the hollow sound that a popular song might have at a funeral. He whirled about on the piano bench as much astonished at the peculiar quiet as a man in different environment might have been had a bomb exploded at his feet. Marie Shaw stopped stock still, stunned into actual quietude for once, with skirt still uplifted in her unfinished pirouette.

Gradually, unconsciously, Druid's guests closed in about the two belligerent men to form a half circle. In the tenseness, each waited with bated breath for what next might happen. Howard Benton's attitude was unmistakable. He meant trouble.

Elinor was the first to gain control of herself. She ran to her brother and grabbed him by the arm.

"Howard!" she shrieked, vixenishly. "How dare you come in here like this! You're drunk! Go home at once! You wait until Dad hears of this——"

"You shut up!" He pushed her roughly aside. "You're a fine one to tell me I'm drunk! Look at you, with your hair hanging around you, and your clothes almost falling off—God!" He buried his face in his hands. "I never thought I should find my sister like this!"

Teddy Martin came forward quickly. "See here, Benton, you don't know what you're talking about. This is Druid's birthday, and we're having a little party. There isn't a thing wrong——"

"You can't make a fool of me!" he answered hotly. "Didn't I see her in his arms when I came in?"

"Well, supposing you did," Druid interrupted. "At an informal party like this, we don't stand on ceremony. This doesn't happen to be one of your—society functions," with deep sarcasm.

"Put on your things at once." Howard turned commandingly to Elinor. "I'll send you home in a taxi and then I'll come back and settle with him."

"But what if I don't feel like going home?" Elinor faced him furiously. "You've got your nerve to think you can humiliate me like this in front of

my friends.”

“Friends?” Howard sneered. “And I suppose this man,” pointing to Templeton and trembling as a man with ague, so eager was he to fasten his hands on the actor’s throat, “is your friend too?”

Elinor Benton drew herself up with all the dignity inherited from a haughty parentage. She looked at her brother, squarely, then defiantly about the half circle of watching silent people.

“He’s *more* than my friend,” Elinor announced haughtily, but with a touch of pride. “He is—my affianced husband!”

Living on sensation as most of her hearers did, proof against surprises in usual matters, still the simply-worded announcement of Elinor Benton was sufficient to cause jaws to drop, to cause glances to dart from one to the other at a statement that, to say the least, to most of them was startling. Then those glances came back to settle on the face of Templeton Druid—the glances of these people who knew him. What they saw was that his suave countenance had turned scarlet, and that his eyes wavered unsteadily as he, too, glanced stealthily around the room.

“How wonderfully interesting!” Howard’s sarcastic laugh rang out, “but don’t you think it would have been proper and more gentlemanly for him to have waited until he had disposed of his present wife before honoring you with his proposal?”

“His wife!” Elinor turned ghastly. “It isn’t true! Tell him it isn’t true—Templeton?”

“Just look at him!” Howard blazed. “You can read his answer in his face.”

“Well, I told you there was a matter of great importance I had to settle—before I could marry you—didn’t I?” Druid turned to Elinor almost fiercely.

“Yes—but a—wife—a wife!” Once more her wail turned to sobs, as her slender body was shaken in a gale of emotion, of chagrin.

Howard took a menacing step nearer Druid.

“You’ve played fast and loose with my sister’s affections in order to feed your disgusting vanity,” he began, chokingly. “You will——”

“Now you get out of here—you and your sister!” All of Druid’s polish dropped from him like a cloak. “I’ve taken about all I care to stand from you. If you think, for a moment, that you can come into my home and insult me in front of my guests, you’re mistaken! Your sister isn’t a baby—she’s capable of taking care of herself. In fact, I think she knows considerably more than you think.” He was sneeringly insinuating.

“You—you cad!” Unable further to hold himself in check, Howard sprang forward. “I’m going to give you the beating you so justly deserve.”

Westley took a step forward and turned aside the angry boy’s arm.

“Steady there, Benton,” Druid’s eyes flashed fire. “If you start anything with me, you’ll find more than you bargained for! You’re not my match in strength, and I don’t like to take advantage of a boy!”

With only the memory of Druid’s words to “get out,—you and your sister” ringing in her ears, and hurt unbelievably that they should have come from the man who but a moment before was softly voicing undying devotion to her, Elinor Benton attempted to interfere, to put an end to the sordid scene. She put her hand on Howard’s arm which he was still waving threateningly.

“Come on, Howard. Mr.—Mr. Druid is right. We have created enough disturbance here. I—I’m ready to go home with you,” she said with dignity.

“You—keep out of this!” Howard shook off her hand. His eyes blazed fire as he advanced on his enemy. “So I’m a boy, am I?” he sneered. “Well at least, I’m not a *coward* and I don’t make play-things of women.”

“Get out!” Druid thundered.

Howard’s answer was to pull off his coat, fling it on the floor and lunge forward with closed fists. Elinor screamed hysterically and fled to the corner of the room, covering her eyes with both trembling hands.

But Druid was not caught off his defense. He caught Howard’s fists in his hands and there was a triumphant light in his eyes as he hissed between closed teeth: “Very well, you damned fool! If you’re bound on fighting, I’ll give you a thrashing you’ll not forget in a hurry.”

Men guests, less befuddled, sprang forward protestingly, but he waved them back dramatically, as he pulled off his coat.

“All of you keep out of this. My patience has been tried beyond all endurance, and this child,” he paused just the right length of time for his dramatic taunt, “must be taught a lesson!” The sneer accompanying the words curled back his lips over the perfect teeth.

It only took Druid a few seconds to discover that he was up against anything but a novice. Howard had taken a special course of pugilistic training besides being a born athlete. In college he had carried off first honors in every contest. Druid was no mean athlete himself and not loth to exploit his prowess, but he depended too much on brute strength, a strength his evening’s debauch had much weakened. He found himself no match for

Howard's cleverness—taught him by one of the most scientific men in the ring.

Templeton Druid was getting the worst of it. That was plain. He had been down twice and was terribly groggy. Both men were bleeding profusely and indiscriminately over the room which looked as if a cyclone had struck it.

A half stifled, hysterical shriek at some telling bloody blow from one of the women, a groan, or muffled mumble of admiration from the men guests who were watching as eagerly as at any mill in the padded ring was all that could be heard above the labored breathing of the battlers, save the steady hysterical sobbing of Elinor Benton from her corner. Rugs were torn up, furniture overturned, priceless bric-a-brac fell with a crash that added to the general ensemble; the grinning Buddha toppled from his pedestal and crashed into a thousand pieces, his grin alone looking up from the floor in the midst of his shattered features.

Templeton Druid dropped to the floor with finality. Men sprang forward, thinking it was the end, when slowly he began to pull himself up again. His hand went to his hip-pocket, and he pulled forth a small revolver. Howard saw it at the moment its shine appeared and leapt for it.

A struggle—more furious than ever for a moment. A shot rang out.

Templeton Druid staggered, threw his hands in the air, and fell, face downward on the torn, blood-stained Persian rug.

Howard Benton stood over the crumpled figure on the rug with the shining revolver in his hand. He looked at it half understandingly, as though it were a strange thing he had never seen before—that he could not recognize. Then it dropped from his nerveless fingers with a clatter among the pieces of the broken Buddha. His eyes shifted aimlessly about, to fix themselves once more on the huddled figure at his feet.

“My God!” he gasped. “I’ve killed him!”

In the speechless pause, Elinor Benton's shrieks rent the air wildly. She staggered from her corner, throwing aside hands that with kindly intent sought to restrain her, to fall prone on the still form on the floor, her gown drinking in the crimson that flowed out darkly across the polished floor.

“Oh, my darling! Speak to me!” she moaned and pleaded. “I don't care for anyone in the world! I love you! Oh—speak to me! Speak to me!”

The quiet that had reigned during the encounter became turmoil. Trembling, wild-eyed, Druid's valet's white face appeared at the door. Westley rushed to him.

“Is there a doctor in the building?” he howled.

The man’s teeth chattered as his shuddering glance took in the scene.

“Yes, sir,” he stuttered. “On the ground floor.”

“Get him!” commanded the movie actor.

Women rushed to get wraps, looking about with anxious eyes for the opportunity of making cautious exits. Only Elinor Benton seemed not to think of escape as she wept over the still figure of the man on the floor. But that escape was out of the question was obvious in but a moment when the apartment began to fill with excited, curious tenants who had heard the shot and crowded forward morbidly to see what was going on.

Orders, suggestions, flew backward and forward. Apparently the only calm person in the apartment was Howard Benton. He had walked unseeingly to a bench at one side of the room and dropped on it. He was too stunned to speak. Attempts to speak to him were met with a dazed incomprehension.

Teddy Martin touched him on the shoulder and offered: “I’m sorry, Benton. Is there anything I can do for you?”

The not unkindly touch helped to bring him out of himself.

“Is he—is he—dead—or only wounded?” he asked quietly.

“We don’t know yet,” Martin answered. “The doctor will be here in a minute, and then we will find out. Here he is now.”

Doctor Adams looked on in surprise while one of the girls pulled Elinor away from Druid, trying to make the hysterical girl understand that the doctor had arrived.

“What’s happened here?” the medical man inquired brusquely.

Harold Westley stepped forward. “Two men had a quarrel,” he informed, “and one of them was shot—accidentally.”

“Humph! Looks more like a free-for-all fight,” the doctor answered, glancing around the room. He bent over the still form; turned him over. His examination lasted but a few seconds.

“Dead,” he announced solemnly. “A clean shot through the heart—died instantaneously.”

“No! No!” Elinor moaned, attempting to rush forward again.

“Are you his wife?” the doctor inquired more gently.

Elinor shook her head, but sobs wracked her.

“Oh—well—it is my duty to inform the authorities. Of course, you know no one must leave before their arrival?” He rose from beside the body.

Howard reached for the only friendly hand outheld to him and gripped it.

“Martin,” he asked, “will you try to locate my father? Call the club, and if he isn’t there, try our home. If you get him, give him an idea of what had happened, and ask him to come to me.”

“I’ll do all that I can,” Teddy assured him, and hurried out to the telephone.

He was fortunate in locating Hugh Benton at the Club, catching him just as he was leaving for home. In a very few moments, he gave him a brief outline of the tragic affair.

“I—I’ll be over at once,” said the father in a choked voice. The catastrophe stunned him. He could barely make himself understood, but he added, as assurance for Howard: “I’m going to try to reach my attorney and have him go with me.”

But it was an old and broken man who hung up the telephone and clung to the table for support as he swayed, fighting for courage to carry him through the ordeal he was called on to face—fighting for immediate strength to telephone the man on whom he must rely for present aid.

Howard was pacing nervously up and down, when his father and John Hammond, the celebrated attorney, arrived at the scene of the tragedy. He went to his father manfully.

“I’m terribly sorry, Dad, to have caused this trouble,” he apologized, “but I—I couldn’t help it. The revolver was discharged accidentally. He—he was a coward to the end—he couldn’t even—fight fair.”

“Tell me the entire thing, Howard; just what brought you here, and how it happened.” Mr. Hammond said quietly.

Howard told it all as clearly as he could remember. Once or twice the lawyer interrupted him to ask a question, or to have him make some point a little more definite. At the conclusion, he turned to Hugh.

“This looks like a simple case of self-defense, Benton,” he said, and his tone and off-hand manner gave rising hope to father and son. “The boy came here to protect his sister’s good name—a fight ensued, Druid pulled his revolver—there are witnesses enough here to attest that,” looking about at the sadly morose lot who so short a time before had been merry-makers. “The boy secured possession of it—it was discharged accidentally, or at the worst, discharged in self-defense.”

“Yes—but think of the scandal—” Hugh was not altogether appeased.

“That is something we cannot help,” the lawyer replied as his jaws snapped shut. “Be grateful to think you can save the boy! There are a certain

amount of preliminaries necessary to go through, and then he can go home with you. Just a moment, before we go—I want to speak to these men,” indicating a couple of officers and detectives who had entered the room.

“I must arrange to send Elinor home.” Hugh mentioned his daughter for the first time, although the sight of her, when he had come into the room had almost taken the breath from his body.

It was a brilliant commentary on Hugh Benton’s attitude of mind that, as he sat before the telephone at this crisis in his life, maneuvering to save both son and daughter as well as to drown out as much as possible of the scandal that must ensue, that not even for one moment did he think of calling his wife to his aid. As he sat there nervously jangling the hook up and down, it was Geraldine DeLacy who was going through his mind. Geraldine! She loved him! She would come to him—would help him through. Only for a moment did the vision of Marjorie cross his mind, and then he dismissed her with a queer wry smile. In this, his time of trouble, he wanted Geraldine. To the woman he loved, and to her only, would he entrust his foolish daughter.

The sleeping butler at the Thurston home was not easily roused to answer the telephone. Even then, Benton had a difficult time in persuading him his business was of the most vital importance, and that he must awaken Mrs. DeLacy.

It seemed ages before a sleepy voice answered him. “Why—Hugh! What on earth do you mean at this hour in the morning. Why——”

“Geraldine, a *terrible* thing has happened!” The man’s voice trembled with earnestness. “I cannot tell you over the ’phone,” he went on, “but I want you to dress as quickly as you can, jump in a taxi and come here at once.” He gave her the address of the apartment.

“What place is that—and what do you want me for—what has happened?” she inquired in one breath.

“I can’t go into details now—all I can tell you is that Howard has killed—Templeton Druid. Don’t ask any questions—just come to me, dear—I need you.” His voice quivered more unmistakably.

“Great heavens!” For once Geraldine was all but speechless as she gasped. “I—I’ll come to you at once, dear.”

She never remembered how she dressed, ordered the taxi, or hurried to the apartment. She knew she accomplished it all in a remarkably short space of time, because Hugh met her at the door and said gratefully:

“You certainly came quickly, dear—thank you so much.” He told her as rapidly as possible just what had transpired. “And now,” he urged, “I want

you to take Elinor home. There wasn't anyone here I felt I could entrust her to. She is in a frightfully hysterical condition and should be put to bed at once."

"I shall be glad to take her, dear, and oh—you don't know how I am suffering with you. Shall I take Elinor home with me—or——"

"No, no—take her to her own home. My lawyer will have to talk with her to-morrow, and besides," he continued, "she may want her—mother."

"Don't you think Marjorie will resent my entering her home?"

"Marjorie has doubtless been in bed for hours—there is no need to awaken her. She will have to be told everything in the morning, but that is time enough."

"I will do just as you wish, my dear. My only desire is to serve you, as you know. Nothing else matters," and she patted his arm lovingly.

She went to Elinor and put her arms protectingly about her.

"Oh—oh—Geraldine!" Elinor began sobbing anew. "What are you doing here? Do you know what has happened? Oh—I just want to die—I want to die!"

"There, there, darling," Geraldine soothed, helping her on with her wrap she had brought. "I am going to take you home. You can tell me everything in the taxi. You must pull yourself together, dear, and be brave."

"How can I be—brave—when—when—my heart is breaking! Just—just think! A little while ago, I—I was in his arms—and—and—now—I shall-never—see him again!"

"Come, dear, we will go now. Your father is anxious for you to go home." And Geraldine led her to the door, where Hugh joined them.

Elinor fell into his arms. "Daddy! Daddy!" she cried, heart-brokenly. "What shall I do? I—I can't stand this."

Hugh held her closely in his arms as he tenderly murmured: "Never mind, darling, your Daddy will always stand by you—no—no matter what happens. Mrs. DeLacy will take you home. Howard and I will have to wait awhile, but we'll follow you."

"Howard!" Elinor turned like a tigress. "He is to blame for all this—I hate him! Do you understand? I hate him! And I hope he is made to suffer for his crime!"

Geraldine DeLacy put her arm protectingly about the girl whose whole body shook with the fury and fervor of the hate with which she denounced the brother who had killed the man she believed she loved. Hugh Benton's

surprised shocked countenance gave proof of his little understanding of the side of his daughter's character she was showing. But Geraldine only drew her more closely into protecting arms.

“Come with me, darling,” she soothed. “You're all unnerved.” She shook her head protestingly at Hugh Benton as his mouth opened to speak. Without a word, he helped the woman and girl into the waiting cab and turned back toward the apartment entrance. But his head hung low as he walked, and there was a sense of unrealness, a sense of bewilderment, wonder, annoyance at the complexity of life as he went slowly back to the son who had sought only to do as his conscience bade.

CHAPTER XV

Until the muffled bells of the cathedral clock in the hall slowly and sweetly chimed out the mid-night hour, Marjorie Benton had sat in front of the fire in the library where Griggs had left her—waiting. She had no idea when Howard would come in, but she expected Elinor almost any minute, as she had only gone to the Thurstons for dinner and could not remain away much longer.

To Marjorie, whose every nerve was keyed to a snapping tension, the evening had seemed endless. Her eyes were riveted upon the hands of the clock. At twelve-thirty, she bounded from her seat, and fairly flew to the telephone, unable to curb her patience a second longer.

Central was obliged to ring a number of times before the Thurston number answered.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Marjorie demanded irritably. “That number should answer at once.”

“I am ringing them, Madam,” Central replied mechanically.

“Such service. You never can get a number when you want one,” Marjorie muttered irritably as she shook the hook.

“They do not answer,” the operator drawled.

“But I tell you they do answer! They must answer,” Marjorie insisted. “Why, they’re having——”

“There’s your party,” Central interrupted. “Go ahead.”

“Oh—hello—I’d like to speak to Miss Benton, please.”

“There’s no one here by that name,” came the answer curtly. “You must have the wrong number.”

“Is this Mrs. Horace Thurston’s residence?”

“Yes, Madame—but there isn’t anyone here by the name of Benton. If it’s Hugh Benton’s home you wish, I can give you the number. It——”

“No—this is the number I wish. Kindly call Mrs. Thurston to the ’phone.”

“Mrs. and Mr. Thurston are both in Atlantic City—until to-morrow.”

Marjorie felt the ground giving way beneath her feet. She clutched at the desk for support as she inquired:

“Where is Miss Thurston?”

“In bed, Madame. At least, I suppose she is. She returned home about twelve o’clock and went straight to her room. Do you wish me to call her?”

“No—no—it will not be necessary. I—I made a mistake—that is all. Somehow I was under the impression that Miss Thurston was entertaining at dinner this evening, but I realize now that it was—someone else.”

“Yes, Madame. That must be it,” the butler agreed. “Because Miss Thurston went out to dinner and the theater with a gentleman this evening.”

“Thank you—I—I’m sorry to have disturbed you at this hour.”

“That’s all right, Madame. Do you care to leave your name for Mrs. Thurston?”

“Oh, no—I—I’ll call Mrs. Thurston myself—to-morrow. Good-night,” she faltered as she hung up the receiver and stood as one petrified, staring into space.

What new horror was about to confront her? Elinor had deliberately deceived her, and perhaps this had not been the first time. Where could she have gone? What did it all mean?

Again she began to pace the floor. Her own trouble was almost blotted from her mind as this new fear clutched at her heart. Where was Elinor? Where was she? Over and over again she asked herself the question as she traveled back and forth between the window and the farthest book-lined wall.

Twice the faithful Griggs attempted to speak to her, but she waved him back frantically, refusing to listen. As long as she lived, this night would leave its mark upon her. She had passed hours of unspeakable suffering and torture.

At four o’clock, with the faint coming of dawn, Griggs placed another log on the fire which he had kept burning all night, and then confronted Marjorie determinedly with the assurance of an old and trusted servant.

“Mrs. Benton, won’t you please go to bed! It’s four o’clock, and you must be worn out! Pardon the liberty of an old servant, but——”

“Four o’clock—four o’clock—” Marjorie kept wringing her hands despairingly, “and not one of them home yet! God! What can have happened!”

“Nothing has happened, ma’am! Miss Elinor and Mr. Howard are most likely with Mr. Benton at some party or dance,” Griggs endeavored to console her.

“Four o’clock,” she kept repeating. “Why, they couldn’t remain anywhere as late as that.”

“Indeed, they’ve come in late many times, Mrs. Benton; only you have been asleep in your own room and didn’t know it.”

“As late as this?”

“Well—no—not quite as late—but I’m sure there’s no reason for you to worry. Come to your room—please—and let me bring you some coffee.”

“Thanks, Griggs,” Marjorie replied gratefully. “You’re very kind, and I appreciate your remaining up with me like this more than I can tell you, but I couldn’t leave here—I must wait.”

“Mrs. Benton, I’ll call you the minute anyone comes. It won’t do any good for you to wear yourself——”

The sound of a machine coming up the driveway cut short further arguments. Griggs rushed to the window.

“Here’s a cab now, Ma’am,” he said, hastening to open the door.

“At last! At last!” Marjorie held her hand over her heart. “Thank God—they’ve come!”

She stood with bated breath, facing the door, expecting she knew not—what. But whatever else it might have been that unfolded itself before Marjorie Benton’s hot worried eyes, it could not have stabbed her as what she did see. An icy hand clutched her heart. The room swam about her. She tried to move forward with a cry, but stood rooted to the spot. For there, standing on the threshold was her own daughter, her baby, Elinor—hair hanging in wild disarray, white-faced, trembling, clothing disarranged, while moans and sobs issued from her distorted pale lips. Holding her up, guiding her tottering footsteps, her arms possessively, protectingly around Marjorie Benton’s daughter was the one woman in the world whom she hated with a deadly hatred, the woman who had taken from her the love of her own husband—Geraldine DeLacy.

The mother’s breath came with a quick intake as her arms went quiveringly out toward the girl.

“Elinor!” the cry came in a pitiful wail.

“Oh, mother! Mother!” Elinor sobbed brokenly, as she wrenched herself from Geraldine’s arms and tottered toward her mother. Marjorie caught her as she fell. She held her closely as she had held her as a baby.

“What is it, dear?” she murmured tenderly. Mother instinct told her it was no time for reproaches, but a time for soothing. “What has happened? Try to control yourself and tell me.”

“Oh—I—I can’t! I can’t!” Elinor moaned. “It’s so terrible!”

Trembling from head to foot Marjorie, holding Elinor closely to her, turned to Geraldine. “Perhaps, Mrs. DeLacy, you will kindly tell me—what this all means?” she asked.

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Benton,” Geraldine replied gravely, “but a terrible thing has happened. I—I scarcely know how to tell you.”

Marjorie’s eyes flashed fire. “Nothing can be more terrible than this dreadful suspense! You must tell me at once!” she commanded.

“Very well, but I want you to believe me, Mrs. Benton, when I tell you that it grieves me greatly to be the bearer of this news.” Geraldine’s attempt at friendly conciliation passed by the distracted mother.

“Go on—please!” she ordered, with set lips.

“This evening,” Geraldine began, “Templeton Druid had a dinner party in his rooms after the show——”

“Who is Templeton Druid?” Marjorie interrupted.

“Templeton Druid was,” she laid stress upon the word, a stress unnoticed by Marjorie, although Elinor shivered in her mother’s clasp, “an actor—the most popular leading man on Broadway, and a friend of Elinor’s and Howard’s. Elinor knew you would never consent to her going to the party, so she told you she was going to the Thurstons’.”

“I—I know,” Marjorie murmured. “I telephoned the Thurstons at twelve-thirty.” She closed her eyes as if to shut out the memory of the shock she had received.

“She spent the early part of the evening,” Geraldine continued, “with Rosebud Greeley, and then went to Mr. Druid’s apartment.”

“Oh, my dear! My dear!” Marjorie wailed. “Go on, please, Mrs. DeLacy.”

“Howard happened to know where Elinor was going, and disapproved of it. He had spent the evening with Nell Thurston, and after seeing her home, went downtown to the club, where he imbibed rather freely with some of the boys. He happened to overhear a conversation concerning Elinor and Druid, which enraged him past endurance. He jumped in a taxi and went directly to Druid’s apartment——”

“Oh—mother—mother——” Elinor clutched her wildly. “I can’t bear it. Why—why——”

“Hush, darling,” Marjorie patted her head, “I must hear the rest.”

“When Howard arrived,” went on Mrs. DeLacy as though repeating a carefully rehearsed lesson, “a wild party was on, which only went toward confirming the things he had heard. A furious scene followed—and a— a fist battle. In the midst of which Druid pulled a revolver out of his pocket— Howard managed to secure it. There was a shot and Druid fell to the floor!” Geraldine dramatically turned her eyes as she reached her climax as though too tender-hearted to witness the mother’s despair. But underneath the lids that veiled her eyes, there was gloating.

“Oh—No! No!” Marjorie felt the iron hand closing tighter around her heart. It was crushing it. “He didn’t—*kill—him?*”

“Instantly!”

The monosyllabic reply was like the closing of life’s chapter to the mother who heard it. The world seemed far away. She could not think— could not breathe to recognize the familiar action. That iron hand was closing and unclosing, squeezing from her heart but icy drops. Vaguely she could feel her arms about her daughter while her mind wandered to the son—could feel Elinor clutching her hands, her arms,—could hear her wailing.

“Oh, mother! Mother! I loved him so! I loved him! Oh, what shall I do!”

The iron hand held a dagger. It was draining her life blood. She felt it leaving her face, her limbs. She felt the gray pallor of her cheeks. Limplly she sank down into the deep chair beside her (and even in her despair there came a queer flash of memory over her that it was Hugh’s chair) as she stared at the bearer of the news. Her comprehension was unable to cope with its suddenness.

Elinor, clinging helplessly to her mother, fell on her knees, burying her head in her lap.

“I—I can’t realize it!” Marjorie felt her lips framing the words, but to her own ears they were inaudible. “It is all—so horrible.”

“I know, Mrs. Benton.” Outwardly, Geraldine was all sympathy. “But you must face this thing as bravely as you can, for Mr. Benton’s sake——”

Marjorie bit her lips so hard she drew the blood in two places. “Where— where is Howard now?” she demanded.

“They ’phoned the club and managed to locate Mr. Benton. He called his attorney. There are certain arrangements to be made and then he will bring Howard home.”

In her dazed consciousness it had already occurred to Marjorie to wonder where Hugh was, and she had had an added pang when she had

realized what all this would mean to him. She would so have tried to spare him.

So he already knew! And he had not even let her know, come to her, or sent to her in his trouble. No—instead it had been this—this other woman he had— Bitterness welled to take the place of pity. And that bitterness swelled her heart till she felt it had reached the bursting point.

To think that her husband had dared to select that woman to bring Elinor home! She should have been sent for! Wasn't she still his wife, and Elinor's mother? Had Hugh thrown her into the dust and trampled upon her, he could not have humiliated her more than by sending this, to her, abominable creature as the conveyer of this appalling news. The strangeness of it all began to dawn upon her. How had Mrs. DeLacy been available at such an hour? Was Hugh in her company at the time? Her lips curled slightly as she asked: "Were you at that party, Mrs. DeLacy?"

Geraldine drew herself haughtily erect. "I? Certainly not!" she cried indignantly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I fail to understand your connection in the affair," replied the wife coldly. "What are you doing here? How do you come to bring Elinor home?"

"Mr. Benton telephoned to me," Geraldine flushed angrily as she faced Marjorie Benton's cold, accusing eyes. "He knew that he could place every confidence in me—and asked me as a special favor to him, to bring Elinor home——"

"I *understand*." Marjorie spoke simply, but with finality. "Thank you—and good-night."

"I should like to remain if you don't mind," Geraldine strolled impertinently toward the davenport, adding, "until Mr. Benton and Howard come."

"Don't you think it indelicate for you to attempt to intrude, Mrs. DeLacy? This is a time when the family desire to be alone."

"I realize that," Geraldine smiled serenely. "But don't you see, when one is such a trusted friend, I really feel as if I were one of the family."

Marjorie Benton had felt before that she had stood all that could be imposed on human nature. But now she found that it had been only a beginning. The cold, unadulterated nerve of the woman who assumed such prerogatives so casually, and at such a time, was beyond anything she could have dreamed. No longer was she physically weak. A great power was given

to her. Gently she put aside her daughter's clinging hands and rose to her feet with a firmness born of indignation too great for words.

"Your assumption is a bit previous," she remarked icily. "You have wrought destruction enough in this home for the present. I am sorry, but I must deny you the pleasure of remaining longer."

"Oh, very well!" Geraldine shrugged her shoulders meaningly, as she turned toward the door. "I regret exceedingly that you will not accept my well-meant offer of friendship. If you should need me any time, Elinor," she called back, "you know where to find me—good-night."

Marjorie stood still as a statue, waiting until she heard the door close after Mrs. DeLacy. Then she resumed her chair, pulled a low stool up beside her and tenderly seated Elinor upon it.

"Darling little girl," she murmured soothingly, gently caressing the disordered hair which futile hands sought to arrange. "Come, tell mother everything. I—I'm not angry, dear—my heart is over-flowing with love and sympathy for you, and I want to help you!"

One upward glance the girl gave her mother. She shook her head sadly.

"Your love and your desire to help me, mother, have come too late."

Marjorie caught her breath sharply.

"Oh, please! Please, dear, don't say that!"

"You've kept me away from you so long," Elinor continued apathetically, plaintively. "I have never been able to confide in you. The wonderful comradeship I've seen between other girls and their mothers—never existed between us. Your continual fault finding with everything I did forced me to be untruthful, and to deceive you."

"I meant it all for your good, dear!" Marjorie's voice vibrated with emotion. "You *will* believe me—you must!—when I tell you my only desire was for your happiness!"

"And *Howard!*" Elinor's voice was bitter in its hysterical condemnation. "What right had he to judge anyone? Templeton would have married me, and now—my life is wrecked."

"You are not in the condition to realize anything now. Perhaps later you will be able to view all this in a different light. Your brother must love you very——"

"Love me!" Elinor screamed wildly. "He has a great way of showing it, when he robs me of all the happiness life held for me! Oh—I hate him! Even if he is my brother, I——"

“Oh—hush, dear, hush,” Marjorie placed her hand across Elinor’s mouth, “you mustn’t talk that way.”

“I—I don’t know what I’m going to do, mother! I’m almost crazy! I’m so frightened, and I don’t know where to turn!” The girl’s passion subsided into a wail of self-pity. She sobbed and buried her head in Marjorie’s lap again.

A light of dawning hope slowly welled up in the woman’s anguished eyes.

“Turn to your mother, darling,” she pleaded, lovingly, tenderly, “the one who will never fail you! Come—I’m going to take you upstairs and put you to bed, just as I did when you were my little baby—and I shall sit beside you and hold your hand, dear, until you fall asleep.”

Elinor arose wearily and stood coldly unresponsive to her mother’s declarations of love and devotion. She submitted passively to the tender embrace as she was led toward the hall.

The slamming of the front door caused them both to start violently. Howard, wanly pale and trembling, came toward them. Marjorie’s arms went out to him.

“Oh—Howard—my boy, I—I——”

“Please, mother!” Howard twisted his fingers and pulled at his collar. “Don’t you start in on me—I’m a wreck, and my nerves are all shot to pieces now! Dad hasn’t stopped talking for a moment all the way home—I just *can’t* stand much more!” He walked unsteadily to the mantle and stood, leaning his head upon it.

Elinor dropped back to the large chair her mother had recently occupied, and curled up in it, her feet under her, her head buried in her arms.

In a few quick steps, the mother crossed the room to her son’s side. Her arm went protectingly about his bowed, weary shoulders.

“Oh, my dear, my dear!” and there was a world of sympathy and love in the vibrating voice, “I’m not going to upbraid you! I just want to tell you that——”

A slight sound at the door made her turn to glance over her shoulder. Hugh Benton stood there, stern and relentless. His eyes roved from the stricken girl huddled in her chair to rest on the bowed head of his son and the mother who stood beside him, her attitude one of soothing.

Like a cold accusing judge he stood towering there. Slowly his hand came up into a sweeping gesture to include the scene. Then the hand was

pointed relentlessly, unforgivingly, at the suffering mother. When he spoke his voice was harsh, repelling.

“Well, Marjorie!” he bit off his words, “I trust you’re satisfied!”

CHAPTER XVI

“Hugh!” It was a cry of pain torn from the mother heart. But even in her anguish for her children there came a pang for the man she loved as she gazed at him wide-eyed, distressed. He seemed to have aged ten years since his interview with her only a few hours before. His face was drawn and haggard. Large, dark circles were about the eyes. The wife forced herself to speak calmly. “What do you mean?” she queried.

“I mean,” he answered, coming slowly into the room with lagging footsteps, “that this is all your work!” His gesture took in Elinor and Howard. “And I hope it pleases you,” he repeated bitterly.

“Hugh, at a time like this, when we need all your strength and sympathy to sustain us—you speak to me like this?” Marjorie’s voice was full of reproach. “Why do you use such tones to me?”

“Because,” he replied and there was no suspicion of a softening heart in his hard voice, “I hold you responsible for everything! If I had listened to the dictates of my own heart, we would never have come to New York—but I was weak enough to yield to your persuasions.”

“Surely, Hugh,—” Marjorie’s lips quivered pitifully as she started to protest, but he authoritatively motioned her to silence.

“I tried to argue with you at the time and impress upon you just what an environment such as this would mean to our children, but you wouldn’t listen to me!” he raged. “You told me that you, their mother, should know what was best for them. Well, there they are! Look at your daughter, the pitiful creature of a dissolute man’s fancy, and your son, a——”

“Stop, Hugh!” Marjorie commanded. “You seem to forget one thing, and that is, that they are your children as well as mine.”

“On the contrary,—I have not forgotten it. I am simply trying to impress upon them that I am not to blame for their misfortunes.”

“Then you believe that I alone am entirely responsible for this awful calamity?”

“Entirely and absolutely,” he answered.

“And you call yourself a man!” Marjorie turned upon him, her eyes ablaze with anger. “You inspire me only with contempt! Last night I thought

because of the children I could never leave you! But now, for the very same reason, I refuse to remain or to allow them to remain with you another day!”

This was rather more than the angry man had bargained for. In his way he loved Howard and Elinor, and his pride, too, was at stake.

“Do you mean,” Hugh endeavored to conceal his anxiety but it was nevertheless poignant, “that you will take Elinor and Howard away from me?”

“That is precisely what I mean to do!”

“We shall see about *that*.” He strode forward angrily. “I think the children themselves are the ones to choose between us.”

“Do you imagine for a moment,” Marjorie replied haughtily, “you could persuade them to leave their mother?”

“Elinor and Howard,” Hugh began suddenly, “I want you both to listen to me for a moment.”

Elinor sat up in her chair, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief, while Howard turned and stood with his back to the fireplace, staring sullenly in front of him.

“Children, your mother and I have come to the parting of the ways. As you heard her remark a few minutes ago—you are *mine* as well as hers. I love you both, and—I want you—but you are old enough to decide for yourselves.”

Silence, distressing in its intensity, followed the father’s brutal ultimatum.

“Oh—I—I don’t know what to say?” Elinor was filled with confusion. Her wail was faltering. “This is all so sudden—so strange!”

“You know, dear,” Hugh strode to her chair, and stood looking down upon her, “I am willing to do anything for you—I will take you abroad until this nasty scandal has a chance to blow over, and when we return, should you have any enemies you will find that the best weapon with which to fight them is your father’s money.”

“Elinor, darling,” Marjorie pleaded, “all that I can do is to offer you my love and devotion—and when it comes to protection, you will find that there isn’t a weapon in the world to compare with your mother’s love.”

“Oh, mother—I—I don’t know what to say!” Once more the girl’s frail body was racked with sobs as she sought to see the light—what best to do. “Dad has always been wonderful to me! Ever since I can remember, he has granted my every wish! I don’t know how to answer! Oh, what shall I say?”

“This is a question that your heart must answer for you, dear.” Marjorie’s reply was faint but her voice told of the heart yearning behind the simple reply. “I—I didn’t believe,” she caught her breath sobbingly, “you would hesitate an instant.”

“Well, you see, mother,” Elinor’s mood changed to querulousness and she pouted, “I’ve always been selfish and headstrong—you’ve told me so yourself many times! So I—I think—if you don’t mind,” she dropped her eyes and stared at the floor, “I—I shall stick to Dad! I guess he’ll understand me better!”

“My little girl!” Hugh exclaimed tenderly, as he leaned over and gathered her in his arms.

“Oh—my baby—my baby!” Marjorie moaned, her arms outstretched before her, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Well, Howard! We’re waiting!” Hugh turned expectantly to his son.

Howard looked his father squarely in the eye as he demanded, with slow deliberation: “Well—what are you waiting for?”

“This is an awful mess—that you have gotten yourself into,” Hugh hastened to explain, but his eyes wavered before the steady gaze of his son. “My attorney says there isn’t a doubt concerning your vindication. All of the witnesses swear that it was either an accident or self-defense—and your motive for quarreling was thoroughly justifiable—but just the same, the law has peculiar twists and angles—and it is going to take a fortune to save you.”

“Well?”

“I want to keep you with me, Howard—and my money——”

“Stop!” It was a son he had never known who took a menacing step toward him, rage flaming in the eyes of scorn with which he searched out his father’s soul. “You and your money!” He flung out. “You think that with it you can conquer the world! You hold my mother responsible for all this trouble—don’t you? Do you want to know the real cause of all the suffering in this room to-night? I’ll tell you—it’s your money! The thing that made me the good-for-nothing idler that I am—that made my sister the frivolous callous-hearted woman you see before you! Your money! You may buy another woman with it and break my mother’s heart! You may make Elinor forget that some day she may have children of her own—but if you think, for a moment, that you can make me forget my manhood to the extent of deserting my mother, then even prison is far too good for me!”

Marjorie stared at him in amazement! Slowly she awakened from her apathy. In a dawning glory that transformed her, her face was aglow with mother love. Her eyes, dim from grief and weeping, fairly beamed with pride and joy. Hugh walked the length of the room twice without speaking. He strove to master himself, but the selfish anger had not been conquered when he came to a stop before his son.

“So that is the way you look at it. Isn’t this display of chivalry rather sudden?” The sneer was in his voice and words.

“I know that I’ve never amounted to very much,” Howard was ready to acknowledge his short-comings, “but I think, Dad, now that it has come to a showdown—I’m more of a man than you are!”

Tiger and cub, they faced each other, glaring.

“I’ve had enough of this.” Hugh’s voice was thunder when he was first to break under the strain. “Go with your mother! Play the hero as much as you damned please! I’m through with you! You’ll find it pretty hard to get out of this trouble without a penny of the money you scorn to help you!”

“I’ll take my chances with hundreds of others—that’s all.” Howard’s serene reply held the indulgence of the conqueror.

Marjorie Benton, too heartfull to speak, to stand between father and son, could hardly realize that this wonderful boy, standing there, superbly defending her, was her son! Never for a moment had she doubted Elinor’s loyalty, and the blow she had received from her had been as unexpected as crushing.

Now, as her husband stalked toward the door with the finality she knew so well, she hurried across the space to place herself in the doorway, obstructing his passage. There was no hint of pleading now, though. All that had gone from Marjorie Benton forever. But there was in the determination with which she barred Hugh Benton’s way something greater—the greatest thing in all the world—the determination of the mother to fight for the child she loves. Her voice was menacingly soft as she spoke, ignoring his annoyed gesture to be allowed to past.

“Just a moment, Hugh,” she said, “we have not quite finished yet. Last night,” she went on, “you made me an offer. You have not forgotten it?”

“An offer?” Hugh lifted eyebrows in puzzled surprise.

“You said if I would consent to a divorce, you would arrange everything and settle three-quarters of your fortune upon me.”

“Yes—I believe I did say that.”

“Are you still willing to go through with it?”

“Most assuredly I am.”

“Then,” Marjorie’s voice rang clear as a bell, “I accept your proposition! Get your divorce any way that you please! I don’t care what the grounds are—only see that I am given every dollar that you promised me!”

“I understand,” Hugh sneered. “You intend using that money for Howard.”

“What difference can it make to you—how I intend using it?” she inquired coldly.

His voice was cold as her own as he rejoined:

“Nothing matters to me—except my freedom. Come, baby!” He looked pityingly at Elinor. “You’re completely worn out—I’m going to take you upstairs.”

Alone with his mother, Howard’s diffidence returned. In spite of all his newly-found chivalry he did not feel at ease.

“Mother,” he began, “I can’t let you do this for me. You don’t believe in divorce.”

“I believe in a *great many* things,” Marjorie answered, her eyes filled with unshed tears, “that I never believed before. I believe that it takes a great sorrow to bring forth the real character of a true man or woman.”

“You never would have given father his freedom if this hadn’t happened with me.”

Marjorie placed both hands tenderly upon Howard’s shoulders and looked up at him with eyes brimming with love.

“I’m so proud of you—my son!” she murmured.

“Gee whiz, mater,” Howard was the boy once more,—the boy who shied at too much display of emotion! “I only did what any fellow would do.”

“Your father has always been such a pal to you, while I have never been—very close—and yet you turn to me. I—I can’t understand why!” she murmured on softly.

“Oh—well—you know, father’s all right—but there’s something about a boy’s mother—Gee!—that gets him, from the time he’s born till he’s an old man.”

“Do you know, dear, that at this moment, when I should be heart-broken, I am the happiest woman in the world!”

“But mother, you’re crying,” he protested.

“Tears of joy, dear—because—I am *your* mother!”

"I've never done a thing in my life to make you proud of me, mother, and now I've brought this new disgrace upon you. It seems almost too bad that Druid didn't get me first."

"Hush, dear!" Marjorie shivered. "You are all that I have, now, and we will face this thing bravely—together."

There was little sleep for any members of the Benton family that night, or rather morning, as it was close to five o'clock before they retired. When Mr. Hammond called at ten o'clock, he found Hugh waiting in the library for him.

"Good morning, Benton," he began in his abrupt manner. "Hope you managed to get some rest? I've been busy since before eight, and I'm afraid things are not going to be quite as simple as they seemed a few hours ago."

"Why—what do you mean?" Hugh asked anxiously.

"Well it seems that Howard did a lot of talking at the club before he went to Druid's apartment. He spoke to two of the members, and the entire conversation was overheard by the coat-boy."

"What could he have said?"

"Oh, many things—all leading up to the statement 'that he intended to get Druid and settle with him for ruining his sister's reputation.' Mind—I don't say this will make any difference in the outcome of it all—it will just complicate matters. If it hadn't been for the influence we brought forward last night, I don't believe we should have been able to bail him out until after the coroner's inquest."

"When does that take place?"

"This afternoon."

"Just what do you think their verdict will be, Hammond?"

"I expect it to be 'death by accident,' " the lawyer answered confidently. "Then this thing will never have to be tried. Now I'd like to have a talk with both Elinor and Howard. Are they up yet?"

"I believe so," Hugh answered. "Would it be possible for you to give me about half an hour of your time before seeing them?"

"Why, yes!" Hammond pulled out his watch. "We don't have to be downtown until two o'clock."

Hugh opened the bottom drawer of his desk and brought out a box of choice Havanas. He offered them to the lawyer, then lighted one himself. But he was apparently ill at ease as Hammond waited inquiringly.

“You and I have been friends a great many years, haven’t we, Hammond?” was his beginning.

“Indeed, we have,” Hammond replied warmly. “I am happy to have you look upon me as your friend instead of merely your attorney.”

“I need your friendship now, Hammond, more than I ever needed anything in my life.”

Hammond grasped his hand firmly: “You can depend upon me, Hugh. Had Howard been anyone’s son but yours, I should never have bothered with this case. You know it is entirely out of my line of work.”

“It is not about Howard at all that I wish to speak,” Hugh announced calmly.

“No? Of whom then?”

“Myself——”

“Yourself?” Hammond inquired, surprisedly.

“Myself and my wife. Hammond, you will no doubt be very much surprised to hear that Mrs. Benton and I have agreed—to separate.”

“Separate! Why I can’t believe it!” The lawyer seemed dumfounded at the news. “You have a grown son and daughter, and you have been married a great many years. Why I thought that you and Mrs. Benton——”

“You thought the same thing as everyone else who knows us,” Hugh interrupted with undisguised bitterness, “that we are an absolutely mismatched couple endeavoring to drag out an unhappy existence together.”

“You’re wrong, Benton. I never thought that. I knew that Mrs. Benton was different from the majority of the women of to-day, and candidly speaking, I admired her for that very reason.”

“But don’t you think Mrs. Benton carries her ideas of propriety rather to the extreme?” Hugh asked irritably.

“That depends entirely upon the way you look at it. I must confess that I am somewhat of the old school myself, and therefore I don’t particularly approve of your modern ‘feminists,’ as I believe they choose to call themselves.”

“Just what is your definition of ‘feminist,’ ” asked Hugh. “And why the disapproval?”

“Because,” and there was a dreaminess in Hammond’s eyes that would have astonished many a judge and lawyer in New York city, could they but have seen it, “they have tried to replace the most wonderful women of all times—the women of bygone years—the women our mothers were. Instead

of glorying in wifhood and motherhood—the true mission of every womanly woman—they launch forth into politics or business or professions with ambitions and determinations worthy of men, or else they fritter their lives away, becoming more and more useless every day.”

“Why, Hammond, you speak as though you have been the victim of a bitter experience.”

“No,” was the answer, with a shake of the head, “I’m not speaking from experience at all—I’m speaking from observation. In my career, I can view the drama of Life from a front-seat.”

“Strange,” Hugh meditated. “In all the years that I have known you, John Hammond, I never once suspected that you, with your abrupt manner and stern demeanor could be an idealist.”

“Well,” he laughed, “I wouldn’t go quite so far as to say I am an idealist, but I do admire and hold in the highest esteem a true woman.”

“But you won’t permit your ideas to influence you—you’ll be perfectly fair with me?” Hugh demanded.

“I always try to be fair, Benton—but in this case I’ll be more than fair, inasmuch as we will not consider this an interview between client and attorney, but a talk—between friends.”

“Fine, Hammond—I couldn’t ask for more. Now, then, as I told you before, Mrs. Benton and myself have agreed to separate.”

“Yes? May I ask why?”

“Incompatibility, for one thing,” answered Benton, his eyes roving about the room. Those searching orbs of the lawyer made him nervous, he fretted to himself.

Hammond was silent a moment: then abruptly he asked: “Just how many years have you been married?”

“Almost twenty-two.”

“And it has taken you two people twenty-two years to discover that you are incompatible? You asked me to be fair, Benton—I in return must ask you to be honest with me?”

“But—I don’t——”

“You’re asking for my advice,” Hammond continued sharply. “Why don’t you come out at once and tell me plainly that you have lost your head over another woman?”

“Why—I—” Hugh blushed and stammered uneasily, “I thought to give you the facts as delicately as possible. Your method seems—er—pardon me

—almost crude.”

“Come, come, Benton,” Hammond replied impatiently. “I don’t believe in beating about the bush! You can’t change a deed or a statement by attempting to glaze it over with a polish. The fundamental fact remains the same no matter what you do. Just a minute, please,” as Hugh endeavored to interrupt him, “let me tell you that I’ll have a great deal more respect for you if you stop this quibbling and come out with the plain truth!”

“Very well, then. I have fallen in love with another woman, and I want to marry her.”

“Of course, you know you could never obtain a divorce from Mrs. Benton?”

“Mrs. Benton has agreed to obtain the divorce from me. I will arrange all of the details, and I want you to help me.”

“Does Mrs. Benton know on what grounds she will have to bring suit?” Hammond inquired in surprise.

“Certainly she knows!” Benton was becoming irascible. He was unused to being talked to like a naughty child, and Hammond’s tone, to say the least, was not the kind the financier usually heard. “We have discussed the New York State laws,” he replied.

Hammond pondered seriously and there was a chilling change from the friendliness of a moment before when he asked:

“Just when did you reach this decision? I can readily understand your not mentioning it to me last night in all the excitement, but you were in my office two days ago and never said a word. If I remember rightly, I inquired after Mrs. Benton, which would have given you an opening should you have desired to speak?”

“We only reached an understanding early this morning,” Hugh answered hurriedly, “after I came home with Howard. I had talked it over with Marjorie—before—but she refused to listen. Something happened this morning—and she changed her mind.”

“If it is not too personal, would you mind telling me just what that ‘something’ was?”

Hugh Benton threw all subterfuge to the winds. This man was too good a cross-examiner. He would make a clean breast of it and have done with it once and for all. It was an abominable mess, however it was taken.

“Oh, well, if you must know,” and his wide shoulders lifted, “I may as well tell you now as any time, for you will have to know it in order to help me arrange my affairs. You see, Hammond, when we first came to New

York to live, it was entirely against my wishes. We had been married five years at the time, and the heated discussion and argument concerning this move caused our first quarrel. Being young and very much in love, I couldn't hold out long against my wife's desires. She was filled with ambitions for us all, and to her New York spelled one word in capital letters, and that was 'Success.' ”

“Well, from all that I happen to know about your affairs,” the lawyer glanced about the sumptuously furnished room, “you seem to have given her her desire.”

“Yes,” Hugh answered bitterly, “from a financial viewpoint, I suppose I am a success—but—outside of that——” He compressed his lips tightly for a moment. “Oh, I'm not going to play upon your sympathy, Hammond, and go into every little detail regarding the misery of many years! All I'll say is that it has been—hell.”

The lawyer looked his surprise.

“Apparently you've always been the happiest of men—why everyone _____”

Hugh Benton broke in irritably. “Surely you don't expect me to go about like a woman carrying my heart on my sleeve! I'll tell you one thing, Hammond,” and he jumped up excitedly, “when two people cease to care for one another—when they reach a state of absolute indifference and still continue to live together under the same roof—it's a crime! They go on—either because they think they owe a duty to children—God, children!” He covered his face with his hands, and there was weariness in all his features as he looked up to continue: “Or else, they fear the censorship of the world! And for one of these two damnable creeds, they condemn themselves to years of torture!”

“I'm sorry, old man, to think that things have been as bad as that,” Hammond was not unsympathetic, but he was beginning to wonder if sympathy would not be wasted here.

“I didn't mean to drift into all this,” Hugh sighed, impatient at his own garrulity as he went on: “But the remark you passed about my success started me off! Let's get back to where we were and finish this thing.”

“Exactly—where were we? Oh, yes, I remember. You are to furnish the grounds, and Mrs. Benton is to divorce you.”

“I'll tell you just what I propose doing.” Hugh drew his chair closer and proceeded to lay out his plan. It was a lengthy recital, during which he kept his gaze focused on his desk. He wouldn't have admitted even to himself that he was doing something of which he should feel ashamed, and yet there

was that within him which prevented him from once lifting his eyes and looking the lawyer in the face.

“I understand.” It was with difficulty Hammond managed to subdue the ring of contempt in his voice. “You have thought it all out admirably; it should do you credit.”

Benton looked up quickly, but Hammond’s expression was blank. He must be mistaken in thinking that last remark revealed a tinge of veiled sarcasm.

“Have you any suggestions to offer?” he asked, lighting a fresh cigar.

“I may have several to offer—but first it will be necessary for me to ask you a few questions.” Hammond’s reply was calmly non-committal.

“Very well—go ahead.”

“I asked you this question before, but you happened to drift away from the subject. What I want to know is—just what was it that caused Mrs. Benton to change her mind?”

“Early last evening, I went to my wife honestly,” Hugh was angry to feel himself blushing at the word, “told her exactly what had happened and pleaded with her to grant me my freedom. She refused, absolutely, and I left the house indignant and determined to find some way or means by which I could compel her to listen to me. When I came home with Howard this morning, I lost complete control of myself and accused her openly of being responsible for all the misfortune which had come to us.”

“Did that seem fair—to you?” Hammond demanded sternly.

“Yes—it did.” Stubbornly Hugh held to his fatuous belief and condoning of himself. “She was entirely to blame for our coming here, and——”

“For Heaven’s sake, Benton.” Irritably the lawyer jumped from his chair to pace the floor. “You can’t mean to sit there—a man of your intelligence—and tell me, with all sincerity, that you hold your coming to New York responsible for the existing conditions?”

“Absolutely! If we had remained in——”

“What about Fate or Destiny, or whatever you choose to call it, playing a part in your life, and all the other lives about you? New York! Ridiculous, I tell you! Had you been in Paris, France, or Trenton, New Jersey, you would have stood just exactly where you stand to-day. Don’t you believe at all in predestination?”

“I do, in every instance—but this.”

“How interesting! But go on—we’ll come back to this later—After you upbraided Mrs. Benton, *et cetera*—what happened?”

“One word led to another,” Hugh answered, pretending to ignore Hammond’s sarcasm, “and finally she declared that ‘she would leave me and take the children with her!’ ”

“Mm, I see! And then?”

“I told her the children were no longer babies—that they were old enough to decide for themselves, and then I endeavored to make the situation clear to them. Elinor came to the conclusion that she would prefer to remain with me——”

Hammond merely smiled, but Hugh did not see the movement of the lips under the grizzled mustache that formed: “Selfish little beast.”

“Howard handed me the surprise of my life,” Hugh continued in a tone of self-pity. “When I explained to him that this mess he had gotten himself into would cost me a fortune, but that I was willing to spend it if he would remain with me, why, he turned on me like a maniac and denounced me shamefully! Acted like the hero in a dime novel—played heroics to a fare-thee-well—ending up by telling me plainly just what he thought of me and my money!”

Hammond’s eyes shone bright as he urged: “Yes! Yes! Go on—I’m greatly interested.”

“He had tried my patience a bit too far, so I ordered him to go and see just where he would find himself without my money. Then Mrs. Benton made her entrance dramatically, as I daresay she believed. She declared she would accept my offer of the early evening, and grant me my freedom providing I gave her the money I had promised her.”

“It is like her, to do a thing like that,” Hammond murmured, almost inaudibly, “and you consented—I suppose?” He turned inquiringly to Benton.

“Certainly—I wanted my freedom, and if Fate chose to bring——”

“Ah!” the lawyer interrupted him. “There you are! Now you believe in Fate! This is evidently one of the instances when you choose to believe in it.” In a twinkling the lawyer’s attitude changed. All semblance of friendship dropped from him like a cloak. He turned on the financier with accusingly uplifted hand while the voice that so often had brought terror to the heart of a culprit, had swayed juries and filled courtrooms, thundered. “You’re a coward, Hugh Benton! You want to leave this woman, who has been your wife for twenty-two years, and the mother of your children, for another

woman and you're afraid to acknowledge that you yourself are to blame and _____”

“But I'm *not* to blame,” Hugh insisted. “I told you that we have been uncongenial for years——”

“You managed to stand the uncongeniality in your home for twenty-two years, and you would have stood it to the very end—if some other woman hadn't aroused your passion.”

“See here, Hammond,” Hugh turned white. Hammond was going too far entirely. “I don't like your tone. You're my attorney, and you said you were my friend. That is why I am telling you all this. I didn't ask you for your opinion of me, and it's immaterial whether my conduct meets with your approval or not! If you don't wish to handle my affairs, say so—I shall be able to find another attorney in the city.”

“Precisely!” Hammond roared. “You haven't an inducement you could offer with which to retain my services! I've curbed my impatience with difficulty in order to let you reach the end of your narrative. Now I want to tell you that after twenty-five years of practice, I find myself unable to read a man's character correctly. I was never so deceived in all my life as I have been in you, Hugh Benton, and I blush to think I called you—friend!”

CHAPTER XVII

“Very well, Hammond,” Hugh arose wearily from his chair, “I’m not going to quarrel with you,” he informed. “I’m sorry to lose your friendship, but as long as you feel the way you do—perhaps it’s just as well.”

“Benton, I’m going to be candid with you, and tell you that I intend offering my services to Howard and Mrs. Benton. The boy will need help and I’m going to stand by him,” Hammond announced as he stood up to leave.

“Griggs,” he said to the waiting butler when he reached the hall, “will you kindly ask Mrs. Benton to see me for a few moments? Tell her I wish to speak to her on a matter of great importance.”

“Mrs. Benton will be with you directly, sir.” Griggs returned with the message almost immediately. “Will you wait here?” he asked, indicating Marjorie’s morning room as he opened the door.

Hammond stood gazing out of the window when the mother of Howard entered.

She held out her hand. “You wish to see me, Mr. Hammond?” she murmured politely, though the paleness of her face, the distraught manner showed plainly how pain had been with her through the hours. She added, hesitatingly: “I think I know why. But after the events of last night, and this morning, don’t you think Hugh could have been a little more considerate, and at least had waited a day before sending his attorney to me?”

“Mr. Benton didn’t send me at all, Mrs. Benton—I’ve come of my own accord.”

“But I don’t understand. You’ve always been Hugh’s attorney, so naturally I thought he had consulted you, and Howard told me you were with him—last night.” Her lips quivered pitifully over the last two words.

Hammond nodded. “Yes—I was with him last night, and I have been closeted with him in the library for the past half hour or so, just long enough for me to refuse to act as his attorney in the future.”

Marjorie’s astonishment was great as she heard him and saw the tightening of the lips under the grizzled mustache.

“Why, Mr. Hammond, you’ve been friends for years! Have you—have—you—quarreled?” she queried.

“We haven’t exactly quarreled, Mrs. Benton, but we can’t agree on certain points, so——”

But to the mother, with thought now only for the son she loved, such a contingency could only take on the proportions of a catastrophe. She knew the reputation held by John Hammond. For years, since he had been her husband’s attorney she had been told of his legal prowess, and had come to believe that anything he undertook of that nature could mean only triumph for his client. All the hours since the painful scene in the library she had hugged to her breast the thought that Howard would be defended by this cleverest of lawyers, and the outcome was to her a foregone conclusion. She caught her breath painfully as she realized now that Howard might, through some nonsensical quarrel of his father’s, be denied the lawyer’s protection. She caught at his sleeve with an appealing gesture.

“Oh—Mr. Hammond,” she cried, her lips trembling, “you can’t desert us now! What will Howard do? Your cleverness, your knowledge means so much to my boy!”

“There, there, Mrs. Benton! Sit down and calm yourself!” He pulled a chair forward and forced her into it. Then, still standing, he went on: “When I came here this morning to see your husband, I hadn’t an idea of this estrangement between you—my business concerned Howard. I only learned of the other affair a short while ago. It was over that Mr. Benton and I could not agree.”

“I must confess that you have aroused my curiosity, Mr. Hammond. I’ve always been under the impression that a lawyer obeyed his clients’ instructions in a case like this,” she smiled wanly, “without questioning.”

“Some lawyers,” he amended, as he, too, smiled. “No, Mrs. Benton, I disapprove of the step your husband is about to take. His dismissal and my resignation were delivered at the same time. So now, I have sent for you to offer my services in Howard’s behalf as well as your own.”

“Then Hugh has evidently told you about Howard’s defense of me?” Marjorie was eager and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Oh, he was so wonderful, Mr. Hammond, and I’m so grateful to you for standing by him! That is all you—anyone—can do for me. You know I have consented to give Hugh his freedom?”

“You don’t have to do it, Mrs. Benton,” he answered sternly.

“I am to receive a great deal of money from Hugh in payment of my kind consideration of him,” she informed bitterly.

Hammond went over to Marjorie and bowed low before her. “You’re a big woman, Mrs. Benton,” he paid homage, “and there are very few like you

in these days. I understand your motive thoroughly, but—” and he looked at her sharply. “Mrs. Benton—you don’t believe in divorce——”

She waved away the matter with resignation as her nervous hands pulled to pieces the rose she had taken from a floor vase near.

“Nothing matters about *me*, Mr. Hammond,” was her firm reply. “It’s only my boy of whom I’m thinking! I must save him!”

Hammond’s jovial countenance turned apoplectic in his sudden burst of rage as he looked at the shrinking, suffering mother and thought of the man he had just left who was responsible for so much of her sorrow, so proudly borne.

“What a beastly advantage to take of mother love!” he fumed. “Your own husband, the father of your children, forcing you to relinquish the doctrine in which you have always believed! In a fit of rage he turned Howard adrift, as it were, little dreaming at the time that you would come forward and accept his bribe. I’m sorry to hurt you, Mrs. Benton,” he apologized gently, as Marjorie buried her face in her arm and shuddered at the word, “but that is exactly what it is—his bribe! When you, in your beautiful loyalty and love for your son, offered him his freedom in return for the money, he considered it ‘an act of Providence’ providing him with the means to gratifying his desire.” Each word was cutting sarcasm that should have buoyed Marjorie Benton. But she was passed caring for most things. She scattered the petals in a shower at her feet, watching them fall idly.

“After all,” she sighed and shook her head sadly, “it doesn’t make any difference. I can’t hold him if he doesn’t care for me.”

“You may not be able to hold his love,” he replied, “but you can prevent him from remarrying if you wish to, as you need never divorce him. That is what I am here to tell you. I will take Howard’s case, I’ll save him, too, and it will never cost you a dollar!”

“Oh—Mr. Hammond.” The tears sprang to her eyes. “You are indeed a friend, and I’m at a loss for words in which to express my gratitude! But I’ve quite made up my mind to let Hugh have his freedom.”

“That is entirely up to you. Candidly speaking, I don’t think he’s worth holding, but I hate to see you hurt so deeply,” he asserted.

“Don’t you think there can come a time, when one is past being hurt?” Her lips formed a smile, but her eyes were heavy with tears. “There have been so many shocks the last few weeks, I just can’t seem to feel at all—any more.”

“It doesn’t surprise me—it seems remarkable to me, that you have been able to hold up at all. Ah—” he turned as Howard entered, “Good morning—I was just about to send for you.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hammond,” Howard’s heavy eyes betrayed the lack of sleep and the tension. “Hope I haven’t kept you waiting.”

“No, I was just going over a little business with your mother. We’ll have to be going downtown soon though. We’re due at the coroner’s inquest at two o’clock.”

“Shall I come with you?” Marjorie asked quickly.

“No, indeed, Mrs. Benton—not at all necessary,” Hammond assured her. “Nothing will go wrong. You must try to trust me implicitly, Mrs. Benton. Rest all you can. We may have a case before us, and then you will require your strength, but I assure there is nothing to fear. We will have to hurry a bit, my boy,” Hammond went on, in his curt, businesslike manner that he had discarded with Marjorie. “We can talk in my car on the way to town. I’ll leave a message with Griggs for your father. I want him to bring Elinor down ahead of time, so that I can have a few words with her. Good-by, Mrs. Benton,” and he held both her hands in a warm, firm grip, “keep up your courage, little woman! Everything’s going to be all right!”

“I feel assured of that, Mr. Hammond.” She smiled as brightly as possible. “How could it be otherwise—in your capable hands. When will I know anything?”

“We’ll ’phone you just as soon as it’s over. I’m going to see Griggs a moment—I’ll meet you in the car, Howard.”

“Good-by, mother.” Howard held his mother tightly in his arms for a moment. Strange what comfort he got from those arms—how new that comfort was—that he had never known these years. He kissed her mouth and the eyes which bravely forced back the tears. “Don’t you worry, dear!”

Hugh Benton and his daughter arrived at John Hammond’s office but a short time after his arrival there with the financier’s accused son. He had had time for only a short talk with Howard, who only repeated his story of the night before, when Hugh and Elinor were announced.

“They might just as well come in now,” he told Howard. “There are some questions I would like to ask you and your sister together.”

Elinor Benton, pale, and dramatically conscious of the part she played in her own mind of being all but widowed, entered the inner office of the lawyer leaning heavily on the arm of her father. John Hammond frowned annoyedly when he saw she had chosen to costume herself in black; that she

gave all outward evidences of being grief stricken, and he thought it ill became her at such a time. But he was not altogether surprised. He had known the girl since she was a tiny child, and her character was an open book to him.

“Sit down,” he said, brusquely, motioning to them to be seated. “This will not take very long.”

Neither Elinor nor Hugh deigned to notice Howard, who sat looking at them through partly closed eyes. Notwithstanding the fact that he was under the strain he was, he could scarcely suppress a smile as he looked at Elinor.

“Just like her,” he muttered, “to dress the part.”

Hammond drew a pad in front of him and dipped his pen in the ink. “Now then, Elinor!” He looked up.

The pale, small figure in black met his eye again. It was too much for him. He fairly exploded:

“What in—well—what in thunderation do you mean by dressing like that? Do you want to play upon the sympathy of a jury and ruin your brother?”

“Why, Mr. Hammond!” Elinor’s handkerchief went straight to her eyes. “How can you talk—to me—like that? Can’t you see—I’m heart-broken?”

Hugh had her in his arms instantly.

“There, darling, don’t cry,” he said soothingly. He turned savagely to Hammond. “I won’t have you talking to her like that! She’s suffering enough—hasn’t she just told you she’s heart-broken?”

“Well, then, let her be sensibly heart-broken!” Hammond brought his fist down upon the desk. “Can you imagine the light it is going to throw upon the case when this slip of a girl appears upon the scene in the garb of an inconsolable widow?”

Elinor removed the handkerchief from her eyes—eyes that were hard behind the glistening of newly shed tears. Her voice was steely as she spoke, the toss of her head defiant.

“I care nothing whatever about Howard!” she said. “You may as well understand that right now! I shall tell the truth, and nothing will induce me to alter my testimony. If things go against him, he will have to suffer the consequences—that’s all!”

“But that is all I require of you—simply to tell the truth. There can’t be anything damaging in your testimony?” The lawyer was evidently a bit worried over Elinor’s peculiar attitude.

“That depends entirely upon how you look at it,” she replied frigidly. “All I know is that Howard quarreled with me at home early in the evening, when I told him I was going to Templeton’s——”

“I didn’t quarrel with you, Elinor,” Howard interrupted. “I merely told you what I thought of Druid, and tried to persuade you——”

“I choose to call it quarreling,” she replied loftily, without permitting him to finish.

“Well, what if he did quarrel with you when he discovered that you were associating with the wrong kind of a man?” Hammond spoke up. “That only goes to prove his brotherly love——”

“Brotherly love! Brotherly devotion!” Elinor’s voice rose to a shriek. “I’m sick of the very words! Everyone knows how we have always disagreed! Why we were never in each other’s society for ten minutes without quarreling—even mother and dad can tell you that! And now everyone expects me to shout from the housetops and proclaim him my valiant defender!” She sneered and her most ardent admirer would not have called Elinor Benton beautiful at that moment of denouncing her brother. “Well, I refuse to do it!” she hastened on, and the stubbornness that had been her birthright was clearly in the ascendant as she spoke. “He killed the man I loved! You can never make me see anything heroic in that!”

“Very well, then, if that’s your attitude, I see no use in my attempting to question you at all.” Hammond laid down his pen. “I can only trust to your sense of justice in answering the questions at the inquest. I have but one request to make, and that is that you will not deliberately try to place a false conception upon everything you say?”

“You need never fear, Mr. Hammond,” she answered. “I shall be perfectly truthful.”

“Benton, I’d like to speak with you alone for a moment before we start.” Hammond turned bluntly to Hugh. “Will you step in here?” He opened the door of a smaller office.

Hugh followed him, Elinor and Howard remaining where they were, each one busy with his and her own thoughts. They may as well have been total strangers for all the notice they deigned to take of one another.

“Hugh,” Hammond began, as soon as they were alone, “I know that you and I parted in anger a short while ago, and that I have since offered my services to Mrs. Benton and Howard. But I can’t allow our personal grievances to stand between right and wrong. It is my duty to warn you that if you don’t use your influence with Elinor before the inquest, I am afraid her testimony is going to do Howard a great deal of damage.”

“I have very little influence over her, I’m sorry to say,” Hugh answered unconcernedly. “She is terribly embittered.”

“But do you realize what this means to your son?”

“I haven’t any son.”

Hugh Benton’s sharp declaration showed plainly that all the embitterment in the Benton family was not monopolized by his daughter.

“Why—why—” Hammond found it difficult to control himself. “You can’t actually be mean enough to want to see the boy get the worst of it?” he blurted.

“I’ll do the best I can with Elinor,” carelessly answered the financier. “I can’t promise any more. Hadn’t we better go?”

“By all means, let’s go. If we remain here much longer, I’ll not be responsible for myself!” Hammond banged the door shut as they returned to the other room.

Elinor Benton was one of the last witnesses to be examined at the inquest into the death of Templeton Druid. She took the stand, trembling, nervous, and in an apparently dazed condition. She stumbled and faltered over her answers. More than once she had to be reprimanded sharply.

John Hammond was thoroughly exasperated. He knew so well the workings of the girl’s mind. But he saw that the face of every juryman bore a look of pity as he took in the pitiful little figure in black with the sad eyes and the distress over the death of the man she loved so evident, though as evidently torn between that love and the love she felt for her own brother, who had been the cause of the tragedy.

True, Elinor Benton was being true to her promise. She was telling the truth, but as each word came from her tight lips as though forced, telling glances passed between the newspapermen seated at the long table in the center of the room, scribbling for dear life. This was a story something like, those glances said! Aside from Hammond and Howard himself, not one in that packed court room (for the inquest had brought out an eager crowd of morbid curiosity seekers to dip into this scandal which touched the lives of those of high estate) could even guess at the double meaning that was in each word that fell hesitatingly from the society beauty’s lips.

Hammond realized that the best he could do for Howard was to cut short Elinor’s testimony as quickly as possible. But he was not quicker than she. In a moment she had grasped his intention. She wavered for a second, then both hands went to her face and her head bowed forward as she wept silently

for a moment. Then she looked up, and it was with stricken eyes and the bewildering despair of a child who did not understand that she hurled the bomb that she knew would bring both brother and mother into the dust. For a moment there was an awed silence. The furious scribbling of the newspaper men could be heard. One of them half stood up as he beckoned to a messenger boy in back of him.

“Here!” he whispered in a rasping voice that cut the stillness. “Shoot this along for the extra. Tell the boss it’s the head!”

From where he stood facing the witness chair, John Hammond caught a glance at the letters that sprawled across the one sheet of copy paper.

SOCIETY GIRL’S TESTIMONY CONVICTS BROTHER

Without another question, John Hammond sat down. The girl had beaten him. For, in that moment of dueling, when the fate of her brother had trembled in the balance, Elinor Benton had looked up with those stricken eyes, those bewildered eyes of a child who did not understand, and her arms had gone out toward her father pleadingly as she wailed; half choked:

“Oh, Daddy! Daddy! I can’t say any more! Please, please, don’t let them ask me any more! I—I—don’t want to incriminate Howard! You warned me to be careful, but you see, they are forcing me to speak!”

At the harsh command of the coroner, Hugh Benton was compelled to explain that his only warning to Elinor had been that she be absolutely truthful.

But Elinor’s victory was complete. The jury returned the verdict of manslaughter.

Elinor sat with her handkerchief to her eyes, her father’s arm protecting about her. Hammond jumped to his feet and rushed over to her.

“I don’t blame you for weeping, Elinor. Let me congratulate you upon your cleverness!”

“Why Mr. Hammond—I did the best I could! After you and Daddy spoke to me, I thought it over,” Elinor looked up at him, as innocently as a child, “and I decided that you were right. After all, he is my brother—so you heard me tell them. I didn’t want to speak—they forced——”

“Please don’t say another word.” Hammond made no effort to conceal his contempt. “You may have succeeded in fooling a great many people, Elinor, but you could never deceive me. You knew exactly what you were doing, and said just the things you wanted to say, yet you made it appear that every word you uttered was dragged from you. The only regret I have is that

Howard ever felt it his duty to defend you. You're a clever woman of the world, my dear, and you could cope with many a woman of forty, despite your youth—and innocence!"

"Oh, Daddy!" Elinor sobbed as she hid her face in his coat sleeve. "Do you hear what he is saying to me? I—I don't deserve it!"

"Never mind, dear," Hugh soothed her, then he turned to Hammond with flashing eyes. "Be careful you don't go too far, Hammond! I've had enough—so has she!"

Howard sat as if stunned. He uttered no word, and he stared at the floor, his eyes riveted upon some invisible object. Elinor and Hugh passed him on their way out.

"I'm sorry about this, Howard," Hugh said, trying to speak kindly. "But don't worry—Hammond will get you out of it all right."

Elinor smiled as she added her mite: "I did the very best I could for you, Howard."

He didn't attempt to answer either one of them, and was still staring at nothing, when Hammond touched him on the arm.

"There, there, my boy—you mustn't allow this to discourage you," he said cheerfully. "It only means that it will take longer, and put us to a little more trouble, but such evidence can never convict you."

"I'm not thinking about that, Mr. Hammond—I'm not afraid! I just can't realize that my sister has really done this terrible thing to me. Why, she didn't want to have them dismiss me! She was anxious for them to bring in a charge against me! Just think of it—my own sister!"

"It does seem terrible, Howard, but she'll suffer for it a great deal more than you will. At present her mind is filled with but one thought, and that is, revenge. But it won't be long before remorse will step in."

"I can't understand her still loving that fellow after it has been proven to her that he was a married man," Howard said wonderingly. "His intentions toward her were not honorable—and she knew it!"

"It's a strange thing, my boy—but women always seem to love that sort of a man—but it isn't really love with Elinor. She was infatuated with him true enough, and now she imagines herself the heroine of a tragic love affair. This posing in the limelight isn't quite as distasteful to her as she would have you think."

"How was it, Mr. Hammond," Howard questioned, "that you and I saw through her actions instantly when she was on the stand, and yet dad

believed her implicitly, and thought she was hysterical and not accountable for what she was saying?"

Hammond smiled knowingly. "Your father believed her because he wanted to believe her. But now, my boy, we must telephone your mother."

"Poor mother! Can you imagine the shock this will be to her? She thought it would all be over in a few hours, and now, there may be months of anxiety ahead of her."

"Oh no," Hammond hastened to assure him, "it will never take that long. We'll have it rushed through as expeditiously as possible. Come, boy," and the hand he laid on the stricken youth's shoulder held all the gentleness and sympathy the father had denied.

Marjorie was pacing up and down the living room when the summons came. She had passed the never-ending afternoon she knew not how. Half of the time she had spent upon her knees within the sanctuary of her own room, praying as she had not prayed in years. The remainder of the time she had traveled throughout the house, covering an area of miles, it seemed.

She reached the telephone white and trembling. "Yes," she faltered, her hands shaking so violently she could scarcely hold the receiver to her ear.

"Mrs. Benton," Hammond's voice sounded quite cheerful, "we were detained a little longer than I expected. I know you have been waiting to hear from us."

"Yes—yes—" came the eager voice, "I'm almost wild with anxiety. Is—is everything all right?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. Benton. Everything's all right, or rather, everything's going to be all right. The verdict was not exactly what we looked for, but that doesn't mean a thing outside of a little extra work and inconvenience. There's not the least necessity for you to worry at all." He was doing his best to make as light of it as possible.

"What—what was the verdict?" she barely breathed.

It was a second or two before the reply came; then his voice seemed miles away, as he said slowly: "Manslaughter. Here, Mrs. Benton, Howard has something to say to you." There was no answer. "I say—Mrs. Benton, are you there?" He shook the hook violently. All was silent at the other end of the wire.

Marjorie Benton had slipped quietly to the floor, a little crushed heap of unconsciousness.

Howard snatched the telephone away from Hammond. "Hello, mother, I'm all right. Why don't you speak? I——"

"What's the trouble?" the operator cut in. "Didn't you get your party?"

"Why, yes, I was talking to her—we must have been disconnected."

"Wait a minute."

"What is it, do you suppose?" Howard turned anxiously to Hammond.

"You haven't been disconnected," Central returned. "They've left the receiver off the hook at the other end, and we can't get a reply."

"Something's happened to my mother!" Howard dropped the 'phone to leap for the door. "The shock may have killed her!"

"I'll go with you, Howard." Hammond hurried him below to the waiting car. "I don't believe it's anything serious. She fainted most likely. Poor little woman!"

All the way home, although the chauffeur exceeded the speed limit at every opportunity, the car, to Howard, seemed actually to crawl.

Marjorie Benton had been picked up by Griggs and the housekeeper, and carefully put to bed. She regained consciousness in time to prevent them from sending for the doctor.

"It's nothing at all," she assured them. "I wouldn't think of having Doctor Morton."

"But Mrs. Benton!" The housekeeper leaned over her solicitously. "You're so white, and it was some time before we could bring you around."

"I've been under a terrific strain for some time, Mrs. Williams. This little spell doesn't mean a thing otherwise than a sort of let-down. All I need is a couple of hours' rest to set me right."

"Very well, ma'am," Mrs. Williams assented. "You're the best judge, I suppose—although I think you're a lot sicker than you imagine."

"Dear, kind Mrs. Williams!" Marjorie smiled gratefully. "Just lower the shades and I'll try to relax. Only the very moment Mr. Howard comes in, send him to me."

"Yes, ma'am—just ring if you should need me." She did as her mistress requested, and left the room, softly closing the door behind her.

Left to herself, the stricken woman buried her head in the pillow and gave free vent to her grief. Her frail body was shaken like a reed, as she went from one paroxysm of convulsive sobbing into another. One word rang in her ears like a death knell—Manslaughter! Manslaughter! She was totally

unaware of the opening of the door, until Howard knelt impetuously beside her.

“How are you, mother?” he asked worriedly. “Mrs. Williams tells me you had a severe fainting spell.”

“Oh, my dear! My dear!” She gathered him in her arms, and held him as though she would never let him go again. “I’m—I’m perfectly well now!” With all her might she tried to force a smile through her tears. “But you, dear, are you nervous—or frightened?”

“Why *no*, mother dear.” (It sounded almost like bravado.) “As far as I’m concerned, I’m as calm as can be! It’s only about you that I’m nervous and worried.”

“Well, you won’t have to be.” She sat up and resolutely brushed the tears from her eyes. “I’ll show you from now on, dear, that I can be just as brave as you.”

“That’s the way to talk.” He kissed her again. “Just make up your mind that there isn’t anything to worry about, and there won’t be! Mr. Hammond says: ‘there are two kinds of people in the world—the negatives and the positives—and the positives always come out on top!’ ”

“There’s a good deal of logic to that, just as there is to everything Mr. Hammond says. What a splendid man he is!” She was fervent in her encomium.

“Indeed he is, and that reminds me,” he said as he placed her gently back among the pillows, “he’s downstairs now. He brought me home when we couldn’t get a response from you at the telephone. I think he was as badly frightened as I.”

“You’ll thank him for me, for his kindness, won’t you, dear? And ask him to pardon me for not coming down? I do feel the need of a little rest—unless it is important for him to see me.”

“Just you rest, dearest! There isn’t a thing for him to see you about now. I’ll come back later and sit beside you, ready to tell you whatever you wish to know.”

She closed her eyes obediently and heaved a little sigh of contentment, as she heard him hurrying down the stairs. It had taken a dreadful crisis to bring her boy to her arms; but the overwhelming joy the knowledge of possessing his love gave her, made all the suffering of years fade into insignificance.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the breaking up of the Benton home, there were no distressing leave-takings. The father was the first to go. Indeed, it cannot be said that he ever made The Castle his home again after the night he spent there preceding the inquest into the death of Templeton Druid and his son's consequent indictment on the charge of manslaughter.

How much of this was due to Geraldine DeLacy's influence it would be hard to say. The man himself would have denied that she in any way held sway over his movements, but the subtle suggestions she was able to throw out, always with words of love and with the persuasiveness of her own logic that Hugh must do things for his own sake, were balm to the man whose selfishness had grown so great that he was unable to see that there was anything paramount to his own desires.

So on the day following the tragic dénouement in the inquest room, Hugh Benton installed himself in a suite of rooms in one of the city's most fashionable hotels. Elinor was enthusiastic when she learned where he had gone. It had always been her desire to live in just such a fashion, and she gleefully welcomed the opportunity of freedom it would give her. She knew that her father's chaperonage would at no time be irksome.

"How wonderful, Daddy!" she exclaimed as she flew from one wide window of his sitting room to another to look out over the towering roofs of the humming city. "When may I come? And where are you going to put me?"

When her father took her into the adjoining suite he had reserved for her and led her into the blue silk-lined boudoir which was its crowning glory, her happiness knew no bounds. She forgot the tragedy that hung over her brother and mother, forgot everything save that she was to be a woman of the world, and live her life to please herself in such surroundings. Her father looked on with pleased eyes as he saw her rapture.

"It's ready for you, baby, whenever you like, but do you think you should leave—just yet?" He was a little dubious about the proprieties. The lessons of years are not unlearned in hours.

Elinor pouted.

"What's the use of staying with those others any longer?" she asked. "Why, Daddy, you have no idea how disagreeable it all is—how they look at

me (if they do at all), as though I were the criminal, instead of——”

Hugh Benton turned on his heel. It grated to hear his son referred to as a criminal, even from his own daughter.

Shut up in her own rooms, the rooms where she had planned so many hours of happiness when son and daughter should be home, Marjorie Benton tried to shut her ears to the bustle of preparations for departure. But each thump of a trunk as she heard it carried from her daughter’s room made an added bruise on her lacerated heart—gave her a sense of loss that even all of Howard’s loving protection (he was the only one who came to break her solitude) could not entirely heal. Her baby was going away from her! It was her baby who had chosen to do this thing!

On the day that the girl’s father came for her to take her to her new hotel home, she met him outside the door. She flew into his arms with eagerness. But, with one foot on the running board of his car, her eyes turned backward for a moment. She looked up at Hugh for guidance.

“Do you think—do you think, Daddy,” she faltered, confused, “that I ought to say good-by?”

Hugh Benton’s thoughts were not on the daughter he was taking from home and mother. He had no time to discuss matters, nor to wait while Elinor made up her mind. He was to meet Geraldine DeLacy at their favorite little café for lunch in an hour (their regular daily meeting) and he was eager not to be late. He shrugged indifferently, as he held open the door of the limousine.

“Suit yourself, my dear,” he said, “but I can’t see——”

“Nor I!” Elinor leaped lightly into the machine. “What’s the use of good-bys? I’ve had enough of scenes—forever.”

And she turned her face resolutely toward the new life.

Geraldine DeLacy was kept waiting for a short time, but when she saw Hugh Benton’s tall familiar figure coming toward her, her mood of pettishness passed as though a hand had wiped out the lines from her face, and it was a smiling eager countenance with which she greeted him as he bent over her hand a moment before taking the chair opposite her in their favorite little corner in the downtown café. Geraldine DeLacy was a careful player. She knew there was yet much to lose by a false move, and she prided herself that never yet had anyone called to her, “Checkmate!” There was the Benton money, for instance. Something must be devised—It would never do to have Marjorie Benton come out victor there, and she knew quite well through her familiarity with the divorce proceedings that were already under way in less than two weeks after Hugh had gained Marjorie’s permission to

start them, that Hugh intended to live up to the letter of his promise to his wife, given that night he had forced her hand.

So it was with no suggestion either of her discontent in this matter, nor of the bad temper that had spent itself over having been kept waiting that the young widow spoke softly to the man who apologized.

“Of course, it was long waiting, Hugh, dear,” she pouted prettily. “But it’s always an age if I have to wait for you a moment! And to think before I knew you I never thought I could miss anyone in the world!”

“I knew you would understand, little one,” he smiled tenderly, “you always do! But I was kept unconscionably late to-day for several reasons. First, Elinor—I told you I had installed her at the Alliston with me, did I not?” Geraldine nodded, but as she bent over her plate of oysters picking at them with the tiny fork, Hugh Benton could not see the annoyance in the dropped eyes. “Then,” he went on, “just as I was ready to leave the office, one of those new lawyers of mine dropped in. I’ll say I’m going to have trouble making them understand that they must make appointments like other people,—Hammond always understood such things so well—and they had a lot of questions to ask about that settlement of mine——”

Mrs. DeLacy showed signs of quickening interest, but her eyes were still upon her plate as she thought best how to inject some of her own ideas into the man’s reasoning.

“It’s all so maddening,” Hugh went on, “to be tied up in this manner over money! Here all I want in the world is you,—and you want me, I’m sure, little one,” Geraldine lifted her eyes to flash him a dazzling smile of happiness and understanding, “and they keep us——”

Geraldine DeLacy laid down her fork and leaned across the table toward her companion, gazing at him thoughtfully and consideringly, as though there were something vital she wished to say, but wanted to be sure of her ground. Hugh smiled tenderly.

“What’s on your mind, dear?” he laughed. “Come on—we’re not going to let you be serious as that without an explanation.”

“I was just thinking——”

“With any other woman, I’d say, ‘Be careful!’ ” he assured her, with a benignant grin. Hugh Benton still believed in the vast superiority of the masculine. But Geraldine did not answer his smile. It must be something serious she was considering.

“If I were to be very frank with you, Hugh,” she began hesitatingly, and her eyes held only a look of adoration, and something that seemed to tell his

vanity that she feared to displease him by anything she might say, “would you consider me presuming or guilty of an unpardonable interference in your affairs?”

“My dear, how little you know me! You know I am always glad to listen to anything you may have to say.”

“Well, then,” she was most cautious, still hesitating, “does Marjorie know exactly how much you are worth? Have you always taken her into your confidence regarding your financial standing? Please do not think my asking these questions strange—you will soon see, dear, that I have only your interest at heart.”

“Why, no,” he answered, but puzzled at this new interest of the woman who had always so carefully refrained from the mention of money, “Marjorie doesn’t know anything about my affairs.”

The semi-lighting effects of the café and her large, drooping hat, prevented him from seeing the triumphant gleam in the woman’s eyes.

“When we first came to New York,” he explained, “we used to discuss all the transactions of the office, but that was only for a very short time. For years she has not shown the slightest interest in me or my doings. I have paid all the bills and given her a liberal allowance, nearly all of which she invested in charity.”

“How about Mr. Hammond? Does he happen to know just what you are worth?”

“My dear, I see that you know very little about business,” he replied laughingly, “or else you would understand that when one speculates as I do, no one knows—not even myself—just what I am worth.”

“You’re right—I know nothing whatever about business,” she pouted childishly. “I’m only trying, in my poor little way, to prevent you from doing yourself a great injustice.”

“An injustice?”

“Yes! Oh my dear! You’re so wonderful—so generous—that you never even stop to consider yourself for a moment! No, you mustn’t interrupt me,” as she leaned across the table, and gave him a gentle pat on the hand. “You’ve been an ideal husband and father all these years. It isn’t your fault if you have been misunderstood by your wife, and unappreciated by your son. Then why should you, at your time of life, beggar yourself so that your money may be recklessly squandered by an irresponsible boy?”

“But I’m not making a settlement upon Howard. It’s Marjorie I’m——”

“Hugh! You’re as gullible as a child!” she smiled. “Don’t you know she will give every dollar she possesses to Howard, especially after you disinherited him because he sided with her.”

“I never thought of that,” he acknowledged comprehendingly. “You’re absolutely right. It is precisely what she would do.”

“Just how much did you promise to—give her?” she asked eagerly.

“I told her I would give her three-quarters of my possessions if she would consent to grant me my freedom.”

“You—you—” She dug her finger-nails deep into her palm. Rage flamed inwardly in spite of her efforts at self-control and her soft-spoken words—“liberal, big-hearted darling! That is just what I would have expected you to do—without once giving yourself a thought!”

“I would have given anything to be free—for you, darling—and I could afford to be generous. I feel more capable than ever of making many a fortune,” he replied, with great confidence.

“I haven’t the least doubt of your capabilities, dear. Only you happened to remark but an hour ago that this was one of the most precarious years frenzied finance has ever known. Therefore, I think,” she pleaded wistfully, “you should exercise your better judgment.”

“What is it you would advise me doing? Have you a suggestion to offer?”

“Y-e-es, I think so,” she hesitated, as though not sure of herself. “Of course, I know very little about business, as you know, but to me it seems a good one.” She leaned forward animatedly. “As long as Marjorie is entirely ignorant of just how much you are actually worth, why don’t you give her a great deal less, and allow her to think, she is getting—exactly what you promised her?”

“Why—why—” he stammered, “wouldn’t that be dishonest?”

“Not at all!” she replied emphatically. “Merely diplomatic.”

“Somehow, it doesn’t seem fair—my conscience,—why dear, what is the trouble?” he inquired anxiously, as Geraldine without warning placed her handkerchief to her eyes and began weeping silently.

“You—you don’t know how you hurt me, Hugh! Why—why—you as much as imply that I was suggesting to you an act of dishonesty, when the only thing that entered my mind was your welfare. As far as I am concerned, I told you once before, dear—that I’d marry you if you were a pauper.”

“Forgive me, dearest, and dry your eyes, I implore you. How can you imagine, for a moment, that I would intentionally offend you?”

“I’m such a baby,” she replied, drying her eyes obediently, “and my great love for you would carry me beyond all sense of reasoning. Of course, if you think there is anything wrong about my suggestion, why then——”

“I’m not trying to say there is anything wrong about it—only—I have always been open and above board in all my dealings,—” he toyed nervously with his own fork,—“I should feel rather uncomfortable about doing anything underhanded.”

But the plotter could see her victim was weakening. She hastened to make the most of it.

“Why, my dear, you couldn’t even harbor a dishonest thought! I can’t help wondering just a little how you, who are always so very considerate of others, have apparently forgotten all about Elinor.”

“Elinor? What has she to do with it?”

“A great deal, I think,” she replied. “You know, Elinor volunteered of her own free will to remain with you, therefore it does not seem fair to give so much to Marjorie and Howard, while Elinor will be compelled to depend solely upon your further success for her share. It is true that you have always been most fortunate—but my dear, we can never tell just when the tide may turn.”

“And what about you?” He looked at her admiringly. “You wonderful woman! All of your pleadings have been for me and for Elinor—never once have you mentioned yourself as deserving of a little consideration!”

“There isn’t a thing in the world that I need or want outside of your love,” she answered sweetly.

“That you shall always have,” he said fervently as he reached across the table and his big white hand crushed her small one tenderly. “And a great many things besides. You have made me view matters in an entirely different light. I shall act accordingly.”

So it was that when a few days later his lawyer handed Marjorie his check after the signing of the necessary documents, the divorced wife found it difficult to suppress her genuine surprise.

“Is there anything wrong, Mrs. Benton?” the lawyer inquired, noticing her peculiar expression.

“Well—I—I am a little surprised—at the amount!” She glanced at the paper in her hand again. “I have always been under the impression that Mr. Benton was a very wealthy man.”

“There was never a certain sum stipulated, was there?”

“Why, no—Mr. Benton agreed to give me three-quarters of all he possessed, but if *this* amount is in accordance with that promise—then he is worth a great deal less than I ever imagined.”

“You know that Mr. Benton speculates in vast sums daily; his fortune is bound to fluctuate. Would you care to send a message to him?” he asked, as he reached for his hat.

“No, thank you. This is perfectly—satisfactory,” she replied.

But with the memory of that check in mind, and of the need of vast sums for the defense of her son in mind, Marjorie Benton, in making her own departure from The Castle, did not follow her husband’s example and install herself and her son in a fashionable, expensive hotel. Instead, she chose a much smaller one further uptown—a hostelry where exclusiveness superseded the pomp of the hotel home which housed her former husband and her daughter.

Marjorie could see that Howard was somewhat questioning at the move she made, though he said nothing. She was in a quandary. She would have liked to explain to Howard that she was not being penurious, not following the conservative bent which had so long been the cause of so much trouble in the Benton family, but she could not. She could not explain to him. He had lost all respect for his father as it was, and she felt she could not be the one to plant the seed of hatred in his heart.

Howard, on the other hand, had been deeply hurt when his mother had neglected to mention to him just what was the sum of the settlement upon her. The confidence she failed to place in him gave him the impression of not being trusted. But his pride would not permit him to question her; he feared she might misconstrue his motive, and consider his interest a selfish one.

Through all her travail Marjorie Benton had had one other consolation save her son. John Hammond had proven himself the friend he had offered to be on the morning he had told her he was no longer her husband’s, but her own and her son’s representative. Each day during the progress of the suit, he had called her up or seen her, and his gentle courtesy had done much to lighten her burden. Now he was busy with Howard’s affairs, and because of the lawyer’s deep interest and enthusiasm, the mother had laid aside much of her worry for Howard, believing that it was an assured thing that John Hammond would acquit him.

In a way, she was beginning to be more cheerful, to look at the future as not all dark, in spite of the fact that her resources were far from what she had believed they would be. However, she argued, if she and Howard lived as

carefully as possible, they need never want until her son should himself be in a position to add to their income,—a prospect that was a surety with Marjorie since Howard had been speaking so earnestly about it. He had only to place himself—to find himself—and surely she and the boy themselves had enough influential friends to see that he got a start.

Hammond had called her up one morning to assure her that her son's affairs were progressing rapidly, and to say that the case had been given a place on the calendar which would be reached in a week or two. She was so glad that it would soon be over.

All during her luncheon, which she ate alone—Howard had telephoned he would be detained in the city—she thought of the approaching trial, and her heart warmed as she pictured the great lawyer defending her son. What a man he was! What a friend he had proven! And, what was as much to Marjorie Benton in her straitened circumstances, how much it meant to both Howard and herself that John Hammond persisted in his purpose to handle the matter without fees.

She looked up from the book she had been idly scanning at her solitary meal to see her son standing in the door. So white and strained he was, so actually ill he seemed that the mother's hand went to her throat to ease the choking lump that rose. What could have happened now?

“Howard!” she cried chokingly. “What is it, dear? What is wrong?”

Without a word, he crossed to his mother's chair and laid before her the paper he held. The black type stared up at her, and for a moment, she could not take it in.

PROMINENT LAWYER KILLED IN STREET
AS AUTOS COLLIDE
JOHN HAMMOND, FORMER SENATOR
DIES INSTANTLY

Tears that had not come for so long to the eyes of Marjorie Benton, who had believed they had dried forever, gathered under the hot lids. She could not read further. She looked up at her son, standing there with his hopeless expression, and her arms went out to him as she hid her face on his rough coat.

“Oh, my dear! My dear!” she cried heart-rendingly, “it can't be true! We've lost our best friend!”

Howard was tender as he stroked her head. But the stricken expression went from his eyes. He straightened himself, then leaned over his mother

and lifted her head to look directly at her.

“No, mother,” he said gently. “We’ve lost a friend—a wonderful friend—but not our best friend while you or I live!”

The papers were all loud in their praise of the prominent man. They spoke of him in terms of profound respect and admiration. He had won a great name and enviable reputation for himself, by his many acts of benevolence and absolute integrity in all his dealings. There were many he had befriended who mourned him sincerely.

But there were none who felt his loss as keenly as Marjorie and Howard Benton. They knew they had lost a friend who could not be replaced.

With the tragedy occurring so near the beginning of Howard’s trial, the days were busy ones that followed. New counsel had to be procured, and when, through friends, Monroe Garden, a celebrated trial lawyer, had been called into the case, they found that the work of weeks had to be gone over. With a sinking heart, too, Marjorie Benton found that it would strain her resources if the matter should be long delayed.

And delayed it was. Mr. Garden’s ideas were different from Hammond’s. The latter had been all for rushing the matter through. He fought for delay upon delay, explaining to his impatient clients that it was the best thing to do.

Perhaps he was right. For after several months of anxiety and nerve-racking suspense, Howard was acquitted!

The strain upon Marjorie had been frightful—both upon her mentality and her bank account. There had been one expense after the other, and as she already knew, the lawyer’s fee was exorbitant. She was so overjoyed at the verdict, though, that she paid him gladly, and it was not until it was all over, that she realized to the full extent how terribly her funds had been depleted.

But it was with a heart full of thankfulness, a deep sigh of relief that she had her son—that he stood free and cleared of intent of crime before the world—that Marjorie Benton turned to take up the slackened thread of her life. There was so much to hope for. And surely all that could possibly happen had happened, and there must now be some peace and happiness awaiting her.

It was with a ruder shock than any that had preceded that the mother was awakened from her new dream. Ever since his acquittal Howard had seemed listless, not entirely himself. She had put this down to the strain, however, knowing well how it had affected her, too. Howard would soon be himself, and they would have a wonderful life together.

She was preparing to leave her room for the dining room in the hotel one morning—(she always breakfasted early with him these days) when word was brought her that her son was ill. She rushed into his room to find that the boy had collapsed as he tried to leave his bed. The physician who was hastily summoned advised an immediate removal, and before an hour had passed, Howard Benton was in a small room in a sanitarium, tossing in the feverish delirium of typhoid. The weeks he laid there passed into months; one complication on another set in, for his constitution was in a badly run-down condition, owing to the months of anxiety he had been obliged to endure during his trial.

There was something martyrlike in the way Marjorie managed to bear up under her heavy cross. She grew haggard and pale as she hovered near the bedside of her boy day and night. It was only when the doctor threatened to bar her from the room entirely, that she consented to go home for a few hours' rest at night. But even then she didn't rest. She either paced the floor in her anguish and despair, or she knelt beside her bed praying to God not to take her beloved boy from her now—now that she had just found him.

And God in His great mercy, heard her prayers, for Howard began slowly to fight his way back again to health and strength. It was then, in these days of convalescence that the wonderful devotion between mother and son became noticeable to everyone connected with the sanitarium.

Outside of going to her room for a few hours at night, she never left him for a minute. She read to him by the hour, played all sorts of games with him, such as a small boy might have enjoyed, and when he was able to be taken out a bit, she wheeled him up and down the corridor, or out into the garden without ever tiring.

On his part, he was never happy unless she was beside him. He wouldn't go to sleep at night without holding her hands, and in the morning, if she was delayed ten minutes in arriving, he would insist upon the nurse telephoning to find out whether anything had happened.

It was beautiful—this great love—to all who witnessed it. Especially was it so to Marjorie herself. She fairly reveled in it. Her soul, love-starved for so many years, reached out passionately for this new-found joy.

In Howard's presence she was always smiling and cheerful. Never for a moment did she permit him to think that there was anything wrong. No matter how hard she would be obliged to struggle, she would never reveal to him the true state of their affairs until he had completely recovered.

It was amazing to her the way her money seemed to diminish as if by magic. There wasn't anyone she could appeal to. Hugh and Elinor had left

for Paris a few days after the trial ended, and even if Hugh had not gone, she would have died before appealing to him. He had treated her shamefully all through the trial, coming into court day after day, without once speaking to her, or even noticing her. Of course, she never guessed that he was really ashamed to look at her. Conscience is a difficult tormentor at times.

The day before they sailed, Elinor called her on the 'phone.

"We're leaving for Europe to-morrow, mother," she announced. "May I come out to see you before we go?"

"I really can't see why you should wish to see me, Elinor," she answered as coolly as her daughter had spoken, but her heart was beating madly.

"Well, I'm going a long ways from here, and somehow—I should like you—to wish me luck." There was a little sob in her voice.

"I do wish you the best luck in the world—*always*," Marjorie replied heartily; "only I don't feel as if I could stand seeing you just yet."

"I'm sorry, mother. Good-by."

Marjorie heard the receiver click at the other end of the line.

Elinor and Hugh had passed out of her life.

When she discovered her funds dwindling away to almost nothing, she endeavored to economize in every possible way. She gave up their rooms in the hotel where Howard had fallen ill, and moved into a back-room in a private dwelling close to the sanitarium, explaining to Howard that she had made the change in order to be nearer him.

One morning, she entered Howard's room, expecting to find him sitting up in bed finishing his breakfast as usual. To her great surprise, he rushed toward her and grabbed her in his arms. He was dressed for the street, while his suitcase stood in the corner, packed and strapped.

"Hello, dearest!" he cried, kissing her fondly, "what do you think of your boy now?"

"Why, darling—what does this mean?" She struggled out of his embrace and looked about her in surprise.

"It means that I'm perfectly well, mother—and able to go home with you now." He kissed her again. "I knew all about it yesterday, but I begged Doctor Simpson and Miss Sanders not to tell you. I wanted the pleasure of surprising you myself. Are you happy, dear?"

"Happy to see you well and able to leave here? Why, darling, you know how happy I am, only—only—" she stammered helplessly, "I—I wish you had told me yesterday."

“But why, mother? I can’t see why it was necessary to tell you in advance? All you have to do is to call a taxi and take me home.”

“Well—you see, dear—” she hesitated slightly, “I wanted to know a day or two in advance so that I could look for a small apartment, or else engage another room—in the house—where I am now living.”

“Another room? Why, dearest, do you mean to say that you have only one room?”

“Why yes—you see——”

“I can’t understand it! Surely you knew I wasn’t going to remain here forever! You should have remained in your comfortable room at the hotel. You could have easily taken a taxi back and forth from here.”

“Well I—I—” The tears she had held back in his presence for those long months suddenly gushed forth. She had reached the end of her strength. Sobs shook her.

“Dearest, *what* is it? Sit here and tell me all about it.” Howard placed her tenderly in the rocker, and drew a chair for himself close beside her.

“No—no—it’s nothing at all.” She tried hard to check her tears as she protested, but unavailingly. “I’ll tell you as soon as you’re well and strong, but now——”

“I’m well and strong now! Why Doctor Simpson says I’m in a better physical condition than I’ve ever been since I was a boy. I insist upon your telling me just exactly what it is that is troubling you, mother,” he said firmly.

“Very well, dear.” She realized it was useless to refuse.

So she told him everything,—just what amount of money Hugh had given her and exactly how much of it had been spent.

“Oh, mother, dear, if you had only mentioned it to me at the time,” he reproached her gently. “You can’t imagine how hurt I was because you failed to tell me. I thought it was because you didn’t trust me enough.”

“No, no, it wasn’t that,” she hastened to assure him. “I didn’t wish you to feel more embittered toward your father.”

“I’d have gone to him at the time and told him plainly just what I thought of him!” he exclaimed indignantly. “He cheated you, mother—that’s what he did—and all because of that miserable creature!”

“Hush, dear, you’re only exciting yourself needlessly,” she cautioned him, “and it won’t do a bit of good. The thing is this—just what are we going to do?”

“*We* are not going to do anything, dearest.” He put his arms tenderly about her. “*I’m* going to do it all. I’m going to work, and take care of you the rest of your life!”

CHAPTER XIX

Hugh Benton had lost no time (nor had the widow allowed him, for that matter) after obtaining his divorce decree, in marrying Geraldine DeLacy. Some of their intimates, many of the more conservative element or the society in which they moved, believed that the marriage had occurred indecently soon after Marjorie had been put aside. But in general society let them alone to go their own way. Shoulders were raised eloquently in a few quarters, in others the names of Hugh Benton and the former Mrs. DeLacy were quietly erased from invitation lists, but the scandal was (as is so often the case among the busy four or five thousand who were once four hundred) not long in giving place to something more recent. Society was beginning to yawn when the name of Benton was mentioned.

The financier, happy in the possession of the woman with whom he was so deeply infatuated; his new wife, elated at the good fortune she had so triumphantly maneuvered, apparently cared not a whit for what society might say. Knowing most of them as she did, Geraldine DeLacy Benton smiled knowingly into her dressing table mirror, as she told herself that all would come in good time. With Hugh Benton's money at her command, she was more than willing to wait her time to take the social leadership she felt so confidently would be hers before long.

Only Elinor was dissatisfied. The freedom she had been so happy over having had not brought her the joy she had expected it to. Even before leaving for Europe with her father and newly acquired step-mother, she had felt the sting of disapproval, and it had only made her more misanthropic than she was already speedily becoming. She could not help noticing that many of her own friends were avoiding her. Invitations were noticeably scarce. But it was some time before she took notice of this, since, in her new freedom, she had taken to visiting the more public tea and dance rooms in company with her various admirers, all of whom seemed to flock around her more than ever, in contradistinction to the cooling ardor for her friendship of their sisters and mothers. It was not until she met Rosebud Greely in the Plaza one afternoon that the truth of the matter was brought home to her, though. Elinor touched the girl on the arm as Rosebud passed through the aisle on her way to a table on the other side of the room, where her mother and some friends were sitting.

“Hello, Rosebud!” she greeted. “I’ve been waiting and waiting for you to come and see my new quarters. Come down to the hotel and have tea with me to-morrow, won’t you?”

Rosebud Greeley, usually so open, so ready for anything, was noticeably uncomfortable. She cast a furtive glance across the room toward her mother.

“’Fraid I can’t, Elinor,” she said nervously. “The mater—you know _____”

Elinor lifted surprised eyebrows.

“Why, what can she have against me?” was her hurt query.

Rosebud shook her head and turned to hurry along. But the hurt look in Elinor’s eyes touched the girl’s tender heart, and she gently brushed Elinor Benton’s arm. “Don’t you worry, old dear,” she advised. “It’ll all blow over—it’s so silly anyhow—but you must know what everyone is saying because you’re flying around unchaperoned, and you know my mater. Just the same, I wish I could do what you’re doing for a while!” She took Elinor in enviously and nodded her head toward the table the Benton heiress had left where a blasé youth was sitting waiting for her. “Try to see you some more, some time. Bye!”

Elinor could hardly realize it. So they were saying things about her, were they? Well, she’d show them! Her father——

She could hardly get out of the place quickly enough to tell him. With head held haughtily high, she left the tea room, looking neither to right nor left at the many she knew who were seeing her. But her cheeks flamed hotly as instinct told her she was the subject of conversation at more than one table that she swept by.

Hugh Benton was sympathetic and gentle as he had been since Elinor had chosen to go with him. But he did not take the matter as seriously as she had thought he should. There were matters on his own mind clamoring for attention. One of these was that he had not told his daughter of his intended marriage to Geraldine DeLacy—for the incident of the Plaza tea had occurred before Elinor had any idea her father contemplated re-marriage. Elinor had known, of course, of his infatuation for the widow, and that she had been the cause of the differences between her father and mother. Equally, of course, she had heard much of the gossip concerning the two. But, loving her father as she did, knowing him as she believed she did, it had not entered her head that Hugh Benton would really marry Mrs. DeLacy. And this Hugh Benton knew.

He seized on his daughter’s humiliating experience for an entering wedge for his confession.

“Poor little girl,” he sympathized. “So she’s seeing that her old dad isn’t accepted as a proper chaperon, is she? I was afraid of as much—but never mind, dear,” and he pulled her to him and seated her on his knee. “We’ll fix all that! There really ought to be an older woman to look after you——”

Elinor squirmed about to face him.

“Why, Daddy!” she exclaimed. “Whatever do you mean——” Then as her eyes searched his face, and she saw the half shamed, half triumphant look there, the truth slowly dawned on her. She drew back as if stung. She was surprised, angry by turns. She caught his two arms and shook him furiously.

“Oh, Daddy! Daddy!” she cried. “Surely, you don’t mean to say that you really intend to marry Geraldine DeLacy?”

“Surely, I speak plainly enough, Elinor,” he answered irritably.

“But Daddy—she doesn’t love you! She’ll never make you happy!”

“Please permit me to be the judge of that.” He was very stern as he lifted her from his knees and set her on her feet. “What right have you to say anything about it?”

“The right of one who really loves you, dear.” She threw her arms around his neck in spite of his move to turn away. “One who wants you to be happy. Besides, you’re all I have in the world. I—I can’t bear to lose you.”

“You’ll not lose me, baby!” Once more he was all gentleness. “I’ll be just as close to you as ever. Only you do need a woman’s hand, you know, and Geraldine loves you so devotedly. She’ll be just like a sister to you.”

“I’m glad, Daddy,” Elinor smiled almost sadly, “that you didn’t say she’d be like—a mother—to me. Oh, well, I suppose you’ve quite made up your mind, so nothing I could say would influence you?”

“As you say, I’ve quite made up my mind. I’m not a child; and I never allow anyone to influence me.”

But if Elinor Benton liked the idea of her father’s marriage so little at the time he told her of it, she liked it still less as the days grew into weeks. On the day of the wedding, she knew that the emotion that she held toward Geraldine was hatred; and it increased day by day with the closer relationship. At first, it was prompted by self-pity. She could not overlook the fact that Geraldine had appropriated her place in her father’s heart; but, before long, she began to realize just how little her father really meant to this vain, selfish creature, who had forced herself—yes, she had always been certain of that—into her mother’s place. Her mother! The woman she had held in contempt and ridicule because of her old-fashioned ideas. Why, it

seemed almost like sacrilege to even think of her in the presence of this woman!

She was positively astounded at her father's actions. He was an enigmatical problem, impossible of solution. He permitted himself to be dragged about like a toy poodle. If he passed his opinion about anything or anyone, and it failed to coincide with Geraldine's—well, he changed it, that was all! And in an apologetical and almost cringing manner that fairly nauseated Elinor.

What had happened to this big, powerful, handsome man, of whom she had once been so proud? There were times when she pitied him. There was something pathetic in his anxiety to please this parasite, who with a smile, or a few words of endearment, could send him to the seventh heaven of delight, or with a frown cast him into the very depths of despair.

But if Elinor Benton was astonished at the change that came over her father in less than a year, she would have been more astonished could she have realized the change that had occurred in herself. She would not have known herself—nor would any of her former friends have known her—for the gay, careless, laughter-loving, joyous creature who had played the butterfly for those few months after her *début*.

She was at outs with the world. It seemed that everyone plotted against her. Constant brooding over her "wrongs" soon changed the butterfly into a cynical woman of the world. Her brother had "wronged" her terribly by killing the man she loved, or rather, thought she loved, for now as she looked back upon it all, she realized that what she had felt for Templeton Druid had not been love at all, but merely a schoolgirl's infatuation. Her mother had "wronged" her by refusing ever to see her, and simply shutting her out of her heart and life; and now her father—her Daddy, whom she had idolized had "wronged" her by marrying this clever, designing woman. Geraldine DeLacy had been a most desirable chaperon for her—while she remained Mrs. DeLacy, but as her father's wife—That was an entirely different matter.

So she consoled herself as best she could with violent flirtations with the foreign gallants with which Paris swarmed. Neither her father nor Geraldine appeared either to know or care what she was doing. But somehow, the sweetness of her freedom had palled, and there came times that she wished for a restraining hand. There were more times when she more bitterly wished herself away from her father and his new wife than she had ever, back there in the security of her own boudoir in her sheltered home in "The Castle," wished herself away from it.

One thing she made up her mind to, though, and that was that never would she return with them to her former home. This was the bitterest pill of all. They were going back, her father told her. It was Geraldine's wish. Their year in Paris was almost over when he told them at breakfast one morning that he had cabled Griggs to re-open the place.

He would have preferred disposing of it and purchasing a new place; but Geraldine had firmly made up her mind—a long time ago—that one day she should be mistress of “The Castle”; therefore she insisted upon re-opening it, declaring that she would redecorate it anew, just as soon as they were settled.

But though things had gradually been shaping themselves for a general cataclysm for months, it was not until just before their preparations for sailing were completed that a crisis came. Only Hugh Benton had been placidly unaware of anything wrong. He believed he held the world. He did not know, could not seem to realize, that he was like a child, or a weakling in the hands of his wife. She ruled his every act, his every thought. Like an avalanche, she swept everything before her in the one mad desire to satisfy her unappeasable greed. But her native subtlety had aided her to hide this from Hugh Benton, if not from his daughter. He went about like a man in a dream. He imagined himself to be the happiest of men. He had a young and beautiful wife, who loved him devotedly. What more could he ask? He put the past from him like a bad dream, and lived only in the present. And then suddenly—the awakening!

He had been for a long walk with Geraldine in the afternoon. He had fairly reveled in her gayety, her bubbling wit, the fact that she was his own, and that every man they passed paused to give the dazzling dark-eyed beauty an admiring glance. He had made a note of her admiration of a string of pearls they saw at a famous jeweler's where they had stopped to get a ring she had left for resetting. Then she had gone home before him, as even in Paris, the calls of his vast business across the water took more of his time than he would like to have taken from his wife's side.

When he hurried into the luxurious sitting room of the suite they were occupying, he found Elinor there alone. She was already dressed, and stood looking out of the window in a bored fashion. She did not even turn as she greeted her father, hastening to add:

“Hello, dad. You'll have to hustle and dress for dinner. You know we're going to the opera to-night.” She couldn't have shown less enthusiasm had she announced that it was time to retire.

“It will only take me a few minutes,” he said. “Where's Geraldine?”

Elinor shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "I'm sure I don't know. Dressing, I suppose."

Geraldine swept into the room, magnificently gowned in a striking costume of cloth of silver.

"You're very late, Hugh," she said peevishly. "Where have you been all afternoon?"

"Now, darling. You mustn't be cross—I had something to do. My! How beautiful you are!" He attempted to caress her.

"Please, Hugh," she held him off, "I wish you wouldn't paw all over me! Nanette simply couldn't arrange my hair to suit me to-night! I had to do it myself and it was exasperatingly stubborn!"

"It looks wonderful, darling."

"No, it doesn't!" She walked to the mantel and stared into the mirror. "It looks a fright, but I can't help it, and I did want to look particularly nice to-night."

"Why to-night?" Hugh asked curiously. "To me you always look particularly nice," he added gallantly.

"There are some people here from New York," Geraldine answered his question without paying the slightest heed to his compliment—"people who had the impertinence deliberately to cut me—before we were married. I am looking forward to the pleasure of retaliating. I think the women will feel it a great deal more, if I am looking my best."

"What a disgusting parvenu!" was Elinor's thought as she still stared into the lighted streets.

"What a child you are," Hugh laughed indulgently. "Well, I have something here," and he pulled a long box from his pocket, "that may help you a little. This is what delayed me."

He held the long string of perfectly matched, lustrous pearls before her.

"Oh, you darling!" she exclaimed, as she threw her arms about him, hair forgotten. "You are too good to me! Here, put them on me!"

She stood still while he clasped the pearls and kissed her neck.

"Aren't they wonderful?" She fingered them caressingly, and then rushed to the mirror again. "Elinor!" she turned suddenly. "What do you think of them?"

"I think they are very beautiful," the girl answered simply, as she turned slowly to take in the scene.

Hugh walked over and placed his arm lovingly about his daughter. "I've ordered a string as near like them as possible for you, baby. They promised to have them for me in a few days."

"Oh—no, Daddy—you shouldn't have done that. I really don't care for them, for myself."

"Nonsense! Of course you do! Besides, I want my two treasures to always share alike," he beamed joyously, glancing across at Geraldine.

She stood in the center of the room, two bright red spots burning in each cheek, as she tugged frantically at the clasp at the back of her neck.

"Why, darling, what is the matter?" He hastened to her.

"Take these things off!" Geraldine screamed. "I won't have them! If you can't buy me a thing without immediately ordering a duplicate of it for her," she pointed her finger dramatically at Elinor, "then I don't want you to give me anything!"

"Why, Geraldine—" Elinor stepped forward anxiously. She could scarcely control her voice. "You just heard me tell Daddy I didn't want them. Please keep yours on and don't make a scene. I assure you, even if Daddy gets them for me, I'll not accept them."

"Stop playing the self-sacrificing little angel with me!" She turned on Elinor fiercely. "I know perfectly well how you hate me, and you know how I feel about you. I'm sick and tired of keeping up this pretense any longer!"

"But—my dear." Hugh was even whiter than Elinor. "I—I thought that you loved Elinor devotedly, and that you two would be just like sisters. You're—you're nervous and upset to-night. You don't know what you're saying——"

"Please! Don't make excuses for me, Hugh," Geraldine interrupted savagely. "I don't love her! I never have loved her, and I never *will* love her! And you might as well know it right now!"

"You gave me to understand one night in New York that you had only Elinor's interest at heart—when you persuaded me to do—something—I didn't think was quite fair. Do you remember it, Geraldine?" Hugh set his lips in their old grim line, as memory flashed back the picture.

Geraldine tossed aside her necklace. A look of pure contempt, all but hatred, distorted her features as she looked at her husband slowly. Then her lip curled and she laughed.

"For a clever and brilliant business man, you're the biggest fool I've ever met in all my life!" she flung at him. She rushed into her own room and banged the door after her.

For a moment Hugh stood and stared at the closed door, too astonished to move. When the realization of the miserable scene he had just passed through, finally dawned upon his numbed consciousness, he sank heavily down upon the nearest chair and groaned aloud.

Elinor was on her knees beside him instantly. "Oh, Daddy," she murmured soothingly, "Daddy—dear."

He buried his head in his hands. "Oh—my God!" His body shook convulsively. "I can't believe it! I can't believe it!"

The sound of his daughter's heart-broken sobs roused him from his own misery. Her head was buried on his knee, her whole figure a picture of abject misery. He bent over and touched her tumbled hair, idly tried to arrange the torn lace of her bodice.

"There! There, dear!" he begged, but his tone was one of hopelessness as he tried to give the sympathy he was himself so much in need of. "Don't cry, sweetheart—it'll all be all right!"

Elinor lifted a tear-stained face to her father's. She shook her head. Then the sobbing burst out afresh.

"Oh, Daddy! Daddy!" she wailed, "I—want—my—mother!"

Hugh Benton was wrong in believing that matters would right themselves when Geraldine's nerves should be soothed. He was to learn that she had but dropped the mask that had irked her through all the year that she had been making for herself the place that she was determined to have—bringing Hugh Benton to an abject posture beneath her feet. For the scene she had made about the string of pearls had been but the woman's opening gun in her new campaign. It was the first of her quarrels with her husband, but others followed in such rapid succession that the first was not long in being lost sight of.

Elinor left them the week following her denunciation by her step-mother. She met some friends who invited her to spend the winter in Italy. She was delighted at the chance to escape from her unhappy surroundings, and Hugh was glad to let her go. He had come to know the impossibility of keeping her under the same roof with Geraldine.

Alone with his new wife, there began a life so terrible for Hugh Benton, that at times he was almost certain it could not be true. He was merely having a dreadful nightmare from which he would suddenly awaken.

Geraldine seemed fairly to thrive upon quarrels and violent scenes. At first, Hugh attempted to plead or remonstrate, or argue with her; but he soon

found that that was the thing she craved, so he simply lapsed into silence until the tirade was over. But oh! how it told on him! How it crushed the manhood within him and made of him a thing he himself despised!



Hugh Benton (Huntly Gordon) comes to his daughter's assistance.
(*"The Valley of Content"* screened as *"Pleasure Mad."*)

On their return to New York Geraldine had redecorated "The Castle," but he never entered it without seeing before him a vision of Marjorie, as she stood in the library that never-to-be-forgotten night, completely rejuvenated and beautiful, trying to rekindle his love and pleading with him to give up his engagement and take her to the theater.

Surely that was the night on which God had forsaken him, or he would have listened to her pleadings, and have been spared all this torture.

Hugh Benton knew he was nearing the end of the road. His associates recognized the change in the man, but there was little sympathy such as might have been expected for a man, old and broken before his time, from any other cause than the one which had aged and grayed the financier. For the first time in his life, he bowed his head, content to take the lashings of Fate because of sheer inability longer to fight. He had been vanquished by a woman—a woman for whose sake he had driven wife and children from him, had outlawed his friends, cut short his life.

As he drooped into his office one morning, he felt that the end could not be far off. And he welcomed it. One more blow from the hand of Fate——

He started to look over the opened letters his secretary had left in front of him. There was one, a personal letter, unopened. He recognized Elinor's handwriting. What would he give for one sight of her! A thought came to him. Why not cut it—go back to Europe with Elinor, let Geraldine do as she pleased. The very thought cheered him. It was worthy of more than passing consideration. Eagerly he opened the letter. But the eagerness turned to pain as he read; the white face turned ashen. The letter dropped with the hand to his knee, and he sat staring at it as though the writing stared out at him in letters of fire.

“Dear Daddy:” Elinor had written:

I know that you are expecting me home soon, but this is to tell you that I am not coming back—ever. What I have to tell you will certainly surprise you, perhaps shock you (or are you past the time of shocks and surprises?) I have been married a month to Signor Guglielmo Bellini, a young baritone in the opera here, of whom you have perhaps never heard, but who is well known and thought of here. Do I love him? I am not sure—any more than I am sure there is any such thing as love. But he is kind and—— He is not exactly what you might call of our kind, but I am through with our kind—forever—and he can give me all that I now crave; constant change and forgetfulness.

So it's good-by, Daddy, and don't forget your baby. I shall never forget you. You have always been so kind to me and have given me everything, except—my mother.

So, if in the future you don't hear from me often, just remember that I am fluttering about the world, for that is how I shall find peace.

Your loving daughter,
ELINOR.

The letter fluttered from the man's nerveless fingers to the floor. His head drooped forward until it rested on the edge of his great mahogany desk, the sharp edge of the glass pressing into his forehead unheeded. His whole body shook with sobs.

“That is how I shall find peace!” he quoted. “Oh, Marjorie! Marjorie!” he groaned aloud, “if you could see me now, you could find it in

your great heart to forgive me!”

Wearily he lifted his head and his hand searched out a desk button. The clerk who answered was told to send Bryson, the manager. When the man stood deferentially before the financier, Benton asked him hurriedly:

“Bryson, I wonder if you will be able to take complete charge here, while I go to California?”

“To California? Shall you be gone long, Mr. Benton?”

“I can’t tell exactly—probably all summer.”

“It would be quite a responsibility for me,” Bryson answered uneasily. “You know what a peculiar state the market is in, Mr. Benton.”

“But you’ve been with me so many years, Bryson,” Hugh argued. “You know my methods. I have every confidence in your judgment.”

“Thank you, sir, I appreciate your faith in me,” Bryson acknowledged gratefully. “When do you intend starting?”

“The day after to-morrow.”

“Why, Mr. Benton! That’s impossible! You have that gigantic deal on hand with Randall, Small & Company! It might be disastrous for you to leave before it is completed.”

Hugh shook his head stubbornly. “Come back in an hour, and we’ll talk this thing over again,” he ordered.

But on the man’s return at the end of the hour, he found Hugh Benton’s private office empty. A note on the desk informed him that Mr. Benton had gone. He was leaving for Chicago at once, and from there to San Francisco. He left everything in Bryson’s hands, and he would write him particulars as soon as he arrived.

“Strangest thing I ever heard of,” Bryson muttered, reading the note again. “Chances are, he’ll think better of it and hurry right back.”

In her boudoir in “The Castle,” Geraldine DeLacy Benton stopped in her preparations for a gay party to scan the telegram her maid handed her.

“Hmmp!” was her comment, as she dipped deeply into her gold powder box. “California, eh? Rather sudden—wonder how long he’ll stay? Well,” and she held out her slender foot for the velvet slipper the long-suffering maid held, “he needn’t hurry back on my account!”

The only one who knew he never intended to come back at all was—Hugh Benton!

CHAPTER XX

It is one thing to announce a heroic determination to become the family bread winner. It is quite another to put that determination to practical account, as Howard Benton was to learn in the days that followed his sojourn at the sanitarium and since learning that his mother's resources were almost gone.

Particularly when one's talents run only to running a sporty little racer and a thorough knowledge of all the most recent dance steps and a canny way of learning just where to find the best bootleggers—a talent which the young man put into the limbo of forgotten things as his first step in his new life.

Both he and his mother felt he could put his knowledge of automobiles to practical account. But when he applied for one position after another with automobile firms, he was laughed at for his pains. Not even he had realized exactly how little he did know about machines. Too long had he left the disagreeable part to mechanics.

His belief in friends (at first) had led him into the offices of those he had known in palmier days. But it was with stung pride that he abandoned this after a few efforts. They had all seemed kind enough—patronizing even—but always it was the same thing he had heard in Thurston's bond office: "Nothing now, my boy—but if you don't get settled, you might call again some time."

But Howard Benton never called again. Instead, he took to spending his evenings with his mother, going over advertisements, writing answers to which, because of his lack of experience, there were few replies. How terribly had he wasted the years at college—years that could not now help him earn a living!

It was when it actually became a question of food that he determined to take whatever might be offered. Months had passed, and he had kept his promise to his mother, but they had gone through hardships together, and there were times when the price of a meal had been difficult to earn.

In the end, his earnestness won him a position in the office of a large manufacturing concern. The salary was not large, but to Marjorie, and to her son, the youth who had once squandered double the amount in a single evening, but who had come to know what it meant to walk about for days

trying to earn enough to keep a shelter above their heads, it seemed a small fortune.

And so two years had passed. As soon as possible they had moved into a new home, a little four-room flat in Harlem. It was cozy and comfortable, a sitting and dining room combined, two bedrooms and a tiny kitchen. Marjorie did all of the work, even to their washing. At first, Howard objected to this. She seemed so frail, he was sure that she could never stand it; but when she assured him that she never felt better in all her life, that the work was like play, and gave her something with which to occupy herself while he was at work, he agreed to let her do as she pleased.

He left at seven-thirty every morning to go to his work, and at six he returned, always to find a hot, tempting dinner waiting for him. At noon, when he opened his lunch-box, some new delicacy or dainty invariably met his eye. How could he possibly know that Marjorie went without her own lunch many a day in order to provide these little luxuries for him?

How was he to know that when evening after evening she greeted him at the door with a smile, she had dragged herself about all day doing her work, cooking his dinner, mending his clothes, without uttering a word of complaint, while she suffered the most excruciating pain? It had begun about a year ago, while they were enduring so many hardships, a sharp, stinging sensation, somewhere in the region of her heart, that at times almost drove her insane.

Apparently they were both quite happy. They never referred to the past. Their lives seemed to date from the day when they left Hugh Benton's house together. Howard could not know that at times Marjorie lay awake all night wondering about Elinor and Hugh. She had never heard a word from Elinor since the day she said good-by to her over the telephone, and of Hugh, she had heard but twice, and that was through the society columns of the paper.

The first time it had been quite by accident. Howard had been lying on the couch one Sunday afternoon reading "The Times." He had fallen asleep, and the paper slipped to the floor. She picked it up, and the name "Benton" caught her eye. It was a small item saying that Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Benton had returned from Paris, and had reopened "The Castle," where they expected to entertain extensively during the coming season. After that, she searched the paper every day, but she never saw another article until one day, she read of the departure of Hugh Benton for California for an indefinite stay.

On the other hand, how was she to know that at times Howard was lonely and unhappy? He was just a boy—not quite twenty-three. All day

long he worked hard, and then came home to spend his evenings with her. It was true that he loved her devotedly, and that he rejoiced in the thought of being able to take care of her, but just the same, he was young, and at times he craved young society. The monotony began to get on his nerves. The worst of it all was that he couldn't see where it would ever change; but he wouldn't worry his mother, so he smiled and laughed always, and made her believe he was contented and happy—just as she never permitted him to know of her days of suffering, of her heartaches and longing, her hours of loneliness. In front of the boy she worshiped, she was always bright and smiling.

They were sitting down to dinner one evening when Howard, shyly and half shame-facedly told his mother of a dance he would like to attend.

“I wonder if you would mind, dearest, if I went?” he asked.

“Why, no dear,” she answered heartily. “I'd be glad to have you go anywhere for a little pleasure. You work so hard you need more recreation.”

“But you know, I don't like to leave you alone evenings, mother,” the boy demurred. “Even when I go to the first show at the movies, and you won't go with me, I'm uneasy until I get back to you.”

“That's foolish, dear. You shouldn't feel like that.” She smiled at him lovingly. “I'm rather tired at night, and I usually have some mending or darning to do. But about this dance, shall I get your dress-suit out of the trunk? You haven't worn it in two years and I'm afraid you've outgrown it.”

“No, indeed, mother!” He laughed heartily. “First of all, you'll never find it! I sold it long ago, when we were so hard up, and if I went to this dance in a dress-suit, they'd mob me.”

“Why, Howard!” She was becoming alarmed. “What sort of a dance is it?”

“Oh, it's a nice enough dance all right, but it isn't a society affair.” He laughed again. “It's just a lot of plain working girls and boys like myself. One of the boys in the office asked me to go.”

“That's fine, dear. It will do you a lot of good. I'll sponge and press your blue suit and have it all ready for you.”

If a bride were being dressed, there couldn't have been more excitement in a home than there was in the little flat on Saturday night, when Howard prepared to go to the dance. Marjorie had laid all his things out on his bed during the afternoon. His suit nicely cleaned and pressed, a beautifully laundered shirt, his tie, collar, handkerchief—everything was ready.

“Why, mother,” he laughed, as she bustled about, handing him his things. “I feel like a girl getting ready for my first party! I really believe you’re enjoying all this.”

“I am, dear,” she answered, her cheeks bright with excitement.

“Well, I’m ready.” He stepped back from the mirror. “Do I look all right?”

“I never saw anyone like you!” She clasped her hands and looked at him adoringly. “All the girls will be fighting over you! You’re so handsome, dear.”

“Mother, you’re a little flatterer.” He caught her up in his strong arms to dance about the room with her.

“Oh, please, dear—please don’t!” she screamed. Her face paled, and she held her hand to her side.

“Why, mother—you’re ill! What’s wrong with you?” He placed her gently on the bed and knelt beside her.

“It’s—it’s—nothing, dear.” She forced a smile to her lips.

“But you screamed with pain—and you’re so white. I’m going to call a doctor.”

“No—no—I won’t allow you to be so foolish. I—I’m perfectly all right, dear. You picked me up so suddenly and you’re so big and strong. It was just a stitch in my side. See, it’s entirely gone now.” She sat up on the edge of the bed.

“Just the same,” he said resolutely, “I’m not going! I wouldn’t think of leaving you alone.”

“But you are going, dear—I insist upon it. There’s not a thing in the world the matter with me, but if you stayed at home, you’d make me think I was really ill.”

For ten minutes she argued until he was finally persuaded to go. At the door she kissed him affectionately. “Good-night, darling! Have a wonderful time and don’t worry for a minute—I’m perfectly well.”

She never knew how she managed to reach her bed. For half an hour she suffered the agony of death until the spasm passed.

But Howard Benton went to his first dance in two years with a heavy heart. In spite of his mother’s repeated assurances that she was perfectly well, he could not get her white, drawn face out of his mind. Once or twice he was inclined to turn back, but the fear of aggravating her prevented him. At all events, he would insist upon her seeing a doctor to-morrow.

When he arrived at the Hall about nine-thirty, the dance was well under way. He felt strange and ill at ease. The crowd was so entirely different from the crowd in which he had mingled in the old days. Outside of a few of the boys from the office, he didn't know a soul. But it didn't take him very long to become acquainted. He was a good dancer, handsome, and a gentleman—three things always bound to attract young women in whatever station of life.

About eleven o'clock, Frank O'Connor, one of the Floor Committee came up to him: "Say, Benton," he offered, "I want to introduce you to a peach of a girl. She's a dandy dancer, and as pretty as a picture."

"All right, you can't hurt my feelings," Howard laughed. "Lead the way!"

He followed him across the room to a corner, where a girl stood talking to two other girls. O'Connor touched her on the shoulder: "Just a minute, Kate—I want you to meet a friend of mine."

She turned, and Howard was looking at one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen. Her beauty was neither statuesque nor dainty and refined; it was something quite different. Just a saucy, Irish face, with dark blue roguish eyes, white and pink skin, a little turned-up nose, and bobbed, black curls.

"Miss Walsh, meet Mr. Benton." O'Connor performed the introductions.

"Happy to know you, Mr. Benton!" She smiled at him, revealing two rows of dazzling white teeth.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Walsh!" Howard bowed. "How about this dance?" as the "specially engaged jazz-band" began to play "Mammy."

"Sorry," she answered. "Just promised it to a guy. But will you meet me here for the next, if you ain't got it taken?"

He met her for the next, and the next, and the next. By the time the dance was over, he had been her partner eight times, and had gained her consent to see her home.

She lived just three blocks from his own home, and a distance of twenty blocks from the hall. But they walked slowly home in the moonlight, she clinging to his arm and looking up into his face as she talked. They hadn't gone ten blocks before she had told him her life's history—how her mother had been married three times, and of all the children in the family, real brothers and sisters, half brothers and sisters, and step-brothers and sisters. She possessed real Irish wit, and her way of telling these things was most amusing. Howard found himself laughing heartily. Through it all, she told

him she was perfectly independent, as she had been self-supporting since she was ten years old.

“I ain’t never had much chance to go to school,” she said. “Just picked up what learnin’ I could now and then. I never seen my real father—he died when I was just a little thing, and step-fathers ain’t much for lookin’ after other people’s kids. So I just had to work and take care of myself.”

“You deserve a lot of credit for it, Miss Walsh,” Howard said admiringly. “It’s pretty hard for a man to battle with the world, but it must be mighty tough on a woman, especially a slip of a girl—like you.”

“I ain’t never noticed it much. Guess it’s cause I ain’t never knowed the difference.”

“You live at home with your mother, don’t you?” he asked.

“Sure I do! Ma and me always gets along fine. She lets me do just as I want, ’cause she knows I’m independent, and besides, she’s got her hands full with the other kids.”

When they reached her door, she held out her hand. “I’m awful glad to have met you, Mr. Benton. Hope I’ll see you again?”

“May I call?” he asked eagerly.

“Why sure you can. I’ll be glad to have you any time you say.”

“How about—to-morrow evening?”

“Gee! You believe in rushin’ things, don’t you?” She giggled. “All right—to-morrow evenin’ ’ll be fine.”

She hurried upstairs and crawled into bed with three little sisters. Soon she was dreaming about a boy with wonderful dark eyes and curly hair.

As Howard walked the remaining three blocks to his home, he wondered what had happened to him. He felt so happy and light-hearted. The sensation of loneliness that had made him so miserable only yesterday, seemed suddenly to have disappeared. As he inserted his key in the lock, he felt like whistling or humming a tune, and it was only the remembrance of the lateness of the hour that kept him from yielding to his inclination.

“Howard!” Marjorie called from her room as she heard him come in.

He started suddenly as he opened her door and peered into the darkness: “What are you doing awake as late as this, dearest? Are you feeling better?”

“Of course, dear. I told you I was all right before you left. Did you have a good time?”

“Yes, mother, I had a dandy time.”

“I’m so glad. To-morrow you shall tell me all about it. You must be tired after so much dancing. Good-night, darling.”

“Good-night, dearest.” He bent over and kissed her tenderly.

Instead of undressing and hurrying into bed, he walked to the window in his room and opened it wide, staring out upon the fire-escapes filled with lines of washing.

He still couldn’t imagine what had happened to him that night; and he was trying to fathom it. He wasn’t thinking of the dance or the girl he had met. He was thinking that he had left his home heavy-hearted and terribly worried over his beloved mother, and yet he had come back a few hours later in such a state of exultation, that he had forgotten all about her until she startled him by calling his name. It almost frightened him—this thing that had taken possession of him—and that he couldn’t explain, even to himself!

The next morning he slept until almost noon for Marjorie always let him rest as long as he pleased on Sunday. He opened his eyes greatly refreshed in mind and body. The feeling of light-heartedness still remained with him. He could have started singing joyously—for some unaccountable reason. But the anxious and worried feeling about his mother he had the night before had disappeared. Somehow things appear so different in the daylight than they do in the darkness.

He sat down to the tempting breakfast Marjorie placed before him.

“Umm—mother—waffles and maple-syrup? Just what I feel like eating. Aren’t you going to have some?”

“No, indeed!” she laughed. “I’ve had my breakfast hours ago. It’s noon, dear, but I knew you were tired after last night, so I just let you sleep it out.”

“I’m glad you did; I feel thoroughly rested.”

She sat opposite him while he ate, enjoying the way he seemed to relish each mouthful.

“Now tell me all about the dance,” she said. “Did they have a nice crowd?”

“Yes—a very nice crowd.”

“Did you dance every dance?”

“Every blessed one! The music was fine, and as I told you, last night, I had a dandy time. Would you like to go to Central Park this afternoon?” he asked suddenly, anxious to change the subject.

Somehow he didn’t want to talk about last night, but couldn’t have given a reason for the reluctance he felt in mentioning it.

“No, dear,” Marjorie answered. “I prefer resting this afternoon, if you don’t mind. But you go somewhere yourself—to a movie, or a vaudeville.”

“No, I’ll stay home with you. I—I may take a little run out—this evening.”

“Certainly, dear. That’s right.” She began clearing away the dishes.

Kate Walsh received Howard Benton in the “front-room” of the Walsh flat—a shabbily furnished little square of room that was used mainly for three purposes—receiving company, exhibiting a new baby, or holding a wake.

The family had been banished to the kitchen at the end of the hall for the evening, with the exception of her mother, whom Kate brought into introduce to Howard. Mrs. Walsh was a good-natured, stout little woman, rather tired and faded looking. She had been in this country since she was sixteen, but she still clung to her native brogue.

“Shure, Mister Benton, ’tis glad to meet ye Oi am. Kitty here’s been tellin’ me what a foine young gentleman ye are.”

“Oh, Ma, you do say such things!” Kate giggled. “You ain’t got no delicacy at all.”

Mrs. Walsh looked wise, but kept silent. She didn’t know exactly what Kitty meant by delicacy. After a minute, she held out her hand to Howard.

“If ye’ll be afther excusin’ me, Mister Benton,” she apologized, “Oi’ll be sayin’ good-night to ye, and goin’ back to the babies. It’s about toime they wuz in bed.”

And feeling that she had nobly done her duty by her daughter by coming in to be introduced to the gentleman—the same as all the society matrons did in the novels Kitty read and told her about—Mrs. Walsh bowed herself out, and hastened to the more urgent duties awaiting her in the kitchen.

Howard remained until ten-thirty. He enjoyed the evening immensely; Kate was such good company.

“Of course,” he began making excuses to himself on his way home, “she is illiterate, and she did say some of the most ridiculous things, trying to use expressions she had picked up in novels. But altogether, she is a sort of rough diamond, and after all, education doesn’t amount to very much—I’ll tell the world mine hasn’t! And she’s so very young! A few months’ instruction from a private teacher would do wonders for her, or—um—um—maybe I could take her on myself.” The idea was far from disagreeable to the youth who had never believed pedagogy to be anywhere in his line.

At the end of the week, after he had seen Kate five more times, he knew what was the matter with him. For the first time in his young life he was madly in love!

He didn't know whether his love was reciprocated or not. Kate seemed to like him pretty well; she was glad to stay at home and have him call when she might have gone out with some other chap. He had never even attempted to kiss her. She wasn't the kind of girl who invited that sort of thing. He went with her steadily for another month, taking her to movies, or dances, on the evenings he didn't spend at her home.

"What did his mother think about his going out every night?" he wondered. She never questioned him when evening after evening he kissed her good-night and said: "I won't be out very late, mother, just going for a walk"; or, "Going to a show"; or, "Going to a dance to-night." Finally he felt that he must say something to her—sort of pave the way as it were. She must know that he was going about with a girl, or else some day it might prove too much of a shock.

"Dearest," he said one evening, after he had kissed her good-by, "don't you think my going out like this every evening sort of—well—sort of funny?"

"Why, no, dear," she answered bravely, struggling hard to look unconcerned lest he read the contradiction to her words in her face. "I'm glad to see you go—you were getting into a rut, staying in so much. You're too young to do that."

"It's a joy to have a mother who looks at things as sensibly as you do," he answered, patting her hand affectionately. "You see, dear, I—I've met a very nice little girl—and I enjoy going about with her."

"Yes—dear——" Although she smiled, the mother's heart held a leaden weight. "That's nice," was her comment.

"I'm going to bring her to meet you some day," he told her, but he was careful not to say too much.

A month later Howard proposed to Kate. One Sunday afternoon and they had gone for a long walk. Everything seemed to be in his favor. The day could not have been more perfect—one of those glorious, crisp, sunshiny days every New Yorker knows and loves. They came to a bench in one of the smaller parks, and sat down to rest. The sky had never seemed so blue nor the grass so green. The birds sang more sweetly than he had ever known they could, and the flowers about them had wafted a fragrance that was heady. What a wonderful place this old world was after all, he thought, as he reached for her hand. Just made for love and joy and youth!

“Katie, dear,” he said simply as his grip tightened on the capable little fingers, “I—I want to tell you that I love you very, very dearly.”

“Oh—Howard—” She hung her head.

“Do you—like me—a little?” He lifted her chin, and looked into her eyes.

“Of course—I like you!” She was blushing rosy red. “But not a little! I—I like you a whole lot.”

“You darling!” His arms went out to draw her to him. They were in a secluded spot, but it would have made no difference to Howard Benton had they been in the open. “You darling—little girl—I—I’m just crazy about you!”

“Howard—someone might see you,” the girl demurred, but her sigh of happiness contradicted her speech as she snuggled closer to him. “Gee, but I’m happy you love me!”

“I’ve loved you since the first moment I met you, Katie—but I was afraid you might not care about me.”

“Ain’t that funny now! I loved you too, from the start. It must a been love at first sight,” she giggled. “Only I was afraid a swell educated fellow like you wouldn’t notice an ignorant girl like me.”

“You’re sweet and good—and I love you, dear.” He kissed her. “And after we’re married, I’ll spend a lot of time teaching you, and in a short time you won’t know yourself.”

“Gee, that’ll be great! Ain’t it a shame I never went to school much? I had to work ever since I was a kid.”

“I’m sure you’re not to blame because you’ve never had the opportunity to obtain an education. But that will come in time.”

“Well, I’ll try hard enough,” she replied earnestly.

“And you’ll succeed too,” he assured her. “Now, darling, I must tell you something that I think you ought to know. It may make a difference in your love for me.”

He told her all about the affair of two years ago—of Elinor, of his father, of Mrs. DeLacy, of his wonderful mother. Everything just as it had happened. He was a long time in telling it, as he dwelt on each point, to make it all perfectly clear to her.

When he had finished, it was with a sad little smile he asked: “So now, dear, you see, I’ve had quite a past. Will it make a difference?”

“Just this much of a difference.” The tears were streaming down her cheeks as she clutched him. “That I love you more than ever. Why you’re grand, dear! You’re a hero—I—I’m proud of you!”

“Oh, Katie, dear, you wonderful girl!”

“I knew all along you wuz a swell, though, and didn’t belong with the gang around here!” She nodded her head vigorously at the recognition of her own sagacity.

“When can we get married, Katie? I hope we won’t have to wait too long?” Now that he had spoken, Howard was all eagerness.

“I can be ready most any time. Of course,” she added with a twinkle in her eye and her little nose wrinkled up in that maddening way she had, “it may take a few months to get my trousseau ready. I’ll see if Lady Duff Gordon or Lucille can spare the time.”

“Funniest little kid!” he laughed heartily. “But let’s talk it over now and try to settle upon a day.” He told her about his position and just what he was earning.

“Gee, that’s a wonderful job, Howard, and you’re earning more than Ma’s old man, and he’s been in one place for years.”

“Then you think we can manage on it all right?”

“Manage? Why, we’ll live like millionaires,” she enthused.

“Of course, we won’t have to get a house—that will help some. Our flat’s furnished very nicely and we have four rooms.”

“I know—I ain’t never seen yours, but I’ve been in the buildin’ to see Mrs. Lambert, and they’re beautiful flats. Say, do you think your mother’s goin’ to like me?”

“How could *anyone* help liking you? You’re so pretty, so sweet, Katie.”

“Maybe—but that don’t mean very much to most women,” she answered dubiously.

“My mother’s different,” he defended. “She’ll be wonderful to you and help you a lot. I know you two are going to get along wonderfully together.”

“Why, Howard!” she sat back suddenly and looked at him. “You ain’t figurin’ on your mother livin’ with us, are you?”

“Certainly, dear.” His astonishment was equal to her own. “Surely, you didn’t think I intended to leave my mother?”

“Well, don’t every boy and every girl leave their mothers when they get married? You ain’t no different!”

“No—but my mother’s different,” he answered tenderly. “Why, she’s a brick, I tell you. She stood by me through thick and thin! She had a lot of money two years ago, but she spent every dollar of it for me!”

“Well, it’s a mother’s duty to stand by her children, ain’t it?”

“I don’t know about that! I hadn’t been such a wonderful son to her, and it’s only in the last two years we’ve grown so close to each other. I wouldn’t hurt her for the world!” he declared.

“Oh, all right, kid!” Katie moved away from him. “If that’s the way you feel about it—let’s just call our engagement off!”

“Katie! You wouldn’t do that! I love you too much!”

“And I love you, Howard. But there ain’t goin’ to be no mother-in-law business in my life. My ma says to me: ‘Take it from me, Kitty, there ain’t no home big enough for two families.’ And she ought to know. She’s been married three times.”

“But there wouldn’t be anything like that with my mother—you’re bound to love her.”

“Sure! That’s all right,” she answered heartily. “I want to love her, and I want her to love me! But I don’t want to live with her.”

“It’s the terrible loneliness of it all that keeps me thinking,” Howard went on ruminatively, as though he were thinking aloud. “You see, mother never goes anywhere. Why she never leaves the flat unless it is to go on an errand, or do her marketing. She hasn’t a friend or companion. She just lives for me alone.”

“Well, we can see her every day, can’t we? She’ll get used to it all right. Every mother’s got to see her kids grow up and get married, and leave her. She didn’t think you was goin’ to be a—a—you know what I mean—an old-maid man—did she?”

Howard smiled in spite of himself. “No, I suppose not. But come up now, and meet my mother. You may feel differently after that.”

“I’ll go and meet your mother willingly—but I won’t change my mind,” was his fiancée’s stubborn reply. “There ain’t goin’ to be no mother-in-laws _____”

He stopped her with a kiss as they started down the path.

Marjorie had just stepped out to go to the delicatessen store on the corner for a few things. It was just a little after five, her table was set, and everything ready for supper, although she didn’t expect Howard for another hour. Very often on Sunday night, she arranged a cold meal. Howard opened the door and drew the bashful Katie in after him.

“Come in, dear—I’ll call mother.” He went to the door leading to the kitchen. “Oh, mother, dear.”

He looked in and then went to the bedroom. “She’s not here—” he turned to Kate, “but she won’t be long. I suppose she has gone on an errand. See the table is set for supper. Come take off your things,” attempting to remove her hat.

“No, I won’t take off my hat.” She fidgeted about. “I’m so nervous—I’ll just wait and meet your mother, and then I’ll run downstairs and visit Mrs. Lambert.”

“You don’t have to be nervous, dear—everything’s bound to be all right.” He pulled down the shade and switched on the light.

Kate looked about admiringly.

“My, this is a gorgeous flat. Ain’t the furniture handsome!” she enthused.

“I’m so glad you like it. We’re going to be very happy. You do love me, don’t you?” Howard caught her in his arms.

“Of course, I do—you big boob.” She kissed him. “You know, I’m just crazy about you.”

“No more than I am about you.” He returned her kiss. “Still,” he added, “I’d give anything dear, if I could only persuade you to let my mother live with us.”

Kate turned irritably. “Do we have to start all over that thing again?” she asked, with eyes flashing. “I thought it was all settled.”

Further discussion was interrupted by Marjorie’s entrance. She was carrying a market basket and she looked pale and tired in her shabby little dress.

“Good evening, dear,” she said, as Howard rushed to her, and relieved her of the basket. “I didn’t expect you home so early. I have a cold supper, just the things you like. I had a little time to spare so I ran down to the corner to get a few things for to-morrow. Oh—I beg your pardon.” She noticed Kate for the first time. “I didn’t know you had company.”

“Mother,” he said, putting his arm about her, and leading her forward, “I want you to meet Katie—Katie Walsh—the girl I told you—I—I cared for. Well, she has promised—to—become my wife!”

“Your—your wife, dear? Why—why I am surprised.” She leaned against him heavily.

“I’ve cared for Katie ever since the first night I met her—but I wasn’t sure she loved me—until this afternoon. We came right up to tell you.”

“I—I see.” Marjorie was endeavoring, with all her might, to come out of her state of bewilderment. Steadying herself with an effort she went over to Kate and held out her hand.

“I’m glad to know you, dear,” she said in her sweet, simple tones, “and I hope you will make my boy—very happy.”

“I’m goin’ to try to, Mrs. Benton,” Katie replied warmly. “I’m for him as much as he is for me,—so I can’t see how we can help bein’ happy.”

Marjorie winced, but she spoke cheerfully. “Love is the foundation of all real happiness, my dear. I’m glad you have the right idea. You must stay and have supper with us—it won’t take a second to set another place. I’m anxious to have you tell me all about yourself.”

“I—I don’t think I can stay.” Katie was evidently uncomfortable. “I was just goin’ to run down to see Mrs. Lambert—before goin’ home. Howard can come over after his supper.”

“But you mustn’t run away like this,” Marjorie urged. “I’ve only just met you! We’ve so much to talk about, you know. Come, Howard, you coax her to stay.”

“Of course, she’ll stay, mother.” Howard removed Katie’s hat without asking her, whispering in her ear: “Stay if she wants you to, dear.”

“That’s fine!” Marjorie started for the kitchen. “I know you’ll excuse me for a few minutes.”

Howard opened the door and carried her basket into the kitchen for her, then he hurried back to Katie and squeezed her joyously.

“Now, wasn’t she fine? What did I tell you?”

“Whew!” Katie made a stab at whistling. “She’s so grand she makes the chills run up and down my back! Do you know, Howard, all the time she was talkin’ to me, I felt as if she was lookin’ right inside of me—through my clothes and all.”

“Mother’s true blue all right!” Howard declared proudly. “The way she took it is a great relief to me. I confess I was terribly nervous for a minute. I hope we won’t have any trouble with your mother, dear?”

“Humph! My Ma’s goin’ to be tickled to death! Besides, she ain’t got nothin’ to say about me—I told you I’ve always been self-supportin’.”

In the kitchen Marjorie was gathering up the dishes and cutlery for the extra place at the table. Her tears were falling so fast they almost blinded

her. She kept brushing them away as she whispered over and over to herself:

“Dear God, help me to-night. Give me the strength to make my boy—
happy!”

CHAPTER XXI

Howard's mother arranged a place at the table next to him for Katie, then brought in a platter of cold meats, some potato salad, and a pot of coffee. Howard, as was his custom, held the chairs for his mother and their guest, then seated himself.

"I hope you like cold meat and potato salad, Katie?" Marjorie asked, as she began to serve. "Howard prefers it to anything else on Sunday evening, especially during the warm weather."

"I think it's fine," Katie answered, playing nervously with her napkin, "and it saves a lot of work—cooking."

"Don't you care about housework?"

"Well, I ain't crazy about it, but it's got to be done. Ma says: ' 'tain't no use killin' yourself over cleanin' a house—it only gets dirty all over again.' And Ma's nearly always right."

Marjorie sat almost dumfoundedly looking back and forth between Katie and Howard. Surely she must be dreaming all this. Her wonderful boy—intending to marry this girl who couldn't even speak grammatically.

"Please pour my coffee, mother." Howard was anxious to say something.

"Yes, dear." She began pouring the coffee, her mind miles away from what she was doing.

"You're spilling it, mother." He stopped her, impatiently.

"I—I'm sorry, dear," she murmured as she handed a cup to Katie. "I don't know what made me so careless."

She never remembered how she finished the meal. With a sort of fascinated horror she kept her eyes upon the girl whom her son had chosen. It was really pitiful to watch the child struggling to handle her knife and fork correctly. Once or twice Marjorie tried to draw her into a conversation, but when she realized how uncomfortable she was making her, she gave it up. So it was Howard who kept up a meaningless chatter until the supper was over.

"I—I think I'll be goin' now, if you don't mind, Mrs. Benton," Kate Walsh announced as soon as they rose. "Ma will wonder what's keepin' me. Thank you for my elegant supper. I enjoyed it very much."

She lost no time getting her hat and bag.

Marjorie held out her hand. "I—I suppose you'll come soon again?" she asked, politely.

"Oh, yes!" The girl placed her hand in Marjorie's rather timidly. "I will. Now that you and me've met, I won't be no stranger."

Howard's nerves were fairly on edge as he helped his fiancée into her jacket. Everything she said seemed to magnify ten-fold in front of his mother. He hadn't noticed it nearly as much when they were alone.

"Good-by," Marjorie said. "Come in—whenever you wish."

"All right—I'll run in from work to-morrow. Oughten' I to kiss you, Mrs. Benton—now that I'll be callin' you—Ma?"

Marjorie hesitated an instant, but one look at Howard's flushed cheeks and pleading eyes, made her answer: "Why, certainly—Katie." She kissed her, then turned to Howard. "Shall you remain out late, dear?"

"No, mother, I'll be home early. Will you wait for me?"

"Yes—I'll wait."

As soon as the door closed after them, she sank to her knees and buried her head in her hands.

"Oh, God," she prayed fervently, "don't let me live to see this! He can't marry a girl like that—it will ruin his life! He has suffered so much, and so have I. We have gone through a great deal and borne up, but in mercy, spare us this awful thing. Please, God—Oh, please," she moaned, as she rocked to and fro.

On the way to Katie's house, Howard made a last effort. "Do you think you're going to love my mother, Katie?" he asked her.

"You just bet I am, Howard—she's so sweet and kind."

"Well, then—won't you reconsider about living with her, dear?" he asked anxiously.

"No—I—I just can't! I don't know nothin'." She blushed furiously as she made the admission. "I seen it to-night plainer than ever. I just got to learn a lot, before I could be around a woman like your mother!"

"But she'll help you, dear—she'll help you all the time," he pleaded.

"No—I couldn't stand that, Howard. I—I want to learn, and I will learn, but I just couldn't have no woman tellin' me what to do every minute. I wish I could make you understand—what I mean," she said wistfully.

"I think I do understand," he said gently, "and I love you so much I guess you'll have to have it your way."

“Gee, you are good, Howard—and some day when I learn everything, you’re goin’ to be proud of me!”

“Well, then,” he tried to throw off his disappointment, “I suppose you know I’ll have to take care of my mother.”

“Of course,” she answered emphatically. “It’s only right for you to do that.”

“Well, you know, I don’t make a million a month. It will mean a lot of scrimping.”

“That will be all right with me,” she assured him, “I’m used to scrimpin’. I ain’t never done nothin’ else since I can remember.”

“We’ll have to look about for a flat. I’d like to stay in this neighborhood in order to be near mother.”

“I don’t see why we don’t keep your flat,” she suggested, as a vision of the “handsome” furniture appeared before her. “It would be easier to get a couple of rooms for your mother.”

“Turn mother out of her home!” For a moment he was angry with Kate Walsh. What could she mean? “Impossible!” He shut his teeth with a click.

“Don’t get sore at me, Howard.” There were tears in her voice, and a tremble that soothed the anger. After all, this little girl didn’t understand, he remembered. It was her training. “I didn’t mean nothin’ by that,” she went on as she timidly touched his arm. “I was just tryin’ to figure out the most savin’ way.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to get cross with you—but I can’t bear to think about hurting my mother.”

Child as she was, though, Kate Walsh was a true daughter of Eve. She knew what she wanted. And she knew how to get it. From the moment of her first view of the dainty little apartment Marjorie had worked so hard to make homelike and pleasing, this little child of the people whose beauty had bound Howard Benton to her in bonds unbreakable, had made up her mind that it should be her own.

She slipped her arm through Howard’s and reached downward with her hand till the warm fingers found their way into his own. Her whole warm, round little body snuggled up to him.

“I don’t know much, as I told you, dear, but I think you’re kind of silly, Howard,” she began coaxing. “I just bet your mother would say the same thing herself. First of all, she’d never be wantin’ no four-room flat all by herself. Besides, ain’t it easier for one person to move into a couple of rooms than for us to have to hustle around and buy furniture and things?”

"Maybe—you're right," he admitted. "But it seems so cruel, I'm afraid she wouldn't see it as we do——"

"I just bet she would!" the girl interrupted. "She's got lots of good sense. Why don't you ask her and see?"

"Yes—I suppose that would be the proper thing to do." But he sighed at the prospect of such a proposed interview with the mother who had done so much for him; been so much to him.

When he returned home, he found his mother seated by the table in the dining room. She hadn't even attempted to clear the supper things away and he could not help but notice that her eyes were red and swollen with weeping.

"Well, mother?" He tenderly touched her shoulder.

"Yes, dear—yes." She reached up and patted his hand.

"I—I know you're dreadfully disappointed. I—I'm *sorry*, mother."

Marjorie shook her head sadly. She must control herself before speaking. Howard moved a chair over opposite her and sat down.

"You must give me a little time, Howard," she said slowly. "This has all happened so suddenly—it is difficult for me to grasp."

"Well you expected me to marry—some day. Didn't you, mother?" he asked gently.

"Oh, yes, dear—yes!" she assured him. "I've always wanted you to marry and have a home—and babies—and—" Her sobs choked her, and she could not finish.

"Perhaps. But you don't like Katie! It's true she hasn't an education, but _____"

"It isn't *that*," she interrupted him. "I can't hold the girl responsible for circumstances preventing her from obtaining one. It's—it's the difference!"

"The difference?"

"Yes," she hurried on. "The great chasm—between you. You're blinded by love now, dear, so you think that the only thing lacking in this girl you love is education, something one can always remedy to a certain extent. But it isn't that. It's the natural refinement, the inborn breeding, which go to constitute the lady. Those are the things she lacks. They are the things bound to raise a wall between you such as you will never be able to scale."

"But mother," Howard attempted to argue, "real love should be able to overcome every obstacle, haven't you always held that?"

“Love could do a great deal, my son—if the break were only half or less than half way even. But you haven’t a thing in common with this girl. She is so entirely out of your class.”

“And—just what do you call my class?” Howard asked, with the impatience of the youth suddenly become a man, to whom the stings of pain of two years past were still fresh. “A girl like Nell Thurston, I suppose,” he suggested bitterly, “a fair weather friend who at the first hint of trouble packs her trunks, leaves for California, and marries the first man she meets.”

“You can’t judge every girl by that one.”

“Well, nearly all of the society butterflies I ever met were of the same sort,” he answered scornfully. “Besides, I’m away from all that now. You know, we’re living an entirely different life from that of two years ago.”

Marjorie Benton was at a loss for words. She felt that here was a situation that required the utmost diplomacy. She prayed for strength, but it came not.

“Howard,” she asked slowly and thoughtfully, her eyes on her son’s face to lose no shade of expression. “Have you absolutely made up your mind to marry this—Katie Walsh?”

“Yes, mother, I have,” he answered firmly, but gently. And watching him, Marjorie Benton knew that no matter what else she and Hugh might have endowed him with, that Howard had inherited the stubbornness that had been so big a part of both their natures, that had wrought so much ruin to them both. She knew that it was inevitable that the illiterate little Irish girl would become the wife of her son. “I love her. I can’t tell you how dearly! I was very lonely when I met her, and she crept into my heart. She’s a good, true girl, and after we’re married, you and I can teach her together.”

Marjorie Benton bowed her head to Fate’s decree. She had done what she could. She had tried before—and failed. But it was left for her this night to see the new monument to Hope she had raised up lie crumbling in ruins at her feet.

“I can’t say anything more to you, Howard,” she said falteringly, “because I love you too much, dear, to stand in the way of your happiness. I’ll just ask God to bless you—and I’ll pray that it is all for the best.”

“Mother, dear.” He leapt from his chair to kiss her. “You’re such a *brick!* You’ve made me so happy!”

“I’m glad of that.” She smiled up into his eager face, but he could not see the smile was soulless. He had turned to pace up and down, fidgeting about uneasily. Suddenly he stopped in front of his mother who had not

moved. "I have something else to tell you, mother," he gulped, "and I—I don't know just how—to say it."

Marjorie reached for his hand and stroked it gently. "You mustn't hesitate to tell me anything," she assured him. "We've been very close to each other since—since we came here. There must never again be a lack of confidence between us."

"I'll have to tell you, mother." He clasped his hands behind him, and cleared his throat. "I hope you won't misunderstand—you've got out of the way of misunderstanding me since—since—" he stammered.

His mother nodded encouragingly. "You know I love you," he hurried on, "but I love Katie, too. We want to be married very soon, and she—we—want to start—living alone."

"You—you mean—you want to move?" She closed her eyes for a moment, "into a place of your own? You want to live—by yourselves? I—I can't blame you for that—only—only—it is going to be very lonely here—without you."

"I—I'll see you every day, mother—and so will Katie." He was eager as the words tumbled over each other in his hurry to have done with the disagreeable task his promised wife had set him. "We—we don't want to move! Katie likes this place very much—and it is just the right size—for us. We—we thought—if we could find you—a couple of rooms—in the neighborhood—you know—near to us—it would be fine—and it would be much easier—for you to move than it would be—for us—to—to—find a place."

He was scarlet when he finished, and he could not lift his eyes from the floor. The mother sat as if carved in stone. But the only emotion she betrayed was a slight quivering of the lips, and a sudden twitching of her eyelids.

"I—I'll always take care of you, dear," Howard hastened to assure her. "Every week you shall have a certain amount of my pay."

"You—you couldn't do it, dear." Marjorie found her voice at last, although it was faint and trembled pitifully. "You couldn't afford to keep up two homes."

"Oh, yes, I can!" he eagerly plead. "Kate says she doesn't mind scrimping at all—she doesn't care how hard we have to struggle. Only she's taken it into her head that she doesn't want to live with—her—mother-in-law." His voice was a husky whisper as the word he knew would flay his mother, came.

A sob that she could not choke broke on the stillness. In a moment Howard was on his knees beside her, his arms holding her close.

“Please, mother!” he begged. “Don’t feel that way! I love you just the same—but I’m a man now, and I’ve met the woman I want to marry. This comes into everyone’s life.”

Her arm closed about his neck and she held him close.

“Oh, my dear—my dear!” and now the sobs came unchecked. “You’re so precious to me—all that is left to me in the world! Husband! Daughter! All gone! Only you, dear,—only you!”

“But I’m not going, mother. Don’t you understand? I’ll see you as much as ever.”

“Why—why can’t I stay here?” In her despair, she pleaded frantically. “I’ll keep to myself—I—I won’t interfere with a thing. I won’t be in anyone’s way—I just want to be where I can see you—where I can be near you—should you need me! See, I’m throwing away all my pride, dear,” as she slipped to her knees, “and begging you to let me stay—because—I love you so—I love you so!”

“Hush, mother.” He lifted her from her knees, and wiped his eyes. “You’re making this very hard for me. You know I wouldn’t intentionally hurt you for the world. I’ve talked this over again and again with Kate—but she won’t have it any other way. I—I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s—all right, dear,” she whispered, but the tone was barely audible and broken. “It’s all right! I—I’ll go.”

“I know just as soon as you’re calm, mother, you will see things in a different light.”

“Yes, dear—I understand, dear!” she said quietly, but the voice was one of despair that the son did not recognize nor heed. “I’ll be calm and *sensible*! You want me to be——”

“Yes, dear. Please try—I’ll be back in a minute.” He went into his room and closed the door.

With a calmness that was appalling she sat where he had left her, staring in front of her with glassy eyes. How long it had been with her she did not know, but she slowly became conscious of the physical pain gnawing at her heart. Oh, how she welcomed it! She wanted it to hurt and hurt until it would carry her off, where she would be free from pain forever. In a moment’s time, there flashed before her a panoramic view of her life. Oh, God, how useless—how in vain—it had all been! And now (she stretched

her arms out before her) she stood ready to go out into the future—alone!
Alone! Alone!

CHAPTER XXII

“Out into the future—alone! Alone! Alone!” Marjorie Benton read the words aloud.

For a moment she sat very still, looking about her in bewilderment.

“Oh—oh!” she exclaimed, and again: “O-o-h!”

She jumped up from her comfortable wicker chair and ran to the bedroom door. She opened it softly. There in their little cribs, sound asleep, were Elinor and Howard. She looked about the room once more and sighed contentedly. Yes, here she was in her own wonderful little kitchen. She picked up the book she had been reading and which had dropped to the floor and placed it on the table. She looked at it, and turned with a shudder.

The door opened quietly, and Hugh tiptoed in.

“Why darling!” he whispered, mindful of the babies. “Up yet? It’s after twelve o’clock.”

With a little scream of delight, Marjorie ran to him and threw herself into his arms.

“Hugh! Oh Hugh, darling!” she exclaimed breathlessly. Again and again she kissed him. “Dearest—sweetheart! Is it you?”

“Why, honey girl!” Hugh laughed as he held her in his arms. “If this is the reception I receive after being away a few hours, I think I’ll have to go somewhere and stay a week.”

“You are my own sweetheart, aren’t you, Hugh?” She pinched his arms, and felt of his shoulders and chest.

“Of course, I am! What’s the matter with you, dear?” He shook her gently. “I’ve never seen you act this way before?”

“Nothing—only I’m so *happy*, dear.” She laughed hysterically as she clung to him. “Because you’re you—and I’m me—and our babies are ours—and this——”

“Whatever in the wide world—” Hugh was emphatically nonplused.

His wife giggled at his perplexity.

“Goose!” she chided playfully. “Can’t I have a few dramatics for myself, and ease up some of my emotions.” But as she saw his concerned expression as he looked at her so closely, she added: “Well, if you must know, here’s the

answer. You know how I love to read a book and always put you in the hero's place and make myself the heroine——”

“Yes, I know all about that, you little romancer,” he laughed, and he pinched her flushed cheek. “According to the different people you've been, you must be hundreds of years old!”

“You can make fun of me—I don't care,” she pouted. “Well, after you left, Mrs. Birmingham sent me some books to read for her. And I've been reading this one!” She picked it up, only to drop it as though it burned her. “It's all about a young couple like us,” she informed, “and they had two babies, a boy and a girl, and so I put Howard and Elinor in their places. I had just finished the story when you came in.”

“Well, it certainly must have been exciting, judging from the way I found you when I came in.”

“It was—terrible—dear!” She shuddered. “The man became very wealthy through an inheritance, but I pretended it was through an invention—Darling, what about you—I forgot to ask you?”

“Finish telling me your story first, and then I'll tell you,” he answered quietly.

“There isn't anything more to tell. Only the most dreadful things happened to them all. You can't imagine how happy I was when I realized I had only been reading a book,” she sighed, “and now, dear, how about you? Were you successful?”

“Why—why,” he hesitated for a moment, “yes, dear—I——”

“Oh—no—no dear—don't tell me that!” There was a catch in her voice as her hand went out to him pleadingly.

“Why, darling, I don't understand you.” He tried to look into her eyes. “I thought you wanted to be rich—to live in New York and do all the things you had planned?”

“Oh, no—no.” She threw her arms about him. “I just want to stay here—with my babies, and my husband, and—my happiness!”

“Well, if that's the way you feel about it, sweetheart, then I'll tell you the truth,” Hugh answered. “I fibbed to you just now—I didn't succeed.”

“You *didn't* succeed?” Her eyes sparkled as she asked the question.

“No, dear.” He shook his head. “I'm an utter failure. My invention isn't worth anything just yet. I'm afraid we'll just have to remain poor—for awhile.”

“Oh, I’m so happy!” Marjorie exclaimed joyously. “But we can never be poor, dear, while we possess love, the greatest fortune in the world!”

“Sweetheart!” He kissed her again. “Tell me what it was that made you change your ideas?”

“It was just the book I read to-night, dear—that’s all,” she answered solemnly. “The book God must have sent me in time—just to open my eyes.”

“This little thing?” He picked up the volume from where Marjorie had dropped it on the table. He read the title aloud. “Hmmp! ‘Building Castles!’ Why that should have pleased you, dear,” he remarked, with a grin. “Isn’t that what you’re always doing?”

“No more! No more!” Marjorie shook her head till the blonde curls threatened to loosen their holding pins. “I have all the castle I want right here. Why, just look around this room! Isn’t it wonderful?”

Hugh glanced carelessly about.

“It’s a comfortable enough kitchen,” he remarked casually, “but I don’t see any particular wonders about it.”

“Oh, don’t you?” Marjorie’s nose went up in the air and she sniffed. “Why, just look at this chair!” And she whirled the wicker rocker she had sat in during the evening before him. “It’s a genuine Louis the Fifteenth,” she informed him solemnly. “That mirror,”—her hand swept in a gesture to include it, “yes, I mean the one you use to shave by in the cold weather,—but it’s from the salon of the Empress Josephine, nevertheless. And this table,—” the hand came to rest on the small table on which rested her books and the basket of neglected mending, “—why famous men and women have gathered——”

Hugh swept her to him, ending her explanations with the bear hug his wife always welcomed.

“Little witch!” he teased. “Seeing everything just the way you want it. But tell me, seriously, sweetheart,” and he lifted her face to look closely into her eyes. “I know you’ve been living on the heights for some time through your belief in me. Tell me, have you really decided you don’t want to live in New York?”

His wife snuggled closer to him.

“‘The heights!’ ” she repeated. “No, Hugh dear,—I’m willing to let who will live on the hilltops of life. For me, the valley. The only place I wish to live the rest of my life is in the Valley of Content.”

For a long moment—a moment when all misunderstanding was wiped out forever—Hugh Benton held his wife close to him. Then he leaned over and placed a kiss on her bright hair that swept his bosom.

“You’ve chosen the only place where you can always be happy, dear,” he said softly.

His head came up with a start. Marjorie drew away from him, to listen sharply.

“Did you hear something?” he asked her, his eyes on the bedroom door.

With finger uplifted for caution, Marjorie Benton tiptoed to the door from behind which had come the disturbing sound, and softly turned the knob. Hugh watched her with eyes of love as she disappeared. But in a moment she was back with him, the door as softly closed behind her.

“It was Elinor,” she told him. “She was sleeping on her back. Something made her cry in her sleep.”

“Dreaming, I suppose—just like her mother!” In his light-hearted relief, Hugh could not refrain from teasing, but Marjorie only laughed.

“Dreaming that Howard had broken her dolly, probably,” she agreed. “Precious baby! I turned her on her side and tucked her in. She’ll sleep till morning. Ready for tea, dear?”

Hugh nodded and slumped with a contented sigh into his seat beside the little table where Marjorie had placed her best chocolate plates and the cups for their tea. Before the stove, Marjorie squinted a moment at her fire. Then she lifted the stove lid and carefully placed a shovelful of coal on the half dying embers. The tea pot was ready with its aromatic herbs. She had seen to that, too. She lifted the kettle of boiling water from where it sang its contented tune on the back of the polished stove.

Then a sudden memory came to her. She turned, uplifted kettle in her hand to the husband who watched her with prideful eyes.

“Oh, Hugh, dear,” she remembered, “on your way to work in the morning, will you stop in at Thompson’s and send me out twelve yards of tennis flannel? I must make some new nighties for the babies. And be sure to send pink; it always washes so much better than blue——”

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

A few obvious punctuation and typesetting errors have been corrected without note.

[The end of *The Valley of Content* by Blanche Upright]