

MORE THAN BREAD

Hulbert Footner

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MORE THAN BREAD

Dr. David Tascott, a “foreigner,” dominates *More Than Bread*. But it is Clare Eltonhead, gallant, tender, unreasonable, exasperating and maddeningly desirable who shocks and disturbs her own people. The Western Shore of southern Maryland is rich soil which, strange as it may seem, has never before been turned by literary ploughshare. Dr. Tascott comes to King’s Green to open his first office; he is a good doctor, physically unimpressive but quiet, lovable and eminently reliable. Clare Eltonhead belongs to the impoverished gentry and has spent several years in Baltimore with a wealthy aunt. On her return to her old home she quickly justifies the gossips’ suspicions of the ways of the outside world by her affair with Lance Corder. These three characters, Dr. Tascott, Clare and Lance Corder, play their devastating role’s against the background of many native characters as the chorus. This story depicts a rather different kind of triangle in that Dr. Tascott and Lance Corder, who should have been natural enemies because of Clare, are actually fond of each other. Each finds in the other, because of widely divergent characteristics, something to admire and something to build the philosophy of life so necessary to the individual. Hulbert Footner knows the Western Shore of Maryland thoroughly and with sure craftsmanship has written an engrossing modern novel of this rare trio.

BY HULBERT FOOTNER

MORE THAN BREAD

NEW YORK: CITY OF CITIES

THE CASUAL MURDERER

THE ALMOST PERFECT MURDER

ETC.

MORE THAN BREAD

By
Hulbert Footner



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MORE THAN BREAD

Chapter 1

MRS. UTIE CHYNNE, plump and purposeful, scampered across the stretch of grass that separated her back door from the Darnalls'. She found her neighbor tying an apron around what was by courtesy termed her waist. Mrs. Darnall, an older woman, had a dejected air that belied her real sharpness.

"Aggie, where you been all day? I was over two, three times."

"I was down to my Sadie's to mind the children," said Mrs. Darnall. "George had to drive to town to open his tobacco and she want go. So George stop by after breakfast, and carry me down there."

"I didn't see you go," said Mrs. Chynne.

"Ain't much you miss, Utie."

"The new doctor has come," announced Mrs. Chynne.

Mrs. Darnall mourned like a dove and sniffed for no particular reason; it was just her way. "So it's true," she said; "Maddie Basilon has sold the old doctor's practice."

"I told you so a week ago, Aggie."

"You only surmised it, Utie."

"I knew it soon's I see Maddie cleaning house with the parlor furniture out on the front porch. She had one turning-out already after the funeral. I walked by there this morning, but there's so many apple trees in front of the house you can't see good. So I come back and stop by Beck Lewger's. From Beck's dining-room window you can see right across the gully to Maddie's. And when I see Maddie come out on the back porch in a silk dress I knew he was expected today."

Mrs. Darnall was setting out a yellow bowl, also lard, yeast-powder and a sifter of flour for the evening's biscuits. "What did you do?" she asked.

"I come right back to tell you so you'd be the first to know," said Mrs. Chynne.

"Excepting Maddie," put in Mrs. Darnall.

“Afterwards I send my boy Ninny down to Maddie’s to offer to chop wood,” Mrs. Chynne continued, “since she has no man on the place, and I told him to keep his eyes open.”

“Well?”

“When he come home for dinner he said the doctor came. His name is Doctor David Tascott.”

The end of Mrs. Darnall’s nose was mobile like a rabbit’s. It registered disrelish. “Tascott? I never heard the name. What like man, Utie?”

“I couldn’t get much out of Ninny—you know what boys are! Doctor gave him a quarter for helping to carry in ’s bags.”

“Too much!” said Mrs. Darnall. “How many bags he bring?”

“Three, Ninny said. New ones. And real leather.”

“No fooling, Utie! Real leather come high.”

“And a big wooden box with the top screwed down,” added Mrs. Chynne, “and wooden han’les to lift it.”

“So he’s come to stay!” said Mrs. Darnall. “What age man, Utie?”

“Young. Just out of hospital. Told Ninny he been working in the hospital six years, and felt like a man let out of jail.”

“Humorous!” said Mrs. Darnall. “Don’t much care for it in a doctor. . . . Is he married, Utie?”

“No.”

“Hm. One more chance for the older girls.”

“Ninny say he don’t look right healthy,” Mrs. Chynne went on. “He pale as a white turkey hen.”

“Then he better begin on himself,” said Mrs. Darnall.

“He drive a blue Ford coop, not new, not old,” said Mrs. Chynne. “New York license. He didn’t wear any hat.”

Mrs. Darnall’s nose quivered. “A grown man bareheaded! . . . Maddie Bason didn’t sell the practice any too soon,” she went on. “Her money all gone now. They say old doctor had two thousand dollars on ’s books, but Maddie will never collect a cent of that.”

“Of course she won’t!” agreed Miss Utie. “She don’t send out any bills.”

“Well, I say, that’s carrying high-mindedness too far, Utie!”

“It’s the truth, Aggie. However, Maddie’ll be boarding the young doctor, I reckon.”

“She can’t run that big house on the board of one man, Utie. Not the grand way Maddie keep house.”

“There’ll be rent for the office, too,” suggested Mrs. Chynne.

“Even so, Utie, however stiff and upright Maddie Bason may hold herself, she too old to do all the work and cleaning of that big house. She seventy years old. She’ll have to have a servant.”

“She’ll have the money he pay her for the practice, whatever that may be,” said Mrs. Chynne.

“She’d be a fool to feed it right back to him. . . . How much would it be, reckon, Utie?”

“I’ll find out,” said Mrs. Chynne.

“It’s an advantage to have a son in the bank,” remarked Mrs. Darnall dryly. . . . “The practice wouldn’t be worth much,” she presently continued, “because all old doctor’s patients have had time to go to somebody else since he died.”

“Perhaps the young man will buy the house from Maddie,” suggested Mrs. Chynne.

Mrs. Darnall kneaded vigorously. “Where would a young doctor just out of hospital get so much money? He better find out what he’s up against before he put all that into it. Who want a stranger for a doctor, and a yankee to boot?”

“That’s what I say,” agreed Mrs. Chynne. “And he so young, Aggie. It would be too embarrassing!”

“Utie,” said Mrs. Darnall, “you would tell your symptoms to a waxworks doctor.”

Mrs. Chynne stiffened. “When I need a physician I shall continue to call on Dr. Hoskey,” she said with dignity. Having paused to let it sink in, she relaxed. “He ask Ninny to come back after dinner to help him clear out old doctor’s shelves. I told Ninny be sure to find out what was in the big wooden box. I told him not to be afraid, but stand up and ask questions. When he get home I’ll have a lot more to tell you.”



The doctor’s house was four-square, white and comfortable-looking. Like something, Dave Tascott thought, that had been held over from a well-loved America which had passed. It stood on a little rise about a furlong from the highway, the space between being occupied by a small apple orchard. Not too tidy; the grass needed mowing and the trees had run to

suckers. They called the place Apple House. Patients drove around to a door in the rear leading to the waiting-room and office.

He took to his landlady at sight. A tall old woman with face cast in a stern mold; black hair with scarcely any gray in it, drawn back and twisted in a tight bun; exquisitely courteous. Obviously a woman of character; no fluttering, no superfluous talk; he felt at ease with such a one. She had quaint ways that made him smile inwardly. She received him like a great lady in a rustling black silk dress of no recent style, relieved at the throat by an old brooch of dull black and white enamel. When she brought in his lunch (she called it dinner) she had changed to a faded cotton dress with a home-made white apron that met around her thin body, and she then chose to regard herself as his servant. While he ate she moved gravely around the room, watching him to anticipate any want.

When supper-time came he could stand it no longer. "Mrs. Bason, please sit down."

"I will eat later, Doctor."

"Why not eat with me?"

"I can't attend to you while I'm eating myself."

"Good Lord! I'm not accustomed to being waited on like this. I don't know how to act."

She smiled politely.

"Unless you sit down I feel like a yankee invader!"

She sat sideways on the edge of a chair at the other side of the table and, helping herself to a little food, toyed with it out of politeness.

Supper consisted of cold home-cured ham, creamed potatoes, applesauce and hot rolls of a lightness Dave had not believed possible. "Mrs. Bason, you're feeding me too high," he said. "It's demoralizing."

"You look as if you wanted feeding, Doctor."

"I had to accustom myself to a low diet at Bellevue. After six years of it the walls of my stomach have contracted. I have to be careful."

Mrs. Bason smiled. It was evident that she had her own notions about feeding men. "Help yourself to the applesauce, Doctor. It's real good."

They continued to exchange conventional table conversation. To Dave it seemed like a missed opportunity. In order to inveigle his landlady into giving him her confidence, he started talking about himself. "The low diet at Bellevue was only a small part of the discipline. We—I mean the internes and the nurses—had to learn how to get along on almost no sleep; to work

for twenty-four hours at a stretch when called on, and to keep our mouths shut under any circumstances. The last was the hardest.”

“Not enough food nor sleep?” said Mrs. Bason. “And you-all so young! Why was that?”

“Bellevue is always swamped with patients. The city builds and builds to it, and is never able to catch up. I had twelve hours duty every day and, in addition, I had to be on call every second night. I had a night off every two weeks, but often I was too tired to go out. Every six months each interne was supposed to have a vacation, but the fellows got so run down, they were ripe for the infections that float around a hospital, and so many of them got sick the well ones had to stand relief when vacation time came around. I was one of the tough ones. It trained me down to a shadow, but I never got sick. Consequently I never got a vacation. For all this I was paid the staggering sum of fifteen dollars a month.”

“No!” murmured the shocked Mrs. Bason. “A negro hand in the fields gets twice that.”

“But you mustn’t think I’m sore,” said Dave. “It was the finest training in the world!”

He looked around the dining-room. The very incongruity of its furnishings pleased him deeply; the room had background without any swank. There was an eighteenth century sideboard with old silver displayed on it; a mahogany table wiped by five generations to a finish like velvet; ugly fifty-year-old chairs; on the table hand-crocheted mats and more delicate worn silver along with cheap and mismatched china. Over the sideboard hung a “pastel” portrait of a youngish man growing bald, who made up for what he lacked on his head with a superb beard parted in the middle and brushed to each side.

“The doctor?” asked Dave.

Mrs. Bason glanced at the portrait without visible emotion. “Yes. As a young man.”

“I was told that he had practiced here for fifty years.”

“Fifty-one in all.”

“I suppose you think I have a nerve, a young snip like me, thinking to fill his shoes?”

“He was younger than you when he began. And not so well prepared.”

“But after all that time the people must have been crazy about him. That’s what I’ll be up against.”

An added dryness came into Mrs. Basilon's voice. "His father was the doctor here before him; and of course with that, and his own long years of practicing, everybody consulted him as a matter of course. But it would not be true to say that he was loved."

Dave was taken aback. He glanced at the portrait again. It had been copied from a photograph. Young though the man was, there were already irascible lines about the eyes. Dave looked back at his landlady. So she, too, in her way, had been trained in a hard school. For half a century. It had made her grim, but not sour. I hope I may stand up to it as well, he thought.

He said: "It's too bad you didn't have a son to carry on the practice."

"I had a son," said Mrs. Basilon in a level voice, "and he was trained to be a doctor. He didn't get along too well with his father, and when his training was finished, he preferred to practice in Baltimore. . . . He was a clever boy. He did well. Older doctors have told me he was the most brilliant of the younger men. . . . He died. He was twenty-nine. They told me he worked too hard."

Dave looked at her without speaking. No words that were adequate came to him. She was looking down and drumming her fingers on the edge of the mahogany with a light, staccato touch. "It's a long time ago," she went on in the toneless voice. "It was a heavy blow at the time. But now . . . I could hardly wish for his sake that he had lived."

There was no need for Dave to ask her to explain her words. Her whole bearing suggested that life was something one endured with a kind of scornfulness. "Your only child?" he asked.

"No. I have two daughters. They married young and went away. . . . Take another roll, Doctor. They came up right nice, tonight."

After a while she asked: "How did you first hear of us down here, Doctor?"

"Men from all over the East come to Bellevue for a turn of work," he said. "A man from Baltimore, Dr. Wigham . . ."

"A friend of my son's," she murmured.

". . . He told me of your husband's death, and said he thought there was an opening here. So I wrote to you."

"You have studied hard," she said, "and for years; how could you expect to be satisfied with this?"

"It was what I wanted. Ever since I was a kid I had a yen to be a general practitioner; to do an all-round job. Sentimental, maybe; but the more I saw of specialists, the more fixed it made me."

“I can understand that,” she said; “but this is such a small, old-fashioned place . . .”

“All right. I’m fed up with the city. In Bellevue we got the scourings of the streets. The municipal lodging houses are almost next door, and they sent us a steady stream of men and women crazed and putrid with the poisonous distillate they drink. They call it ‘smoke.’ In the beginning all this crime and filth and ignorance was stimulating; there was a job to be done. But after six years, God! I began to feel as if I was getting rotten, too!”

“You will find all those things in the country,” murmured Mrs. Bason; “crime and filth and ignorance.”

“I know it.”

“Perhaps worse here.”

“It couldn’t be worse. You have clean dirt and air and sunshine in the country. Green things grow here.”

“Bad things, too.”

“I’ve been through the mill,” said Dave. “I’m not looking to find a bed of roses anywhere. But in the city when I got to thinking of the lucky people who lived in whole houses surrounded by trees and fields; who didn’t have to do the same thing at the same time every day; who were able to knock off for an hour or two and loaf and smoke and chew the fat; Lord! it would drive me crazy! And so I snatched at the first chance I saw of living a natural life myself!”

“I hope you won’t be disappointed, Doctor.”

“The life I was living was no life,” Dave went on. “Seems as if discipline is only good up to a certain point. At least for a young person. If you are too hard on yourself something goes bad. I mean if a young person tries to live like a tight cask . . .”

“I understand what you mean,” put in Mrs. Bason.

“Thanks. I lost my old friends because I never had time to look them up, and I couldn’t make new ones . . .”

She was deeply interested. “How about the other young people in the hospital?”

“All in the same boat,” said Dave. “Grand fellows and girls, but tuned up too high. Reckless. We had so little in our lives that we wolfed our fun, if you know what I mean. No satisfaction. Take the girls; all kinds; the right ones were the best of God’s creatures. But a life like that can’t help but rub the bloom off them, make them a little hard, at least outwardly. I looked on them as my equals in every way; I respected them; but, Lord! I couldn’t fall

in love with a nurse. A man wants what? A little strangeness, a little wonder. I'm drying out like a piece of old leather. Before it's too late I want a bit of romance. Silly, isn't it?"

"Not in the young," said Mrs. Bason.

"How I run on!" said Dave, grinning. "I'll take one more of these heavenly snowballs, and stop." He helped himself to a roll.

"You will have an uphill fight here," said Mrs. Bason. "I warned you of it."

"You did, and I disregarded the warning."

"You will find the people prejudiced against you because you are a stranger. They will set their faces against modern methods."

"I'll win them in time."

"Are you fixed to last out for a while without any income?" she asked bluntly.

"For a while," said Dave guardedly. No sense in confiding in her, he thought, that his cash assets consisted of a week's board and a gasoline card.

"My first job is to make good with you," he said.

"I am already your friend," she said calmly. "You put me in mind of my son."

Dave attended to his plate, more pleased than he cared to show. "The rest ought to be easy then," he said, "if you circulate the good news that they have a second Osler in their midst."

"Don't count too much on me, Doctor. I am not a favorite here."

He looked up in surprise. "Not a favorite? Why?"

She hesitated before answering. "I never stop to ask myself that question. . . . Perhaps it's because I'm a stranger. I was not born here in Travis County, but in Prince George's across the river."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Forty-nine years."

"Good Lord! and do you mean to tell me they still look on you as a stranger?"

"When they are provoked with me," she said with a faint smile. ". . . The truth is, my ways are not their ways. That is not because I came from Prince George's, but because I was made differently. I am not an easy-talking woman, and my silence is often taken for censure when none is intended."

"I get you," said Dave. "I'm a little like that. I mean, I dry up times when I ought to talk. . . . You and I don't seem to have any difficulty with

each other,” he added.

“Help yourself to another roll, Doctor. They’re real good.”

Chapter 2

TUESDAY was “court day” in King’s Green. Actually, the Circuit Court of Southern Maryland only sat twice a year in Travis County, in May and November; but every Tuesday was court day because the offices in the courthouse were open; County Commissioners, Clerk, Treasurer and so on. The farmers and the fishermen drove in from all three districts to do their business with the officials, or merely to meet and gossip with their friends. On Tuesdays the empty village suddenly swarmed with cars. There were no parking regulations, and as each car was left according to the driver’s fancy, it was difficult to get through on the state road after nine o’clock.

In the middle of the morning Dave Tascott set out on foot to look it over. The doctor’s house was almost the last one at the southerly end of the village street. King’s Green hardly lived up to its romantic name. Sooner or later, the ancient buildings had been destroyed by fire, and nothing remained antedating the gable and clapboard era except an old mossy shed where the Travis County *Herald* had been printed since 1805. With the opening of the state road the place had begun to grow, and the bank cashier, the garage owner, and the local manager for the telephone company now had trim new houses. There was no rich man in the community, and no dwelling grander than all the rest.

In the center of the village stood a shabby, clapboarded hotel, graced by a mighty wistaria vine extending across the long frontage on supports of iron pipe. Across the road rose a new clapboarded Town Hall, and next to it the new brick courthouse which had the appearance of having originated in a builder’s book of plans for county courthouses. It had a grassy yard with a fancy wire fence around it, and in the middle of the cement walk leading up to the entrance, a war memorial. This was a great slab of bronze bearing a draped female figure in high relief.

Mrs. Basilon, in her dry manner, had told Dave several anecdotes of the building of the courthouse. A fireproof vault had been planned for the storage of the county archives, and a great steel door such as banks use, ordered for it, with elaborate locks of the latest pattern. When the building

was opened and the fire- and burglar-proof door proudly exhibited to visitors, somebody noticed that the “vault” had been left with an ordinary window looking out on the yard. The war memorial was put up some time later. One day Sam Southam, the county lawyer, walking rapidly up the path while he rehearsed his plea with moving lips and gesticulating hand, ran smack into the bronze lady in broad day and mashed his face.

On the other side of the state road the courthouse was faced by the King’s Green Department Store, Azrael Cohn, proprietor. Cohn had lately transformed the whole appearance of the neighborhood by putting up a modern front with plate glass display windows, awnings and a cement walk. It was the only piece of sidewalk in the village. Next to his own establishment, Cohn ran up an additional store and rented it to the A. & P. Everybody was indignant at the coming of the A. & P., Mrs. Basilon said, because of the hardship to the local storekeepers. However, she added, they did not fail to trade with the chain store, and the local establishments were forced to close. Afterwards, the A. & P. prices went up.

North of the center ran the older part of the village where the houses were shabbier and the trees more glorious. The only new house in this part was that of Mr. Gussie Southam (a cousin of Sam’s), a neat prefabricated home purchased from a mail order house. After Mr. Gussie had moved in, he started to tear down his old house next door, but changed his mind when he had ripped the porch off, and rented what remained. His tenants used a soap box to enter their front door. At the north end of the village a side road struck down towards the river at Pope’s Point. There were a few more houses scattered along this road, and a church.

Men were standing in groups alongside the courthouse fence or sauntering up and down the state road, reluctantly making way for moving cars. This is pure American, Dave was thinking; like coming home to something. It’s only below the Mason and Dixon line that men have the art of standing ’round gracefully. He walked slowly, eager to make friends. When a man looked at him he nodded and spoke a greeting; but the other always turned his head in embarrassment. Not unfriendly, Dave told himself, but only self-conscious. When he approached a group they did not look at him, but turned sheepish and spat. After he had passed, he felt their eyes between his shoulder blades. They all know me, he thought, ruefully.

After he had decided to make no more friendly advances he was hailed by a merry, high-pitched voice: “Hello, son!” Turning, he saw a tall, lean old man with magnificent shoulders, and thick, unshorn white hair sticking out below the edges of his black plush cap. He had eyes as blue as the sky, rosy cheeks and a jutting hawklike nose. His quizzical grin revealed two rows of

broken teeth. The loud hail had attracted the attention of all the men in the vicinity, and they were staring. This appeared to please the old man. "H'are you, Doc," he said, extending an enormous hand. "You see I know who you are. I'm Edward Shenton. Looking us over, eh?"

They shook hands. "Sure," said Dave, "and giving you-all a treat."

Mr. Ed did not fail to mark the localism. The blue eyes twinkled. "So, you're already getting the hang of our talk." He looked around at the nearby men. "Reckon you don't find us overly friendly, eh?"

"I suppose they want to know first what they're making friends with," said Dave.

"That's right, son, you show 'em!" He came closer and lowered his voice, still grinning broadly. "Let me tell you something, they're plumb scart of you, that's what!"

"Scared of me? What the heck for?"

"Because you have the name of a learned man, see? We ain't ne'er had a learned man down here before. They don't know how to take you."

"Now you're pulling my leg," said Dave.

"Not me! Not me! I e'er speak by the book! Ask anybody." He could not contain his laughter. "So long, son! First time you're down our way, stop by to see us, do. I live in the first district; you turn off the state road at Pardee's store. Anybody down thataway will direct you."

"Thanks, I will," said Dave.

He was cheered by this encounter. When he got home he told Mrs. Bason (or Miss Maddie, as he now called her) about it. She said: "Ed Shenton? Yes, there's something warm in the man. Years ago he was called the prettiest young fellow in the county and the biggest liar—I mean stories, not wicked lies. Before the war the Shentons were a fine family in the first district; now they're poor. You should go see Ed. Nanny Shenton, his wife, is a woman with a heart of gold." This surprised Dave as coming from the self-contained Miss Maddie.

Dave walked as far as the church, the last building on the Pope's Point road. When he returned to the center of the village it was more crowded than before. He took up a stand on the sidewalk in front of the A. & P. store where he could watch and listen to the meetings and the greetings; the loud talk and unrestrained laughter. People with plenty of room have no need to restrain their voices. Dave felt depressed in the presence of so much friendliness, and none of it for him.

Up the road he saw a woman approaching on horseback. She rode with the ease of long custom. Her horse was inclined to be jittery in the crowd, but she had the mastery. Amongst all the motor-cars the solitary horsewoman came riding like something out of the past. A couple of hounds lolloped around the horse and sniffed at the edges of the road. As they drew close, Dave noticed that the people around him were becoming self-conscious. Some of the men turned and looked in the store-windows. Another stranger! he thought, and immediately felt a bond with her.

He got a good look at her, and was confused. A deep-bosomed young woman with a very straight back and slim legs encased in worn, well-polished riding boots; dark hair, brown eyes and a fair skin. Beautiful? he did not ask himself then or later. She was herself; she was like no other. He was struck by the extreme arch of her eyebrows, which gave her a look of indignant surprise like a child, and made him want to laugh. There was nothing childish in the glance of her eyes. Everything was there; everything lovely and contradictory; pride, pain, courage, candor, gentleness; that look had no name. It entered into the middle of Dave's breast and left a barb sticking there.

She dismounted a few yards from him and spoke privately to her horse. The riding breeches were shaped to a pair of thin knees. Dave had a weakness for thin knees in women. She looked up and down the walk. To anybody who came before her eyes she spoke with a candid smile. At the same time, Dave observed, it was clear she didn't give a damn what they thought. She spotted a half-grown negro boy slouching in front of Cohn's, and hailed him in a clear voice that made Dave shiver with pleasure. It was different from any voice he had ever heard; it was the right voice to come from her. The boy approached, grinning. Dave perceived that there was understanding between them. She addressed him preemptorily, but it was the preemptoriness without contempt that negroes love.

"Hold my horse, boy. If he begins to jump around don't pull on the bridle, but follow him up easy, and speak to him. I'll be watching inside the store and I'll come."

"Yaas'm, Miss Clare."

She turned to go into the store. She appeared to pay no attention whatever to Dave. On the threshold of the store she met a rouged and waved older woman coming out, who stiffened, pursed her lips, and pointedly looked aside. The girl passed her with devastating unconsciousness. Dave found himself glaring at the village wife.

He went to the negro. "Who is that young lady?"

The boy looked surprised that anybody should ask. "That Miss Clare, suh."

"Miss Clare who?"

"Miss Clare Eltonhead of Geneezay, suh."

Dave turned homeward. He wanted to get away where he could try to straighten out the confusion in his mind. All validity had suddenly gone from the untidy, populous scene that surrounded him; men, dogs, motor-cars were no more than a printed picture.

At dinner time, having told Miss Maddie about everything else, he approached the subject casually. "There was a girl riding a horse . . ."

"Clare Eltonhead," said Miss Maddie instantly.

"How do you know? Is there only one girl who rides a horse?"

"Only one who would ride into town on court day."

"She wasn't showing off," said Dave.

Miss Maddie glanced at him dryly. "Of course not," she said. "It's just because she enjoys riding."

Dave thought: Damn! I'm giving everything away! He waited for Miss Maddie to enlarge upon Clare Eltonhead, but she did not, and he had to ask another question. "Is she a stranger here?"

"A stranger! The first Eltonhead received a patent for Genizir from Lord Baltimore himself. It is the only one of the original families that is left. What made you think she was a stranger?"

"The people seemed to act towards her like they act towards me."

"Oh," said Miss Maddie guardedly, "she hasn't lived in the county, you see. Clare was the youngest; her parents died when she was a small child and her aunt in Baltimore took her to raise. The aunt is a wealthy woman and Clare is accustomed to the highest society. That makes county people a little ill at ease with her."

"Not the negroes."

"Eltonheads have a way with negroes."

Dave could see that Miss Maddie was holding a lot back. "What does the rest of the family consist of?" he asked.

"There is only Tom Eltonhead, the oldest brother. He farms Genizir. Clare keeps house for him. The brothers and sisters in between have married out of the county."

"Isn't the brother married?"

"He has been," said Miss Maddie warily.

“What’s the story, Miss Maddie?”

She hesitated, looking her grimmest. “I hope,” she said slowly, “that you would not find strangeness and wonder in that quarter.”

Dave felt his face growing hot. He brought out a laugh. “Good Lord, no! I only had a passing glimpse of her. . . . But why shouldn’t I?”

“Wait until you get acquainted ’round,” urged Miss Maddie, “There is any number of sweet girls.” (Dave thought: Not so sweet as she!) “Natural wives and mothers.”

“I don’t doubt it. But what’s the matter with Miss Eltonhead?”

“The modern girl!” said Miss Maddie with finality.

He couldn’t question her further without giving away too much. “What about her brother?” he asked carelessly.

“Tom Eltonhead is a triflin’ man. Nothing prospers in his hands. It is true, Genizir was run down when it came to him; it’s worse now. He only lives there by sufferance of his brothers and sisters. The place was left to all six children alike. Tom was farming it, and he went on farming it. He has never been able to raise the money to buy out the others. He has never paid any of them a cent. However, all of them have done well, except the youngest.”

“What about his marriage?”

“He married beneath him. She was the daughter of an overseer on his father’s place. She made him a good wife as far as I know. There are two children; boy and girl now, twelve and fourteen years old.”

“And then?”

“I don’t like to talk about it,” said Miss Maddie.

“I’ll hear it from others,” Dave pointed out. “I’d rather get the straight dope from you.”

“Very well. Tom Eltonhead was sued by a woman for the support of her daughter’s child. The girl herself was little more than a child. Poor whites. It was an ugly case. Tom settled it. There was so much talk that his wife felt obliged to sue him for divorce to save her face. Everybody had always looked down on her, and she thought, as the injured party, a divorce would give her better standing. . . . In a way it has,” Miss Maddie conceded with grim humor. “She lives on in the village. Everybody sides with her, and dislikes her. A common woman!”

“Lord! the man must have been through several kinds of hell!”

“Exactly. I suspect that the mother and daughter entrapped him. To them he was a rich man.”

“Then why are you so bitter against him?”

“Not bitter. Disgusted because a man could be so souple. I don’t like to talk about it because it’s so ugly. Mrs. Eltonhead sued her husband in the county court. It was the first time a divorce case had ever been tried here. All the dirty things were brought out in open court. It was sickening the way people *enjoyed* it.”

“I get you,” said Dave.

“Tom Eltonhead was left living alone at Genizir. He is not a handy man; had no notion how to do for himself. Nobody would go there. Even the men would not speak to him for fear of what their wives would say.”

“Good God!” said Dave. “After he had given them so much pleasure by his trial?”

“They would not admit that. They say that Tom Eltonhead got in a very low state. Drunken and dirty and heedless. A year ago the girl came to keep house for him. She has brought about a great change.”

Dave thought: I was not mistaken in her! “That was a fine thing to do!” he said.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t,” said Miss Maddie grimly.

“You mean she left her aunt’s luxurious home and came down here to live in comparative poverty?”

“There is nothing comparative about it. It is real poverty. The court ordered Tom Eltonhead to pay his wife a hundred fifty dollars a month. There is little left for him and his sister.”

“Perhaps the rich aunt helps out.”

“No. She quarreled with the girl because she came to live with her brother. She cut her out of her will. The girl is a good manager. Does most of the work of the big house and thinks nothing of it. Tom holds his head up again. She’d make a man of him, if ’twere possible.”

“Then why don’t you like her, Miss Maddie?”

Miss Maddie looked at him with something in her glance that he did not understand. “I neither like nor dislike her. I am nobody’s judge. In this girl the old Eltonhead pride and family feeling have come out, but it’s all for Eltonheads. There are other Eltonhead traits not so pretty. I should not like to see anybody entering that family that I wished well to.”

“What other traits?”

“I’m not saying,” said Miss Maddie. “Family traits are like chains laid on a young person. What’s more, my notions have no force in these days.

You're a young man and no fool. Think things out in your own way. But *think!*"

"Not always easy," Dave said.



When she had finished the dinner dishes Miss Utie ran over to Miss Aggie's. The slower Miss Aggie was still washing up, and Miss Utie wiped for her. "Clare Eltonhead rode into town on horseback this morning," she said.

"On court day?"

"Uh-huh. I was in the A. & P. when she come in."

"What she do with her horse?"

"Ordered a colored boy to hold him as cool's you please."

Miss Aggie twitched her nose and mourned for no reason.

"Verna Eltonhead was going out just as Clare come in. I think they met."

"Hm! I would like to see that meeting."

"Oh, Clare wouldn't let anything on."

"That girl's smooth face would hide murder."

"Just so, Aggie. Especially when she smiles. . . . There was twenty people in the store and the clerk ran to serve her first."

Miss Aggie mourned. "I can't see why men of that sort fall for her. White trash and niggers! She's no beauty."

"No indeed! She beguiles them with her smile."

"Her smile don't mean a thing, Utie. Inside, she deem herself as high as the Queen of England."

"Just so, Aggie. Howsoever friendly she smiles, we are like dirt to her. How can she have the face with what we know! . . . *He's* been down again."

"Who? The tall one with yellow hair?"

"Uh-huh. His name is Lance Corder."

"How did you find that out?"

"From the usual source."

"Verna?"

"Uh-huh. Verna has Aunt Maria's Onyx working for her so she can keep tab on what goes on at Geneezay. At that, Verna don't get much, Aunt Maria

is so good-natured. Aunt Maria makes out she's crazy about Clare Eltonhead and all her works."

"What do you expect, Utie? Niggers got no moral sense."

"Just so. Well, I got this from a better source than niggers. The bus-driver told me he brought Lance Corder down Saturday afternoon. Clare Eltonhead was waiting for him in a car at the corner of Pope's Point road. *They kissed, Aggie!*"

"No fooling!"

"Everybody on the bus saw them. A hot kiss with hugging. In broad day!"

Miss Aggie's nose was active. "Seems like Clare Eltonhead is not always so uppity, then."

"Uppity, my foot! Not with the right man!"

"Is this young fellow Corder in Baltimore society, Utie?"

"I don't think so. I never did see his name in the *Sun*-paper. He don't look a day over twenty-one."

Miss Aggie mourned. "And Clare Eltonhead twenty-five! Was born the week following my Sadie."

"She likes them young," remarked Miss Utie.

"You said it! Easier to lead on!"

"They say he's handsome, Aggie."

"What's handsome!"

Miss Utie glanced at the kitchen door to make sure it was closed, and lowered her voice. "And very much of a man!"

Miss Aggie was interested. "That's more likely to be it. . . . But how would anything like that get around?"

"Aunt Maria saw him undressed. She told."

"Aunt Maria ought to be a good judge," said Miss Aggie sourly.

"He 'pears to have run the others out," said Miss Utie. She counted on her fingers. "There was the sporting editor of the *Evening Sun*-paper; the cashier of the Baltimore Trust Company; young Snowdon of Snowdon Hall. Ain't none of them been down for weeks past."

"What is the girl thinking of!" said Miss Aggie. "She could have married one of them!"

"She is just reckless," said Miss Utie. "Like all the Eltonheads! . . . I ain't told you the worst yet. The bus goes back at seven o'clock on Saturdays. The driver told me when he come to the corner of Pope's Point

road, Tom Eltonhead was waiting for him. Clare and the young fellow drove him over. *Tom Eltonhead went to Baltimore Saturday night.*"

Miss Aggie was startled. "No fooling, Utie! And left those two alone in the house?"

Miss Utie put arms akimbo and sarcastically wagged her head. "Aunt Maria Phillips stayed."

"Aunt Maria Phillips! Go on! What are you telling me, Utie?"

"It's God's truth, Aggie."

Miss Aggie laughed in a rusty manner. "Aunt Maria is a fine chaperon, indeed! She has raised a whole family of bastards."

"Just so, Aggie."

"What could Tom Eltonhead be thinking of?"

"Would you expect Tom Eltonhead to show any gumption? He told the bus-driver—Tom Eltonhead would talk to anybody, as you know—that he was going to town to have a little fun. . . ."

Miss Aggie's nose made nimble play. "That means Jeannette Street by the market."

"I reckon. Tom said it was only because his sister had a man in the house that he could get away for a night."

Miss Aggie mourned. "Tsch! Tsch! Tsch! How disgraceful!"

"Sunday," Miss Utie continued, moistening her lips with relish, "they were seen careering over the side roads on horseback over Island Creek way, jumping fences, racing across fields, whooping and hollering like wild Indians. Plenty people saw and heard them; they didn't care. Believe me, Aggie, she wa'n't hardly what you'd call uppity then. She was all woman!"

"Um," mourned Miss Aggie. "Where will it end, Utie?"

"Where it always ends," said Miss Utie sharply; "in a hasty wedding and a premature baby, so-called."

"Well, that'll end her fun," said Miss Aggie. "I hope he can keep her, because she's got nothing. . . . When did Tom Eltonhead get back?"

"On the late bus, Sunday. Young Mister Corder, he went up early Monday."

"Two nights!" said Miss Aggie darkly.

Chapter 3

DAVE had brought his shingle down from New York with him, a neat black affair with gold letters on a pebbled ground, reading: “Dr. Tascott; Office Hours; 8 to 10; 1 to 3; 6 to 8.” He hung it outside the gate of the Basilon place—old doctor had never found it necessary to put out a sign; and thereafter made a point of sitting in his office between the hours named, waiting for patients patiently, as he put it, day after day. At other times he drove rapidly up and down the state road to convey the impression that he had been called on serious cases.

On the frosted glass of the outer door of his office was painted the word “Surgery” in old English script with curlycues. It tickled Dave, and he let it stay for the present. In the middle of the door there was a key-handle which, when turned, caused a bell to whirr inside. On a card tacked to the door was printed: Ring and enter. Miss Maddie had made the waiting-room look very up-to-date with new cretonne covers on the old sofa and chairs, and some magazines. In the consulting-room Dave had cleaned out old doctor’s accumulations of fifty years and started his own on the freshly painted shelves.

The first time the bell rang it startled him. For a second he couldn’t remember what it was. Then, springing up, he glanced around to make sure that the room was in the right shape to impress a patient, and looked in the mirror to straighten his tie. Half way on his dash to the waiting-room he pulled up short. Mustn’t appear too anxious, he warned himself, and stood there long enough to count ten slowly.

It was a friendly-looking, dark-haired man of forty-five or so, in rough clothes, which he carried with a certain grace; he had been good-looking, but his face was now a little seamy; he had young eyes. His glance had something of the bright, shallow quality of an ape’s. He was easy-going to the point of slackness; there was a vaguely familiar look about him. “Morning, Doctor,” he said. “Can I see you?” He slurred his speech like the other county men, but the touch of grace set him apart.

“Surely,” said Dave, throwing the door wide. “Go right into my office.” He followed his patient, closing the door.

The caller was looking around at the neat shelves of books and bottles. “You seem well fixed already, Doctor. How’s business?”

“Okay,” said Dave. “What can I do for you? Not much wrong with you, judging from your looks.”

“Oh, this isn’t professional; this is a friendly call, Doctor,” the man said, laughing. Dave concealed his disappointment.

“Nothing wrong with me as far as I know. . . . But there may be,” he added, laughing again. He laughed easily.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, as man to man, I spent last Saturday night in a house in Baltimore. You know how it is. Feel a mite anxious.”

“Didn’t you take prophylactic measures?” asked Dave.

“Sure, did I. But one of ’em busted.”

“It was not too late then.”

“I know. I been in the army. But I didn’t come prepared.”

“That’s six days ago. There isn’t anything I can do now.”

“Don’t you worry, Doc. It’s a nice house, and I’m known there—I’ll give you the address if you want. I’ll be all right. I only mentioned it to break the ice, sort of.”

Dave grinned. “That’s all right. Ice is broken. Sit down and smoke up.”

“I’ll stick to my pipe,” the man said, producing it. “Let me introduce myself; Tom Eltonhead of Genizir.”

A faint family likeness! That was it! The touch of grace! Dave felt the blood crawling into his face and got up to find a pipe cleaner. Why in God’s name couldn’t he control his face? She had haunted him the past days, and he had been plotting how to bring about this very meeting that had happened of itself. He realized that his visitor was waiting for him to say something. “Mighty pleased to meet you,” he said woodenly.

They got their pipes drawing companionably. “How you like old Travis?” asked Eltonhead.

“Fine,” said Dave.

A dreamy expression came into the other’s slack face. “Good country!” he murmured. “It’s the only country I know, and all I want to know. You must come to my place. The house is built high. You look across a big river with a winding creek running into it; rich bottom lands. Beautiful. In hot

weather a soft haze hangs over it, and when nor'west wind blows 'tis polished like emerald and sapphire. In my blood, I reckon. Eltonheads been living there near three hundred year. I love the life from winter plowing all around the calendar to hog-killing. Love it too well, maybe. I like each day so well I never look ahead. So I ain't made nothing of myself. The grand gentlemen Eltonheads in coach and four would blush for me, I reckon. I'm thought an ornery scoun'rel 'round here. Reckon you've heard?"

"No," said Dave.

"I'll tell you about it if you want," Tom offered; "I'm not the man to hide anything."

"It's not necessary," said Dave. "I take a man as I find him."

"Good lad! Me too. At that I'm no worse than others I could name. Only I got hauled up and fumigated in court. God! what a clacking of tongues!"

"It isn't always the worst ones that get caught," said Dave.

"Right! My wife left me because of it. Well, that was a good riddance. She's a nagging bitch. I miss the children, though."

"Don't you ever see them?"

"Sure, I see them. On the sly. Wife tries to set 'em against me, but they see through her, young as they are. They like me. . . . Anyhow, I'm free again; I can visit in the poor white cabins, or go up to town just as I have a mind. And nobody to nag me."

Dave thought: What about your sister?

Eltonhead's talk became very gross and Dave got uncomfortable. It was not that he couldn't take the grossness with a grin, but the man seemed a bit elderly for that sort of thing. However, Dave, watching him, saw that he was not leering and licking his lips like an old man; the dark eyes glowed. He still genuinely felt these heats of the blood and was therefore the more excusable. But Dave wished he wouldn't talk about it.

In the end Eltonhead revealed other interests besides women. "Like to go fishing and gunning?" he asked.

"Haven't had time for it since I was a boy," said Dave. "I'd like damned well to begin again."

"Gemmen!" said Tom, "I love it! It is half my life! . . . Ain't nothing biting now but hard-haid; poor sport and indifferent eating. When trout and rockfish come in, I'll take you fishing. Or trolling for blue on the Bay. Come fall, we'll go gunning. The first to open is the season for squirrel; then pa'tridge and rabbit, and lastly ducking. There's reedbird further up river, but I don't bother with such small fowl. In the winter we get a gang of men

together, boys, pack of dogs, plenty corn liquor; and go coon and 'possum hunting. Out all night. Man! that's fun!"

In a lull of the conversation Tom looked at Dave quizzically and rubbed his chin. "Doc, I know you ain't had no custom yet. Nothing can be hid hereabouts. Ev'body knows you're kiting up and down the state road just for a decoy."

Dave kept his face. "I'm learning the roads," he said.

"Sure. Sure. But you ought keep your hand in with doctoring, too." Tom hesitated, grinning. "I know a man over my way who's real sick. Reckon he'll die if you don't do something for him. No doctor will come to see him because he won't pay. He won't pay you. But I thought maybe just to keep your hand in . . ."

Dave considered it. "All right," he said. "I'll go." It was close to ten o'clock and he proceeded to get out his bags.

"Two bags?" said Tom. "Old doctor ne'er carried but one little fellow."

"There's no drug-store in the county," said Dave. "I've got to be prepared for everything."

"Pretty work," said Tom.

Outside he said: "Get in my car, Doc."

"Better take both cars," said Dave, "so you won't have to come back."

"No. I'll bring you back. Got nothing better to do."

After driving through the village they turned into the Pope's Point road and in a couple of miles took a left fork. "This is my way home," said Tom. "Genizir's at end of this road." Dave's pulse beat faster, thinking of who lived there. He felt the wrench of pain again. Like a damn schoolboy! he thought sorely. Why can't I take it naturally?

Passing a roadside store, a knot of men pushed out on the porch, eagerly staring. Dave guessed that they all knew who he was and whither bound. Tom waved his hand airily.

Tom entertained Dave with anecdotes as he drove. "Down yonder dirt road lives Uncle Hez and Priscilla in a one room cabin. White folks. Last of old family. Uncle Hez, he's eighty-six; Priscilla's ninety-three. She's his brother's wife. Brother died and Hez' wife died, and Priscilla she come to Uncle Hez and say: 'Hez, you've got to marry me now. Ain't no sense or reason we live alone in two houses; you got to marry me.' So they get married.

"Uncle Hez, he's a pow'ful saving man. Got twelve thousand dollars in the bank when she close down. Lose half. When she open up again Hez

draws out what's left, says he's going to build a big new house. Says he might as well get something out of it before the bank takes all. So he builds a big house seven rooms, believe me, yonder in the woods out of sight of man. When she's finished, Hez and Priscilla move in, and stay all night. In the morning they move back to the cabin again. They gave the new house away. That's how folks are."

Off to the right Dave had his first glimpses of the blue Pocomico River, a mile wide. It formed the western boundary of Travis County. They turned into another dirt road on the left, and slid down into a creek bottom over appalling ruts washed by the rains.

"Will you be able to get up again?" asked Dave.

"It's just possible in dry weather," answered Tom with a laugh. The bottom was filled with tall, thick, second-growth timber meeting overhead. Tom snaked the car through formidable mudholes and over roots. "Reckon some of these very holes been here since the Civil War," he said.

At last they came out on a forlorn little house, mounted on skinny brick piers in a weedy clearing. Chickens scratched in the always dry earth beneath it. The house was taller than it was wide; it had never been painted; broken panes were stuffed with rags, and the top of the chimney having blown off, a rusty end of stove-pipe had been stuck in to carry off the smoke. A rickety boy-child of three or four sat on his bottom in the dirt doing nothing. In the open doorway hung a shy girl of twelve, peering at the newcomers through a tangle of hair.

Tom said: "This is the place. You go in. I've got to go back to the store to see a man. I'll come back for you." He turned his car. Dave, taking his bags, started for the house.

The girl recognized him for a doctor. "Pappy upstairs," she whispered. Inside, four strides would have taken Dave from the front door out of the back. Going upstairs was like climbing up steeply piled boxes. Difficult to negotiate with the two bags. There was no stair rail. On the landing above he fell over an ancient phonograph sitting on the floor.

There was only one room, and he turned in the door. In an unspeakably dirty bed lay a gaunt, bearded man with matted hair and feverish eyes. Soiled clothes were scattered on the floor, and a rusty, up-ended kerosene drum with some holes cut in it served as a stove. There was no other furniture. Seeing Dave, the man on the bed croaked:

"Go away! Don't want no doctor! I never sent for you! I won't pay you a cent! I won't pay!"

Dave thought: Pneumonia. Here's a job! And took off his coat. Going to the door, he called to the girl to bring him a basin of water and a towel.

More than an hour had passed when he came out of the house. He had left medicine with the girl and told her what to do. When she overcame her shyness she seemed intelligent. He told her he would come again next morning.

Tom Eltonhead was waiting for him, lolling in the car. "My God, Doc, you'll never make a living if you stay as long as this everywhere."

"I had to examine him to find out which side the pneumonia was on," said Dave. "He was wearing seven shirts and put up a fight over each one. It was like carrying seven lines of trenches." Tom laughed.

Back on the hard-surfaced road, he pulled up in front of the little store. "Come in and meet the boys," he said.

Inside, introductions were solemnly made all around. There were six rawboned men with strongly marked, characteristic faces, and a fat storekeeper. The men were sheepish; looked anywhere but at the doctor; however, Dave felt friendliness in the air.

Tom said: "Hold your hands together, Doc." He scooped up a pile of loose change from the counter.

"What's this?" asked the surprised Dave as the money poured into his hands.

"We took up a collection."

Dave pocketed his first fee.

"Excuse the libe'ty, Doc," said the storekeeper. "Is it a fact that Tom here told you you wouldn't get no pay for this visit?"

"Sure," said Dave, "what of it?"

"Okay," said the storekeeper. Producing a glass jug of white mule from underneath, he planted it on the counter. "Step up, boys. It's on the house!" There was a general wiping of mouths with the backs of hands.

"It was a bet," said Tom Eltonhead, pulling a droll face, "and he lose!" Dave was satisfied that he had made a stage.

After the drink Dave penciled a memorandum in his notebook. "This is what the sick man ought to eat," he said, tearing the page out.

The storekeeper reached for it. "Okay. I'll take care of that."

One of the rawboned men spoke up. "Doc, mah wife's ben right po'ly. Reckon Ah'll cahy uh ov' to town t'morr'."

"All right," said Dave. "Office hours eight to ten, one to three, six to eight." Tom Eltonhead winked at the storekeeper.

Half an hour later Tom let Dave out at the back porch of the Basilon house. “So long, Doc,” he said, letting in his clutch, “see you soon.” Suddenly he stepped on his brake and stopped again. “Hey! I forgot something!”

“What’s that?”

“My sister said she’d be glad to make yo’ acquaintance, Doc. She said it’s high time we had a proper doctor in the county. She wants you to come over to supper tonight. How about it?”

The blood rushed to Dave’s face. There was nothing for it but to stand it out. He was so pale ordinarily he knew it was showing up like the flag of anarchy. He had to wait a couple of seconds before he could collect himself sufficiently to answer. “I’d be glad to come. Please thank her for me.”

“Sure will. You know the way. Six o’clock. We’re simple country folk.” Tom lingered, looking at Dave curiously.

“It’s the first time I’ve been asked out,” Dave explained. Tom thrust a hand out of the car, and Dave took it, careful to restrain the impulse to press it hard. At that moment Tom’s slack, good-humored face looked as beautiful to him as an archangel’s.

“So long, Doc!”

When the car had disappeared around the house a reaction set in. All Dave’s elation ran out of him, and he stood with hanging head and hands. The pain surprised him. The doctor in him thought: Strange, that a man should feel physical pain for such a reason. The books don’t tell you that . . . and for a woman I have never spoken to. This thing is going to give me hell. Always getting hell from some quarter. . . . If I had good sense I’d stay away from the house. A painful grin twisted his lips. Try and stop me!

Chapter 4

MISS MADDIE came out on the back porch as Dave was leaving. He was aware that his casual air was not deceiving her. “Reckon you won’t be here for your evening office hours,” she said.

“No. I guess it’s safe enough to skip it for once.”

“You’re not taking your satchels.”

“I’m only going out to supper.”

“You ought always to have your satchels with you. You never know when the call may come, nor from where.”

“That’s good advice,” said Dave. He went back into the office for his bags.

“Where can you be reached if you’re wanted?” asked Miss Maddie, following him.

Dave looked up the number in the telephone book. “14F3” he said. Of course, Miss Maddie knew whose number that was. She looked at him levelly without speaking. . . . Why does she have to prophesy disaster? Dave thought sorely.

With a quickening pulse he drove along the same road that he had taken with Tom Eltonhead that morning. It ran through a small-scale countryside, slovenly and beguiling—like its people. The little sloping fields were broken by ragged patches of woods and winding gullies, which started at the roadside and ran down to the unseen creek in the bottoms. Some of the fields were neatly harrowed and laid off for corn or tobacco; others flaunted last year’s dead weeds. Pointed cedars grew along the fence lines; mats of waxy honeysuckle smothered the neglected corners; tobacco barns, silvery with age, were eked out with lean-to additions, which gave them crazy, pleasing lines.

After he had passed the point where they had turned off in the morning he came in full view of the broad river. It bore a solitary schooner beating down stream under full sail against a southerly breeze. Slow-moving schooner, small fields and modest houses, all were in keeping with the wide,

unspoiled prospect. The thought that shaped itself in Dave's mind was: Why could men not have been content with this?

The hard-surfaced road ended at the outer gate of Genizir. At the open gate stood a lugubrious figure who hailed Dave. "Hey, Doc, stop a minute, will you?" Dave, silently cursing the delay, stepped on his brake. "I got a awful sore throat, Doc. Will you take a look at it?"

After a brief struggle with his impatience, Dave said: "Sure." He got out and lifted one of the satchels from the luggage compartment. Miss Maddie was right. "How did you recognize me?" he asked.

"Well, I knew you was invited to G'neezay for supper."

Dave shook his head. What a people! He made the man sit on the running-board and throw back his head. He had a sore throat in good truth. Dave swabbed it out, and tossed the cotton swab over the fence into a cornfield. "I can give you a gargle if you want it," he said, "but salt and water is just as good."

"'Druther have real medicine if it's the same to you, Doc." Dave mixed the gargle in a bottle and handed it over. "How much?" asked the man.

"Dollar and a quarter with medicine."

The patient fished out a tightly folded bill from one pocket in his overalls, the coin from another, and handed them over. "Much obliged, Doc. Feel a sight better awready."

"Don't mention it," said Dave. As he drove on he said to himself: What a doctor needs down here is a roadside manner.

Inside the gate his excitement increased. A dirt road followed the crest of a shallow ridge in agreeable curves; on one side, the fields stretched down to a deep inlet, on the other, to the river. This was Genizir and every detail had meaning for him. He was no farmer, but he could see evidences of neglect; fences submerged under a tangle of honeysuckle, trumpet vine, wild grape and other beautiful weeds; barns beginning to sag; spring plowing not yet finished. The ridge ended in a flat-topped knoll, predestined for a fortification or a mansion, and here stood the old house, shaded by trees taller and more magnificent than any Dave had seen; tulip poplars.

There was another open gate admitting to the house grounds. One approached the house from the side. As he drove under the vaulting trees Dave could see nobody, but he heard Tom Eltonhead's lazy voice from the porch. "Leave your car anywhere, Doc, and come on up."

The house was a rectangular brick structure, nobly proportioned, and having four great chimneys. Along the front ran a deep porch, a later addition. Dave, absorbed in what he was to find inside the house, turned his

back on the famous view. Tom Eltonhead hoisted himself out of a shabby porch-glider and came to the head of the steps to greet him. “Welcome to Genizir, Doc.”

To Dave the words had a portentous sound. Almost with dread he looked past Tom through the open front door into a wide hall with a waxed floor of black walnut, and a graceful curving stairway. The back doorway, open too, enframed a wistaria vine and in an aperture of the vine, a distant flower garden. She was not to be seen. “Sis is fixing things,” said Tom. “Be out directly. Sit down. A drink is coming.”

Dave smiled, and felt as if his face was cracking. He wanted to make a good impression, and as he waited, moment by moment, he felt his morale coming apart. Luckily, Tom was not particularly observant. He talked about the negroes on the place. “Never have any lack of help,” he said. “They’re fond of me, I’m fond of them. I can’t get no manner work out of them. They keep me poor.”

Hearing her coming with quick steps through the hall, Dave jumped up in a fever. She appeared like Hebe bearing a salver with cocktail shaker and three glasses. In women’s clothes she was infinitely more upsetting; gentler, less gallant. It was a blue cotton dress with a wide white collar. The waist crossed over on her breast, leaving bare the V of a neck lovelier than Dave could have guessed. That crossed-over collar was exactly right on a deep-breasted woman.

“Here’s the new doctor,” said Tom.

She greeted Dave with the same words her brother had used: “Welcome to Genizir.” Evidently in the lives of these people their home was an important personality. Dave was pricked with disappointment because her smiling glance immediately returned to the tray. She was friendly, but not especially interested. Why should she be?

The cocktails were poured out and tasted. “What do you think of it?” asked Tom. “The Genizir special. Everything in it come off the place—but for God’s sake don’t mention that I told you so. Corn liquor, shrub, and a dash of honey.”

“Very nice,” said Dave.

Clare made talk as women do with a new guest. Dave, seeing her through a shimmering mist, scarcely heard her words. His heart alternately rose and fell like a spirit thermometer grasped in a warm hand and released again. Not since boyhood at the approach of the first singled-out she, had he been so overwhelmed, and he was ashamed.

The glasses were filled a second time and Clare raised hers. "To Doctor Tascott's success in Travis!"

It warmed Dave like a dram; he began to feel at home. He told of his roadside case, and Clare was amused. Her laughter ravished his ears. It was like strings of different-sized silver bells shaken one after another, beginning with the smallest.

Clare told anecdotes of the county folk. She was of them, yet not of them. She said: "Often when I drive out, Mr. Giddy Coppage, our neighbor to the north, will send his little boy down to sit on the fence by the road until I come back."

"Why?"

"To see who I am bringing with me." Who *does* she bring with her? Dave thought.

In the delight of looking at her he forgot everything. All his defenses were down. It was the first time he had seen her hair. Of the darkest shade of brown with a slight wave in it, it was too soft and fine to make much of a display around her head. It was twisted in a loose knot behind. When a lock of it escaped over her ear, she poked it back, saying: "Cat-fur!" She wore no make-up but a vivid lipstick. Her face was thin and mobile, the lips never still. There was something piteous in it, as in the face of a hurt child who is too proud to cry. Not that she was asking for pity. She kept the two men laughing. Behind this, Dave saw another woman; tender, generous and passionate. Will she ever show that one to me?

In her company Tom Eltonhead was another man. The grinning coarseness was clapped under hatches. His air was almost gallant towards his sister. Was this merely for company's benefit? Brother and sister were good friends and companions, but not really honest with each other. What a lonely life she must lead! Dave told himself. A secret shine in her eyes denied it.

She led the way into the house. Along the right side of the wide hall ran a double drawing-room, each half with a fireplace, and on the left opened a dining-room paneled to the ceiling in waxed pine. All the rooms were unexpectedly bare. Clare said: "My brothers and sisters ran off with most of the family heirlooms before I grew up. And of course Tom had to furnish his wife's apartment in the village. So we get along without any furniture to speak of. Saves trouble."

The food was on the table when they sat down. Clare said: "In my father's time this was the study; the first Eltonhead called it his closet. The dining-room was back of this, kitchen in the basement. The food was sent up

on a dumbwaiter. We changed the dining-room into the kitchen; so much easier for poor folks.”

Dave never knew what he was eating. When a thing was required Clare fetched it herself. “Aunt Maria is such a monstrosity I told her not to show herself,” she explained, laughing. “The floor bends under her as she walks.” Tom added: “I had to put in an extra post under the kitchen floor to support it.”

Nevertheless, during the meal the swing door was thrust in with a sweeping gesture, and an enormous old negress entered, bearing a plate of hot rolls on her palm. She was enveloped in a vast white apron, and had drawn on a pair of white cotton gloves with the finger-tips out. She knew she was disobeying orders, and her eyes rolled rollickingly. She walked on tip-toe—or as near tip-toe as she could manage, with her free hand poised delicately in the air to suggest that though fat, she was still light on her feet.

Tom burst into a roar of laughter at the sight, and Dave joined in. Clare bit her laughter back. Aunt Maria herself shook so violently she all but dropped the plate of rolls. Placing it hastily on the table, she waddled out, forgetting her graces. They heard her drop into a chair in the kitchen and go into a paroxysm of rich, fat laughter. Later, Dave heard Clare remonstrating with her in the kitchen, and heard Aunt Maria’s rumbling reply. “ ’Deed, honey, I jus’ want to show comp’ny Mist’ess wa’n’t doin’ all.”

It was growing dark when they returned to the porch. In lieu of brandy, Tom Eltonhead produced a bottle of corn whiskey that he said had been buried for twenty years in a charred keg. “You lose half of it,” he said, “but it’s worth it!”

After a while a negro came to the steps to say that Mist’ Tom was wanted at the barn. Tom went away with him. When he was left alone with Clare Dave was scared by the strength of the feelings that took him. It was like something outside of oneself entering into possession. One looked on helplessly. She was sitting in a low, deep chair; the turn of her little head, the sight of the expressive hands lying loosely in her lap—especially her hands—unnerved him. He had a boy’s longing to fall on his knees beside the chair and bury his face between those cool hands.

Clare started asking questions about his training in the hospital. There was more than politeness in it; she was digesting what he told her. She said in the end: “I wanted above all to be a nurse. But my family wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Sometimes a girl ought to take the bit between her teeth,” said Dave.

“Surely,” she agreed. “I wish I had now. But a young girl hasn’t got assurance enough. It’s only when it’s too late, that she develops a mind of her own.”

“Too late?” murmured Dave.

“They wouldn’t let me learn anything useful,” she went on. “Can you believe it in this day and age? I reached the height of my career at eighteen in making my debut at the Bachelor’s Cotillon in Baltimore. A slow decline followed. The consequence is, that at twenty-five I find myself a kind of hanger-on in a busy world.”

Dave was careful with his voice. “I wouldn’t say that—after what I’ve seen here tonight.”

Clare said: “You mean I’ve got a worth-while job here? You’re right. Trouble is, it’s so damned precarious.”

“Precarious?”

“My brother is never the man to live single for the rest of his life. When he marries again my job is washed up.”

Dave thought: Must *you* live single? He said nothing.

“I have always wanted to make friends with a doctor,” Clare went on.

“Why?”

“Well, doctors have to face realities. They ought not to be so sentimental as other men.” Dave grinned. “Why do you smile?” she asked.

“You’re out of luck,” he said. “In me you’ve got hold of a super-sentimental specimen.”

“Oh, no, not in the way I mean. You’ve got plenty of ballast.”

“Thanks,” said Dave, “I’m glad to be assured of it.”

“No sentimental man would ever admit that he was,” she added; “they are always grieved by the suggestion.”

“There hasn’t been any opening for sentiment in the life I’ve known,” said Dave. “Everybody was making out to be hard-boiled. Women too. It’s a shame to see a soft-hearted woman trying to be tough.”

“I know what that is, too,” said Clare, and was silent.

The silences shook Dave. He searched desperately around in his mind for something safe to say, and couldn’t find it. Everything conspired against him. The softness of the May night, new to a northerner, and its faint perfume; the first fireflies switching their little flashlights on and off under the trees; Clare sitting there with her head lowered and her quiet hands in her lap.

“We are talking at cross purposes,” she presently resumed. “Sentimental is not the same thing as soft-hearted.”

“What do you mean by sentimental?” he asked.

“I was thinking of the men who go mushy as soon as they are left alone with a girl—mushy as a popular song! It’s the Maryland tradition.”

“Aren’t girls just as bad with men?” asked Dave.

“No. There’s a difference. Girls hand out a line to men because they’ve found it’s the easiest way to handle the creatures. But they’re not fooling themselves. You would find that nearly every girl welcomes the chance to be honest.”

“Men too,” said Dave, “but each is waiting for the other side to begin.”

Clare laughed, and Dave caught his breath with pleasure. “And so our talk is traveling around in a circle,” she said.

“Talk generally does,” said Dave, “but nobody is going to stop talking because of it.”

In the dark her shadowy hands were lying partly turned up in her lap as if asking . . . asking . . . But not for me! he thought.

“I’m fed up with ‘chivalry,’” she said. “I want to be talked to like a human being. I want to know matter-of-fact things. I want men friends.”

“You can have me—for what I’m worth,” said Dave casually.

“Thanks. I wasn’t angling for it, but I’m glad you said it. I could see right away the other day that you were a dependable sort of man.”

Dependable! The word rang like a knell in Dave’s inner ear. He smiled stiffly. “The other day? I didn’t know that you saw me.”

“Oh, I see more than I appear to,” said Clare. “It’s one of the tricks they teach debutantes.”

Chapter 5

THE doctor's days began to be less empty. Every morning he drove over to see his pneumonia patient in Sumach Bottom, and a patient or two presented themselves sheepishly at his office. Most of these, he suspected, had had trouble with the other doctors, or had not paid their bills. However, it was cash business and he succeeded in getting together another week's board, and in putting aside a dollar or two towards the next month's office rent. For the moment he refused to think of the gasoline bill and the additional drugs he needed.

One morning on his way to Sumach Bottom he saw Dr. Hoskey's car standing outside a small white farmhouse. Inside the house a woman was screaming horribly. Dave thought: I don't envy him that case. On his way back an hour later the doctor's car was gone, but the screaming continued. Short, sharp, never stopping, it was more like the bark of an animal than human cries. Dave's hospital-trained ear marked that it was not pain nor fright, more like mania. After a sharp struggle with himself—another doctor's patient!—he stopped and went in. He could not drive on and leave those cries.

The door was opened by a tall, good-looking young fellow in gum boots, who looked utterly distraught. Dave said: "I'm a doctor. Can I be of any help?" The young man looked him up and down morosely, and spoke over his shoulder. "It's the new doctor, Poppa." An old man, even taller than his son and no less straight, appeared. His face was hard with pain. He said: "There's nothing for you here. Doct' Hoskey couldn't do nothing for her."

"That's all right," said Dave. "I couldn't drive by without offering." He turned to go.

"Wait a minute," said the old man curtly. "Doct' Hoskey took what money we have in the house."

"Never mind that," said Dave. "If I help her you can pay me later. Otherwise, forget it."

The old man stood aside from the door. "Come in."

Dave said to the young man: "Please fetch my two satchels from the back of the car. It's not locked."

The old man led the way upstairs. "The name is Abram Ewbank," he said. "It's my wife." The little house was bleak inside, but clean and tidy; two rooms and a lean-to kitchen downstairs, two bedrooms above. On a high bed in the principal room lay the screaming woman. She had been dressed when they laid her down, but had torn her clothes partly off. Her body appeared surprisingly white through rents in the faded print dress. She had not injured herself. Her gray hair stood on end in shocking disorder; eyes fixed and staring; arms and legs drawn up into a rigid knot. Every breath was emitted in a scream. Dave had had plenty of such cases in hospital; epilepsy complicated with hysteria.

There was a frightened woman in the room. She said: "Can't keep nothin' over her."

"Has she had a mental shock?" Dave asked.

The woman nodded. "Her youngest son drown' off Packard's wharf yes'day. They still searchin' for the body."

The old man took the satchels from his son at the door. "Don't come in," he said to the boy. "Ain't fittin' for you to see."

Dave moved a table to the head of the bed and opened one of the satchels on it. "I'll have to ask you all to leave the room," he said.

"What you gwine do to her?" demanded the old man.

"In order to quiet her I have to get her to concentrate. Can't do that with others in the room." They went out reluctantly, and Dave closed the door.

Switching on his examining light, he held it in front of the woman's face. The mad eyes fixed on the tiny spot of light and when Dave moved it slowly back and forth, the eyes followed it. With his free hand he poured spirits of ammonia on a pad of cotton. Switching off the light, he clapped the cotton over the woman's mouth and nose. She struggled to get from under, but he held it firm. Every time she drew breath to scream, the fumes strangled her. She stopped screaming. Dave removed the pad and, taking one of her twisted hands, drew his hand down the stony arm.

"You're getting better now," he said. "Your arm is loosening. Let it come down. See, it's coming down. You're getting better. Let it come down. . . . Let it come down."

Little by little the arm relaxed, until at last he was able to draw it straight. The woman's eyes remained fixed on the spot where the light had been. The frantic look had gone. Then the other arm; the legs, one after the other. It was a long business. Always the firm stroking, and the quiet voice

suggesting: "You are better now. Let it come down. See, it's coming down." In the end he had her lying straight and quiet on the bed. Her eyes closed; she slept.

Dave drew a coverlet over her. He gathered up his things and, softly closing the satchel, opened the door. The old man looked at his wife, amazed and suspicious. "What you give her?" he demanded.

"Not a thing," said Dave. "That's natural sleep."

The woman neighbor, hand to mouth, was gaping at the patient as if she beheld a miracle. In the old man's face a struggle was taking place. "Well," he said, "you appear to be a doctor."

They went downstairs. The young man's face was glowing with gratitude. He didn't speak, but eagerly took the satchels from Dave. "Wait a minute," said Ewbank bluntly. He went out of the back door leaving Dave standing in the hall. The woman in a nervous whisper related the details of the tragedy which had thrown the mother off her base.

In a minute or two Ewbank returned, carrying a country ham sewed up in a cotton bag. "Will you take this?" he asked in the hard voice that Dave did not resent. "Our hams are said to be right good."

"Sure," said Dave. "How much is it worth?"

"It is seventeen pounds. We don't gen'ally sell our hams. Others ask forty to fifty cents a pound."

"Then it's good for more than one visit," said Dave. "If your son is found, it might bring on another crisis. Let me be here when he's brought home."

"I would take it right kind of you," said Ewbank. Dave drove away with the plump ham lying on the seat beside him.

When the noise of this "cure" went around the second district, the straggling callers at Dave's office began to show an increase. Most of them were women; some attracted by curiosity; others willing to pay a dollar for the opportunity to recite their symptoms to a new listener; a few cases where the doctor could be of real assistance. It became apparent that he need no longer worry about the gasoline and the drug bills; but Miss Maddie's financial condition troubled him.

One afternoon when he came home, Miss Maddie herself being out, he found a tax bill tacked to one of the posts of the front porch. Miss Maddie made light of it when she returned. "They never advertise you in the paper before three years, and I'm only a year in arrears. Willie Brome gets a quarter for every one of these that he delivers. It's always been done so."

“Why don’t they mail them for three cents?” asked Dave.

“Then there’d be no job for Willie.”

Dave’s bit of success did not recommend him to the other doctors. Old Hoskey, seeing him get out of his car in front of Cohn’s, hailed him. There were several bystanders. Hoskey was an untidy gray man with the disintegrated look of one who has suffered a slight stroke in the past. “Doctor,” he said, “what was your college?”

“New York,” said Dave with a wary smile.

“Did they teach you at New York that it was ethical to go into a house without being called, and take another physician’s patient from him?”

“That’s hardly the point, Doctor,” returned Dave, smiling still. “They taught us first, that we must never pass up a chance to relieve suffering. As to losing your patient, that’s up to you, isn’t it?” Dave went on into the store without waiting for an answer.

In addition to Hoskey, there was young Dr. Dabney who practiced mostly in the first district, including the village of Absalom’s Island. Dave could not feel that either was a dangerous rival. Of the two, the young man was the worse doctor. Hoskey at least had his forty years’ practice to go by, and was good enough for simple ailments, but the sullen, resentful-looking young Dabney was a hopeless misfit. He obviously had not learned much in school, and was incapable of learning from practice. Both doctors circulated spiteful stories about Dave, some of which came back. Dr. Hoskey said to the county men: “Well, of course, it’s none of my business if a man wants to let a strange doctor shut himself up with his wife and hypnotize her.” Dave shrugged when he heard it.

One night Dave was summoned to the house of a white man who was said to be suffering from “mannaporcha.” He had never heard of this disease. It turned out to be a violent case of delirium tremens. The family had locked the patient in his bedroom, and left him to rage. They opened the door for Dave, but refused to follow him inside. Dave saw a huge fellow with black, unshaven chin lying on the bed, snarling. My specialty seems to be mania, he thought. As he started to examine the patient, the man flung his arms around Dave’s waist and squeezed until Dave felt as if he were coming apart. He could not break the man’s hold.

“Here, you, help me!” he called sharply to those at the door. None of them moved. The crazed patient, showing his fangs, within an inch or two of Dave’s face, continued to squeeze. Dave, fast losing his wind, saw a heavy china pot under the edge of the bed. Grasping it by the handle, he brought it down on the man’s head. He passed out.

On his way home later, he muttered to himself: Mannporcha? . . . Mannaporcha? Where the hell did that term come from? Suddenly a light broke on him. *Mania a potu!* Sure! Good Latin, at that!

He had his high days and his low days. Once on court day a man, holding his head, came into the office half crazed with pain. Dave gave him codeine and when it had calmed him a little, tried to get his case history. He had had these headaches for over a year. The county doctors could do nothing for him. He had been to half a dozen city doctors. Some said this; some said that. They administered all kinds of things and it didn't do him any good. They told him that the findings of the X-rays and all the different analyses were negative. In short, there wasn't anything the matter with him. But the headaches continued. They were getting worse. "I can't stand it any longer," he said. "Doc, if you can't help me, I'm going to end it!"

Dave, after examination and questioning, guessed that the trouble originated in the pituitary. He said: "I think I know what's the matter with you, but I haven't got the right medicine here to treat it. If you're willing to come back in two days I'll try it."

"Come back? Doc, I'd camp right here on your doorstep!"

Dave sent to the city for an extract of the gland. The patient presented himself again, and Dave gave him a shot. To his horror, the man passed into unconsciousness. The sweating Dave worked over him desperately. There was no help to be had; the responsibility was all his. Respiration and pulse had almost ceased; he made up his mind that he had killed the man. However, in an hour he came back. He sat up on the table with an incredulous air. "Doc," he said, "my headache's gone!" Dave sat down suddenly and wiped his face.

On the other hand, there was the night when young Pete Caswell was brought home crushed and bleeding after an automobile smash. He was a grand boy; an only remaining son; the other having been killed in a similar accident. He was so near gone that the long journey to a city hospital was out of the question. However, he did not die. Dr. Hoskey and Dave worked over him together for forty-eight hours. The old doctor meekly took his orders from the young one. "You see, I've had a long experience in a city accident ward," Dave explained. For a while it seemed as if the boy might actually get better. Then there was a final hemorrhage and he died. It was Dave's job then to take care of the broken father and mother. Afterwards he went home and got drunk.

Dave saw and heard of cases that he longed to get hold of, but his hands were tied by medical etiquette. The strangest case was that of an old man he

used to see tottering by the roadside. Sick as he was, he would not give up and take to his bed. He was not a poor man; a servant always followed him carrying a chair. When the old man stopped, swaying on his feet, the servant hastily planted the chair under him and he dropped into it. Locomotor ataxia, Dave said to himself the first time he saw him; later he decided that he was wrong.

Miss Maddie told him that this was Judge Lomax. He was not old, but had been forced to retire in middle life by his illness. He had been like this for two years, and was slowly getting worse. He, too, had been to doctors in Baltimore and also in New York, and they could do nothing for him. It was a very strange case. He had been a full-blooded, high-living man. His enemies said that a special curse had been invented to lay upon him. When the servant wasn't quick enough with the chair, he dropped to the ground in a heap. At the table when his hand was half-way to his mouth, it would fall as if lifeless, spilling his food. Sometimes his eyes would close and he be unable to open them. Or in the middle of his speech his tongue would go limp.

This case teased Dave. Somewhere, and not so long ago, he had read of a similar case. At King's Green he was handicapped in being cut off from a medical library. However, after a patient search through his own few books he found the name of the disease; myasthenia gravis. Of course! He wrote to a friend in New York and a few days later received a copy of the medical magazine in which he had formerly read a history of one of the few cases to be reported. Dave felt like sending up a cheer. Here the old Judge's symptoms were all set down. And what was more, a cure had been effected. A drug called prostygmim which had been developed, only a few months before, had relieved the patient. Dave sent away an order for prostygmim.

He began to work on Miss Maddie at the supper table. "Do you know Judge Lomax's wife?"

"Why, of course, Doctor."

"Are you friendly with her?"

"We're not unfriendly. She's a town woman. She is out of the county most of the time."

"There's a new treatment that I'd like to try on the Judge," said Dave casually, "but of course I couldn't approach him myself."

"He won't listen to any more cures," said Miss Maddie. "Says he's just waiting to die."

Dave described the case he had read about, and she considered. "I won't say anything to Mrs. Lomax direct," she said. "Would look like I was

drumming up trade for my boarder. But next time I am in talk with Utie Chynne or Aggie Darnall or Beck Lewger I will just let fall that you know of a case like Judge Lomax's that was cured. It will get 'round to them quick enough."

The seed so dropped was not long in sprouting. One morning the tottering old man was led into Dave's office by his attendant. They were accompanied by Mrs. Lomax, a tightly corseted woman with hennaed hair. Early as it was, the news of their coming had gone around, for when Dave admitted them to the consulting-room, he saw Mrs. Utie Chynne waiting demurely in the outer office. To judge from her expression, she would gladly have given him her dollar just to leave the door open.

Mrs. Lomax was the kind of woman who must have the center of the stage. "Have you no nurse?" she complained. "I think I'm going to faint."

Dave fetched in Miss Maddie who sat beside the distressed wife giving her a whiff of ammonia from time to time.

"Oh, doctor!" mourned Mrs. Lomax, "if you can do anything for my husband you will be saving my life! Nobody knows what I have been through the last two years! I have such a tender nature I cannot bear the sight of sickness!" Miss Maddie's expression was grim.

The white-faced old man sat with his chin on his breast, arms hanging straight down, looking at nobody. When he was spoken to he seemed to come back from a long way off. "Get on with it," he said. "Nothing will come of this. My wife made me come."

Dave had the hypodermic syringe ready. He bared the stringy arm and rubbed it with alcohol. "You will scarcely feel this, Judge. . . ."



An hour later Miss Utie was relating what had happened to Aggie Darnall in the latter's kitchen. "The doctor said: 'Take his coat off,' and . . ."

Aggie interrupted her. "How could you hear with the door closed, Utie?" "I heard."

"Was anybody else in the waiting-room?"

"No."

"Reckon you had your ear against the crack of the door, then?"

"No such thing!" said Miss Utie indignantly.

Miss Aggie's nose wiggled, unconvinced. "Well, go on."

“The doctor said: ‘You will scarcely feel this, Judge.’ Then nothing more.”

“Nothing more?” echoed Miss Aggie.

“Nothing more! Five people in that room and nobody said one word. Was so quiet I could hear my own watch ticking. Five minutes passed. It was like an hour. And nobody inside stirred hand nor foot. It was terrible, Aggie. I was like to scream myself.” Miss Utie shook her head at the recollection.

“Well, get on! get on!” said Miss Aggie.

“All of a sudden a chair fell over inside, and Ella Lomax let out a screech. I thought the old man was dead. But no! He cried out: ‘Give me my coat!’ ‘Let me help you, Judge,’ said Doctor. ‘I can put on my own coat,’ said Judge. ‘I can stretch out my hand! I can hold my head up.’ And Ella mourning: ‘Oh, be careful, Frank! Be careful you’s’e’f!’

“Then the door banged open . . .”

“And almost catch you listening,” put in Miss Aggie.

Miss Utie ignored the interruption. “And Judge walked out. . . .”

“*Walked* out, Utie?”

“Walked as good as you or me! His eyes was fired up like a crazy man’s. He didn’t rightly know what he was doing. The servant run after him with his chair. ‘Throw that damn chair away!’ Judge hollered. Ella Lomax squeezed her hands together, rolled her eyes around, cried: ‘Oh, what a moment this is for me!’ But nobody regarded Ella. They all came through the waiting-room and down the steps.”

“You tell a good story, Utie,” said Miss Aggie. “Didn’t Judge pay the doctor?”

“That visit was worth more to Judge Lomax than a dollar,” said Miss Utie. “Judge said he would see him later.” When they had gone Doctor was inside washing his hands and laughing. “He feel pretty good, and had cause to. I wouldn’t have missed it for a farm, Aggie.”

“Well, it only cost you a dollar,” said Miss Aggie.

“Not at all. I had my dollar’s worth afterwards. Doct’ Tascott understands my case.”

Miss Aggie’s nose quivered. “You didn’t always think so, Utie.”

Chapter 6

DAVE, speeding down to Pope's Point early in the afternoon, glanced down the left fork of the road and saw Clare loping along the shoulder in his direction. His two feet clamped down on clutch and brake and the car squealed to a stop. It was purely a reflex action, and he was conscious of weakness. But he could not help it. At sight of her an inner tightness relaxed; a change came over the surrounding scene; the sun shone more brightly. Just for ten seconds! he told himself.

Clare pulled up alongside, she and the horse at ease with each other. She called her horse "the Colonel." "Hello, Tascott," she said in her casual manner—her public road manner, Dave termed it.

He smiled at the haughty eyebrows which so misrepresented her. "Saw you coming," he said. "Had to stop."

"Why shouldn't you stop?" she asked.

"Well, I'm on a hurry call to John Stinnett at Pope's Point."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Appendicitis, I take it. Sounds as if they had put off calling me for too long. May have to operate."

"An operation? How can you in a farmhouse?"

"I'll make out."

Clare's face flushed like an eager child's. "Can I help?"

His eyes dwelt on the quick flush. "Ever been present at an operation?" She shook her head. "An emergency operation is desperate business," he said; "I'd rather keep you out of it."

She was hurt. "That's unfriendly! When you know how much I want to be useful."

Dave, gazing at her, could not keep his mind on sickness and healing. He said slowly: "You're more than useful just the way you are!"

She ignored it. "If there has to be an operation I *could* help."

"Sure, you could. I'll need all the help I can get."

“All right, then, I’m coming. Drive on.”

He let in his clutch. In the little mirror over his head he watched her running her horse in the soft stuff alongside the road.

The Stinnetts were well-to-do farmers living in an ancient house on the bank of the river. The interior of the house was Victorian and comfortable and a whole family had been drawn together by the crisis; the group of frightened women and helpless men that doctors know. The groans of the patient were sounding through the house. Upstairs Dave found him stretched on a bed, rigid with pain. Before Dave could examine him, he suddenly went limp with a long sigh. “I’m better now,” he said weakly.

Dave’s face turned grim. “Where is the pain?” he asked.

The farmer placed his thumb on the right side of his abdomen. “It was here. Seems to have spread around some. Not so bad now.”

“We’ll soon have you on your feet,” said Dave with a cheerful air.

He left the room. “His appendix has ruptured,” he told the assembled family downstairs. “I should operate immediately.”

The wife gasped. “Operate? Oh, no, Doctor! Not here!”

“He will certainly die of peritonitis if I don’t, Mrs. Stinnett.”

“But we have nothing that you need, Doctor.”

“I will manage with what I brought. It’s too late to try to take him to town.”

They went into consultation. Clare had come into the house, and was standing disregarded by the wall, watching Dave with her quick lips pressed together, waiting for orders. Dave was aware of her without looking at her. In her riding habit she was at once woman, boy and child; she tapped all the springs of a man’s tenderness. Can I forget her while I’m operating? he asked himself. I’ll damned well have to!

The family told him to go ahead. He despatched a young man to the village to fetch Mrs. Willie Brome, an experienced sickroom attendant, and another to bring in his satchels. To Clare he said, low-voiced: “Try to get the women to pull themselves together. See that a good fire is kept up in the kitchen, and put plenty of water to heat. I need a vessel of water large enough to sterilize my pans.”

Searching through the house he collected two stoutly made tables of the same height. They were scrubbed, put together in the bedroom, padded and covered first with a rubber sheet, then cotton. Near by he set out his instruments on a smaller table. Dressing himself in cap and gown, he put his spare gown on Clare, and bound her head in a sterilized towel. His hands

lingered over this task. He was distracted by the tendrils of hair escaping at her nape.

Clare said: "The eldest daughter has the coolest head. She will stand at the door, ready to fetch hot water as needed. All the vessels have been sterilized."

"Right," said Dave. "Let the door of the room be open and she standing outside. . . . How do you feel?"

"A little shaky," Clare confessed, "but I'll get the best of it."

"Don't watch what I do," said Dave.

He washed the patient's abdomen with alcohol, painted it with iodine, and with help placed him on the improvised operating table. Clare assisted him to put on his gloves. By this time Mrs. Brome had arrived, an unprepossessing woman with small eyes and a big stomach. She was not helpful; she had been doing the wrong things too long. She resented Clare's presence in the sickroom, and gave herself an air of affronted virtue.

"You will anaesthetize him," Dave said to Clare. "We'll use chloroform in this emergency. Can you take his pulse?" She nodded. He filled a tea-cup with cotton and saturated it. "Hold this over his nose and mouth but don't press down on it." After that Clare was no more to him than an animated manikin there to do his bidding.

When it was all over, he turned a small chair upside down on the bed and put pillows against it. Carrying the unconscious patient to the bed, they let him lie half raised against the chair. "Can't you put him down comfortable?" grumbled Mrs. Brome. "This position is necessary for drainage," explained Dave. The woman drew in her lips. She was unteachable.

Dave came back to himself, and was aware of Clare again. Having done a good job, he felt uplifted. Clare was very pale, but her back was straight, her eyes steady. The expression of her too-eloquent eyes was more than he could bear with equanimity. "Take off your gown," he said brusquely, "and we'll go outside and have a smoke. Mrs. Brome will watch the patient."

"Will he live?" murmured Clare.

"That's up to nature. We didn't lose any time, that's the main thing."

After Dave had reassured the waiting family, he and Clare left the house, and seated themselves in Dave's car outside the yard. The sight of grass and trees and river afforded them a blessed relief. The Stinnett place had the satisfying aspect of something that had stood for a long time unchanged. The river bank was not high in this spot, and house and yard were in intimate relation with the wide sweep of water. The trees were old and splendid. The two lit cigarettes.

“Did you mind the blood?” Dave asked.

“Only a little,” she said. “Next time I won’t mind at all.”

Dave felt like the weakling then. “I expect you could stand it better next time than I could,” he said, laughing and holding out his hand to show her how it trembled.

“It must have been a fearful strain,” she said, quick with sympathy; “entirely without help, and having to improvise everything.”

He shook his head. “That wasn’t it.”

“What was it, then?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t have you to help me at another bloody operation.”

“Why?” she asked, disappointed.

Her sweetness inevitably drew it out of him. “Because . . . because I love you too much.”

She turned her head quickly. “Oh, damn!” she said. “Now everything is spoiled.”

“You must have known it,” said Dave. “They say a woman always knows.”

“I suppose I did,” she murmured. “But I didn’t want to admit it to myself. Anyhow, you’re so secretive I couldn’t be sure.”

“Secretive!” he exclaimed. “I felt as if I was advertising it with an illuminated sign!”

“No,” she said. “You don’t give anything away.”

They were silent for a while. Dave found himself watching the scattered, self-righteous hens each scratching hopefully in the well-scratched earth and talking to herself; and a rooster who had lost most of his tail feathers but was just as lordly as if he had them. Fowls were lucky, he thought; their feelings were simple.

Clare said: “I tried to make it clear from the beginning that . . . that . . .”

“You did! You did!” said Dave with bitter cheerfulness. “I never had any false hopes. I never believed for a moment that anything so wonderful could happen to me.”

“You deserve something better,” she murmured.

Dave said: “Lord! if I got my deserts I *should* be badly off!”

Clare kept saying bitterly: “It’s a shame!”

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Because I’m selfish. I want you for my friend.”

“I *am* your friend, and ever shall be! . . . I had to tell you,” he went on. “It was too much of a strain to keep it to myself. I couldn’t be natural with you when I was acting a part. Now it’s out, it can be taken for granted.”

“Not by me,” she said softly. “I’ll always be aware of it. And afraid of hurting you.”

“Then *you* will be spoiling everything,” he said quickly. “It must be treated as a joke. That’s the best prophylactic.”

After a silence she murmured, “You’re pretty fine, you know.”

Dave laughed. “Sure! Brightest boy in class. But not exactly a figure of romance. However, that’s not your fault.”

“What’s romance?” she said scornfully.

“There is something,” said Dave. “Give it any name you like. And I haven’t got it.”

“Certainly you have!” she said.

“Well . . . not for you,” said Dave. She was silent.

Presently one of the Stinnett women came to the fence. “Doctor,” she said, “Mis’ Brome say he coming out of it. You better go up to him.”

“Stay here,” said Dave to Claire. “There’s nothing more you can do in the house.”

Chapter 7

DAVE's first patient was safely on the mend, and one day towards evening he made his final visit to Sumach Bottom. While he was in the house a sharp squall broke. The rain stopped in a quarter of an hour, but left the dirt road slimy with mud, all the holes in it overflowing. Standing in the doorway Dave said ruefully:

"I'll never be able to get up the hill to the hard road."

His patient's little girl said: "There's 'nother road, Doctor."

"Where?"

"On your way back a piece you'll come to a fork. Keep along by creekside and it bring you to the old wharf at Geneezay. There's road from there to the hard road. It's longer thataway, but ain't so bad washed."

Dave said: "I'll take a chance on it."

He drove slowly over the slippery rutted road, careful to keep moving through and over all obstructions. The sun came out for a while. Its level rays struck through layers of shining wet leaves and the drops sparkled as they fell. Then clouds gathered again, promising a steady rain later. Where the road forked one branch was no better than the other. He bore to the left. The banks of the creek began to spread out widely, all the space between being filled with tall green rushes through which the running stream found its way unseen. Open water showed ahead.

He came out of the woods. He had reached tidewater now, and the estuary of the creek was a quarter of a mile across. The opposite bank was lined with trees. On Dave's right the fields of Genizir swept up gently to the central ridge of the farm, and ahead in the distance he could see the back of the house on its knoll, overtopped by the sculptured tulip trees. Across a sandy spit at the foot of the knoll, the river gleamed, its further shore almost lost in the haze.

There was a hole in the narrow road that he could not avoid. He miscalculated his headway and stopped in the middle of it. When he attempted to start, his wheels spun and he knew he was stuck for good; to

apply more power only ground him deeper in the mud. A shove from behind would have supplied all the extra impetus he needed, but he couldn't drive the car and shove simultaneously.

He got out and looked around for help. A wide and empty prospect of fields and water. However, there was one human in sight. Out in the middle of the creek was anchored a flat-bottomed skiff with a single crouched figure in it fishing. Dave blew his horn repeatedly, and when the figure looked up, waved his arms. He had the satisfaction of seeing the man go forward and start pulling in his anchor rope.

He rowed in with sure, economical strokes that aroused Dave's admiration. What shoulders the rower had! He landed his skiff on a stretch of yellow beach below the bank and stepped out; a tall youth most beautifully made. He had braved the squall of rain, and the cotton shirt and trousers were glued to his skin. He was barefooted. The anatomist in Dave was gladdened by the swelling pectoral muscles, the rippling back, tapering thighs. The youth swept off his saturated hat and flung it in the bottom of the skiff. His strongly marked face was lighted up with good humor. "Stuck?" he said.

"So it seems," said Dave. "But I think one good push will free me . . . And you seem to be the man to give it to me," he added, looking him over.

"Sure," said the grinning youth. "I have my strength. It's all I do have." He came springing up the bank. "What brought you down on this track?" he asked. "It doesn't go anywhere."

Dave explained how it had come about. "I'm Dave Tascott," he said, "local medico."

"I'm Lance Corder," said the youth, thrusting out his hand. "I've heard of you." They shook hands.

"You're not a native," said Dave.

"No, I live in Baltimore. My father is Arthur Corder, the painter, and my sister Mary is an actress of local renown; one of the props of the Vagabond Theatre. They're the famous members of the family. Maybe you know them."

Artistic, thought Dave with a feeling of distaste. He said: "No. I'm not acquainted in Baltimore."

"Get in and start your engine," said Corder, "and I'll give you a heave from the rear."

After some violent exertions on the young man's part, the car crawled out of the hole. Dave stopped it on firm ground beyond, and got out to thank

his rescuer. “God! I’m sweating!” said Corder. He was covered from feet to crown with liquid mud, a chocolate man with startlingly white teeth.

Dave had to laugh at the sight, and the young man promptly chimed in. “It’s a damn shame,” said Dave.

Corder waved it aside. “No matter. I was wet anyhow. I’ll take ’em off and wash ’em in the creek.”

He started pulling off his shirt. It clung so tightly Dave had to help. “Are you in a hurry?” asked Corder.

“No, I’ve made my last call for the day.”

“Then how about taking a dip with me? The water’s prime!”

Dave hesitated. “I’d like to . . .”

“Come ahead! We’re out of sight of all the world here. That’s the beauty of this country. It’s empty enough for a man to act natural in.”

Dave could not bring himself to bare his own meagerness in the luster of such perfection. “No,” he said. “I haven’t been in yet this year. Got to approach it slowly. You go ahead.”

Corder went down the bank carrying his shirt. On the strip of beach he peeled off his trousers and, standing in a couple of feet of water, stuck his head under to wash off the mud. Then, straightening up, he flung the hair out of his eyes. He then set about rinsing his clothes. Dave watched him with a keen pleasure. His body was justly formed in every part; the classical model, holding a true balance between strength and speed. Yet it had plenty of individuality, too, in the set of the shoulders, the particular curve of the flat back, the conspicuous virility—young as he was. Corder, entirely unself-conscious, continued shouting sportively to Dave up on the bank.

His face was scarcely handsome; the nose too fleshy, the mouth roughly formed; but he had fine, beaming blue eyes. The quick play of expression, the ready smile were more engaging than regularity of feature. He had intractable blond hair that he wore too long; the water had twisted it into comic ringlets dangling in his eyes. Dave’s pleasure in watching him was mixed with an ache of longing. If I could be like that! He was powerfully attracted by the young man’s spontaneity and zest, so different from his own nature.

He went down the bank so that they could talk without shouting. Corder said: “They tell me you’re a newcomer here. How you making out?”

“Not too badly,” said Dave. “What do you do for your country?”

“Everything by turn and nothing long,” said Corder. “I run the family errands and act as my father’s and my sister’s publicity man. She’s trying to

get in pictures. I write a little, broadcast occasionally, direct an amateur play. Doesn't sound very impressive, does it?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"There is plenty of time before you, then."

"I've had a couple of regular jobs," said Corder, "but I always seem to get fired. Not because I'm dumb," he quickly added, "but because I'm not dumb enough. Or so I say." He laughed. "Trouble is, there are too many protuberances on my personality. I don't fit any of the established holes. And, Oh, God, how I dread plugging a hole! I mean doing the same thing at the same time for the rest of my life. All my family is like that. I suppose that's how the idle apprentice excused himself."

There was something about this that upset a good many of Dave's settled notions. "Very likely," he said; "but what the hell!"

Corder echoed it: "What the hell! I enjoy life. I get fun out of everything. I like people. I've got plenty of friends, thank God! My friends take up a lot of my time."

"And the delights of the flesh?" suggested Dave.

"The flesh! Oh, boy!" cried Corder with a laugh of pure joy. ". . . You know!" he added with a glance that admitted Dave to the male brotherhood.

"Some day I hope to make my living by writing," Corder went on; "but it's hellish hard getting started. I never seem to have any time for work. It's come to the point, though, when I've *got* to knuckle down."

"Seems a pity," said Dave.

"That's not the usual view," said Corder.

"I speak as the industrious apprentice," said Dave. "Since I was a boy I've done nothing and had nothing but work. I can't give it much."

Corder found this very amusing. "You're a guy after my own heart," he said. "But seriously, Doc, it's got you somewhere. They tell me you've made a couple of spectacular cures lately."

"Spectacular is right," said Dave. "You can be sure those tales don't lose in the telling."

"I'm all for the spectacular," said Corder. "In addition to solid worth a man must have ballyhoo."

"It's true I've chiseled out a toe hold for myself," said Dave. "But you can pay too big a price for it. Work dried me out before I was even ripe."

Corder said: "Just the same, I admire you for it; anybody would."

“Not being gifted with any special personal qualifications,” said Dave, “there was nothing for me but to get to work. Without my work I’d be nothing.”

Corder said: “There’s an inconsistency somewhere in your argument, Doctor. If you were nothing in yourself, you wouldn’t feel that you had missed out.” Dave laughed and let it go at that.

Corder, having rinsed his two garments, wrung them between his strong hands and hung them over a branch to dry. Every move he made had the same sureness that Dave had first noticed. Admirable co-ordination. Dave felt that he could never tire of watching the grace of muscle and limb. Corder, turning to the water, said: “Sure you won’t come in?”

“Not today,” said Dave.

“The bottom is muddy near the shore,” the younger man said. “I’ll go out a little way and jump in.”

He pushed the skiff off and sat down to the oars. Dave thought: There’s a fine subject for his father, the painter: Naked Man Rowing. Corder presently drew in his oars and, climbing up on the nose of his skiff, stood there poised with his arms above his head. He dove in cleanly, rose out of the water, showed his gleaming teeth in Dave’s direction, and flung the hair out of his eyes. Arm over arm he clove the water as if it were his natural element. He dove like a porpoise, barrel fashion, over and over. He swung himself back into the skiff and dove from the nose of it again. Dave watched him with pleasure, with pain and with an odd sense of identification, because Corder was what he had always secretly wished to be.

Finally Corder came ashore, and ran up and down the strip of beach to dry his skin. “I’ve got towels up in the car,” said Dave.

“Don’t bother to get them out, Doctor. My clothes are damp anyhow.” He started putting them on.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” he went on.

“While you were splashing around?” asked Dave.

“Oh, a part of the mind keeps working. . . . It would be grand to be a playboy if everyone else was. I’d have a chance to excel, then. I’d be the greatest playboy of them all. But in a working world I’m at a disadvantage. I have to sing pretty small when anybody asks me, as you did, what I do. In a society that rests on spending money I’m nowhere. In spite of myself I become a sponge. I can’t take a girl out. It costs too much. What’s the answer?”

“There is none,” said Dave.

“No, you shouldn’t encourage me in my primrose path habits, Doc. The answer is, I’ve got to get to work.”

“Well, my words seem to have had the desired effect, then,” said Dave.

When they parted Corder said: “I suppose you have an office over in King’s Green.”

“Sure.”

“Some time when I’m down, can I fluff over and chew the fat with you?”

“Nothing I’d enjoy more,” said Dave.

Corder pushed off and applied himself to rowing towards the river with unconscious good style. Dave went up the bank and started his car. They passed out of sight of each other.

Chapter 8

AT GENIZIR LANCE CORDER came into the dining-room wearing white flannel slacks and a snowy shirt open to reveal his ruddy throat. The intractable blond hair was neatly combed out, the whites of his eyes were shining like nacre and his mouth was fixed in the half-smile of perfect well-being. Clare was angry and hiding it. Looking at Lance through her lashes, she bit her lip, thinking: It's not fair! It's not fair!

Tom Eltonhead sang out. "Hello, Lance! We didn't wait for you because I have to go out after supper."

Lance cut his brilliant eyes in Clare's direction and the smile in the corners of his mouth deepened a little. Clare looked away. "Sorry to be late," he said. "I was fishing out in the creek, and a car came along by the bank . . ."

"That road's not fit for a car," interrupted Tom. "'Specially after rain."

"Right," said Lance. "And so he got stuck. The fellow got out and waved his arms, and I rowed in to help him. It was the little doctor. . . ."

"He's not little," said Clare quickly. "He's an average size man."

"I suppose so," said Lance carelessly, "but I could look right over his head."

"He's a good fellow," said Tom.

"He's more than a good fellow," Clare said sharply. "He's a godsend to this community."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Lance, "there's no call to stick up for him against me. I think he's a grand guy myself."

"Then don't patronize him," said Clare.

"I didn't mean to be patronizing," said Lance, with a glance of surprise.

"Did it take you long to get him out?" asked Tom.

"No, indeed, but I got plastered with mud and had to wash my clothes in the creek. We talked. That's what made me late."

Clare was filled with curiosity. These two so different! “What did you talk about?” she asked.

“We argued about work.”

“Work?”

“Sure. I was for work and the doctor against it.”

Clare’s lip curled. “That sounds fantastic.”

“So it was,” said Lance. “The net result being that I have made up my mind to write my play. And to let nothing stop me.”

“Then Doc bucked you up,” said Tom lazily.

“For the moment,” put in Clare with bitter lips.

Lance looked at her again in surprise. He said: “I seem to have got on your nerves tonight.”

Clare smiled. “You’re so damned pleased with yourself sometimes it’s more than one can bear.”

For a moment Lance was nonplused. He looked absurdly young. “I don’t feel pleased with myself inside,” he said; “honest, I don’t. Only I always have such a good time here, I suppose I get to look fatuous.”

Clare was instantly remorseful. “Sorry,” she murmured, lowering her eyes.

“Sis has got the heebies tonight,” said Tom carelessly. “Don’t notice her.” Lance smiled again.

Tom slipped away as soon as he decently could. He ran down the porch steps, and presently they heard the car leaving. “What a considerate brother!” said Lance with a broad grin. But Clare only looked at him in silence, almost it seemed with dislike. They left the table. Out in the hall Lance came up behind and put his arms around her. She hung slackly with averted face. “Honey-lips, what have I done to cross you?” he murmured in her ear.

Swiftly she turned and her arms went around his neck. “Nothing, only I love you!” she whispered. “I love you too much!”

“That’s all right!” he cried in relief. “I can take it!”

“You left me for three hours this afternoon!” she said stormily.

“But, honey, I didn’t want to come home without any fish!”

“Fish!” she cried, beating his chest. “Oh, what a child you are! Why do I have to be so crazy about a child!”

He suddenly crushed her against him and covered her lips. “Now say I’m not a man!” he murmured breathlessly. “I dare you!”

“You are a man!” she whispered.

Out on the porch she lay within his arm in the glider, and for a long time there was no sound at all, except that occasionally Lance chuckled in his throat. Once when he did so Clare said reproachfully: “Don’t laugh!”

“Honey, I can’t help it!” he pleaded. “When I love I got to laugh. It’s so damn funny.” His voice deepened. “And so sweet . . . so sweet!”

“When I love,” she mimicked. “Sounds as if you were saying: ‘When I eat my dinner!’ It’s not *me* you love.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Lance lazily.

“You’re only in love with love.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” he said good-humoredly. “It is just a catch-phrase. You’re my girl, aren’t you? I give you all I’ve got. No other woman exists for me but you.”

“That’s not true,” she said quickly. “I’ve seen the way you looked at them when they passed.”

Lance laughed delightedly. “Sure! Girls were made to be looked at, weren’t they? But I don’t want to go any further than looking. I *couldn’t*, honey. You’re my homecoming and my harbor.”

“You left me for three hours this afternoon!”

Lance laughed and hugged her.

“If we were parted you would soon forget me!”

“Why worry about what might happen?” said Lance. “Isn’t this enough? I’m so full of happiness I can’t worry. Why, during the day whenever I think of you I bust out laughing with delight!”

“Whenever you think of me!” she murmured sadly. She took his hand and placed it on her breast. “You are here always, always.”

“And you in me,” said Lance. “You have made a new world for me. I didn’t know that so much joy existed. Like wings. And you’ve made a man of me for your world. Don’t you see, you have created me. I am yours completely. Why worry?”

She melted. “Ah, forgive me,” she said. “I am always tormenting you.”

“Bless your heart, I don’t mind.”

“That’s just the trouble, you don’t mind!”

“Whatever I say is wrong,” said Lance, laughing. “Lovers should never talk. Sinful waste of time.”

“Anyhow, forgive me,” she pleaded.

“I forgive, pug-nose.”

“It’s not pug; it’s only short.”

“All right, short-nose.”

“Ah, you’re such a dear!” she whispered. “Always so surely yourself while I am torn in rags!”

“Rags?” said Lance. “You look pretty complete to me. God! I’m so proud of you! That’s what gives it such a wonderful sting.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Because you’re a noble woman and my paramour!”

“That sounds horrid,” said Clare doubtfully—but she was charmed by his bluntness.

“Don’t be afraid of a word,” said Lance. “It’s the feeling that counts.”

Later, Clare, with her cheek pillowed in the hollow of Lance’s shoulder, said: “Dave Tascott would be a good friend for you to have; he’s so steady.”

Lance moved uneasily. “Sure, he’s a good friend, but for God’s sake don’t call him steady.”

“Why not? He is steady.”

“Steady makes me shy over to the other side of the road. Steady sounds so Y.M.C.A.” Clare laughed. “Dave’s a right guy,” he went on. “I have already asked him if I could go over and chin with him some time.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Clare.

“That wouldn’t work.”

“Why wouldn’t it? I want to share in everything you do.”

“Much as I love you, honey-lips, that just isn’t possible.”

“I don’t see why I couldn’t go with you to see Tascott.”

“We’d have a pleasant visit,” said Lance, “but I couldn’t make friends with a man if I had a woman along.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Now you’re the one acting like a child,” he said. “There is man talk and woman talk.”

“You needn’t try to explain,” she said sorely; “I understand that you would have a better time without me.”

“But afterwards I would come back to you,” said Lance. “That’s the best part of it. To go off on some man’s business and when it’s done, to turn back to you. Oh, God! what a lovely thrill!”

“I would like to be with you every minute of our lives,” murmured Clare.

“Wouldn’t work, honey. You wouldn’t want me tagging along when you went to see one of your women friends.”

“I haven’t any close women friends.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“They call me a man’s woman. They don’t like me.”

“They’re jealous,” said Lance.

“Maybe so, but that’s not all. There’s a land of freemasonry among women; they have their ritual, their secret signs and passwords. Well, I’ve never been initiated into the lodge, and they look on me as a spy.”

“Women are the devil!” said Lance.

“That’s an affectation,” she retorted. “You like women.”

“Sure, I like them, but they’re the devil!”

“To come back to Tascott,” said Clare; “what about asking him to breakfast tomorrow? It’s Sunday and he could come after his office hours.”

“Swell idea,” said Lance. “I’m strong for the guy!”

After a while Clare said: “Tell me about the play you’re going to write.”

“Can’t talk—like this,” murmured Lance.

She moved to the other end of the glider. “Now you can.”

“Come back!” he begged. “You’ve left an awful gap in my arms!”

“No! Let’s talk. You scarcely ever want to talk to me.” Lance got up, shook himself violently, took a turn up and down, produced his pipe. Clare felt a little resentful then, because he was so ready to obey her. Yet she wanted to hear about the play, too. She longed for assurance that both the amorous and the thoughtful Lance were hers.

He sat down again, not touching her. “I’m thinking of calling it ‘The Sophisticated Lovers.’”

“Good title!” she said with quick approval.

“Of course, I don’t mean the cheap smartness that passes for sophistication with fools, I mean sophisticated in the sense of Hamlet, with too much thought and introspection.”

“But, Lance, could you create characters of that sort? You’re not like that.”

“That’s just the point. I must go outside myself. I can see other people more clearly. . . . The principal character is a woman of thirty.”

Clare laughed. “Honey-bear! You don’t know anything about a woman of thirty. I’m only twenty-five!”

“If you laugh at it how can I go on?” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry!”

“I can imagine a woman of thirty. She’s got to be thirty or she wouldn’t have had time to become so sophisticated. I see her just a little past the perfection of her beauty, but still infinitely desirable . . .”

A chill struck through Clare. In spite of her resolve, she edged close to Lance for reassurance. “What happens to her?” she asked.

“If you kiss my neck I can’t remember anything else,” murmured Lance. She drew away. “I’ll be good.”

“The man is older, you see. The two of them have got so in the habit of dissecting and analyzing their emotions that they haven’t got an honest-to-God feeling left. Instead of treating each other rough, they sit down and talk endlessly about it.”

“That’s dangerous,” suggested Clare.

“How dangerous?”

“Endless talk in a play.”

“Oh, they won’t do all their talking in the presence of the audience. Things happen.”

“What happens?”

“Well, the man is a playwright.”

“Why do you make him a playwright?”

“So I can bring in stage people, and scenes from the theater.”

“I see; colorful. Go on.”

“He is rehearsing a play, see? The girl becomes infatuated with a handsome young actor in the play, and he, the playwright, I mean, falls at the same time for a pretty, worthless little tart. Each sins, as the saying is, and when they see what is going on, each becomes wildly jealous of the other. The idea being that it is only through a false love that they discover the strength of their feeling for each other. Ironic, see?”

Clare was silent. “Don’t you like it?” he demanded sorely.

“Yes . . . no . . . I don’t know,” she murmured. “I don’t *like* it, but I think it’s a good idea; original; telling.” She put her arms around him. “Oh, Lance, I’m afraid of it! It’s too true!”

“Silly baby!” he said, kissing her. “It’s only an idea for a play!”

“I wish you didn’t want to write plays,” she murmured. “I’m afraid of your imagination. It carries you too far away from me!”

“Strange little person!” he murmured, drawing her closer. “The heck with it! *This* isn’t imagination!”

She held herself away. “No! I want to talk! . . . It’s a swell idea, Lance. Already I can see it being acted on the stage. It will make you famous and rich. . . .”

Lance chuckled. “I’ve got to write it first.”

“Will you read it to me scene by scene as it is written?” she asked eagerly. “Of course, I’m not clever, but maybe I could offer a suggestion here and there. Then I’ll feel that I have a little share in it, and I won’t be jealous.”

“Sure, honey! I couldn’t do a thing without having you behind me!”

“You must start work right after breakfast tomorrow,” she went on eagerly. “I’ll fix everything for you in the back drawing-room, and nobody shall disturb you until dinner. Oh, how thrilling to go in then, and read what my playwright has written.”

Lance laughed. “Like lifting the cover on a pot of soup!” As she protested, he gathered her in his arms. “Honey, I couldn’t work here!”

“Why not?”

“This, in my mind, is the house of love! As soon as I come in the yard I feel loving!”

Clare resisted his embrace. “I wish you wouldn’t talk so coarsely! As if it was just a bodily condition!” It angered her to see how his throat quivered with laughter.

“It *is* a bodily condition, honey-lips; and it *is* coarse! Why not admit it? Coarse and sweet; it’s all one. If there is anything to bring us nearer Heaven than this, I don’t know it . . . Kiss me!”

She strained away from him. “No! Kissing is not enough! We must share other things. Kissing is an evasion. I want to know you!”

“Afterwards,” murmured Lance. “Turn your head, honey!”

“I won’t!”

His persuasion became rough, and Clare got angry in earnest. Tearing herself out of his arms, she sprang up and stamped her foot on the porch. That made him laugh afresh. “You’re lovely when you’re in a rage,” he murmured. “It’s a perpetual temptation!”

“Oh, I hate you when you act like that!” she cried.

“Sometimes you like it,” he said.

“I’m a person!” she cried. “I have a right to say when I will, and when I won’t!”

“Sure, you have,” he said good-humoredly. “I’m sorry, dearest.”

“You’re not sorry! You’re laughing!”

Lance struggled with his laughter, and that made it worse. “Can’t help it,” he gasped. “You’re so little!” It was too much for him. He threw his head back, and laughter poured out of him full-throated.

“Oh, I hate you now!” stormed Clare. “You’re only a raw boy! You feel nothing!”

“That’s not so!” gasped Lance.

“It *is* so! The way you take me for granted is insulting! I won’t endure it!”

Lance got the better of his laughter. “Listen, baby! Be fair! How can I take this seriously? My instinct tells me that you love me. What else matters? I know that after this squall blows over we’re going to have a lovely time again.”

“You’ll see!” she cried. “I’m going to bed!”

“I’ll give you quarter of an hour,” he said, grinning. “Time for a pipe.”

“As many pipes as you like,” said Clare. “My door will be locked tonight.”

She turned to go, but he caught her hand. He was laughing again. “Honey, you can’t go to bed alone and hug your anger. By morning all your sweetness would be curdled!”

“Let go my hand!” she commanded. “Somehow I’ve got to teach you that you can’t take me for granted. It’s slavery for a woman!”

Lance began to be seriously concerned. “Honey, you couldn’t do that!” he pleaded. “All week I’ve been living for tonight! I’m all on edge! Tom won’t be back until near morning. What an opportunity! It would be a sinful waste to pass it up. You’d regret it!”

This made Clare even angrier. “Never mind my regrets!” she said.

“Oh, God! you’re so sweet!” groaned Lance. “Do you want to drive me out of my mind!”

“Let go!” commanded Clare.

He suddenly obeyed. “All right,” he said, grinning again. “If you change your mind, my door won’t be locked.”

“Don’t count on it!” she said over her shoulder. She ran up the stairs as if she had a hundred feet.

Lance sat down on the glider, filled his pipe with care, and got it going well. He glanced desirously out under the trees, but a steady rain was murmuring on the porch roof and gurgling in the leaders. So he paced up and down the porch with lowered head. After a while he went into the

lighted hall and made some notes for his play on the back of an envelope; then resumed his pacing.

After a while the current of his thoughts changed. He stopped in the doorway, and glanced upstairs, smiling and softened. Turning out the hall lights, he went up the stairs swiftly and noiselessly. Clare's room was in front on the right. He softly tried the door. It was locked right enough. He went on across the hall to his own room, and undressed. Presently he stole back in his pajamas and tried the door again. Still locked. He tapped on it, and spoke Clare's name softly. No answer.

Back in his own room, he left the door open a crack, and getting into bed, started to read. Unable to keep his mind on the printed page, he flung the book aside and filled his pipe again. For a long time he lay in his bed with his hands clasped behind his head, smoking and waiting. A dozen times he started up at a fancied sound, and his shining eyes fastened on the door. But it was never pushed open.

When his pipe was finished, he got out of bed and paced the floor, scowling and cursing under his breath. Then a new thought came to him, pulling him up short. A grin spread across his face. Turning off the light in his room, he climbed out through the front window, and made his way slowly across the slippery wet slates of the porch roof.

The front window of Clare's room was shut. He tried to raise the lower sash and found it fastened. He tapped on the glass. No sound of movement came from within. Lance perched himself on the windowsill hugging his knees, and let the warm rain fall on him, grinning confidently in the dark.

Chapter 9

DAVE TASCOTT closed his office on the stroke of ten and drove over to Genizir. It was a pretty day after the rain. He had a couple of serious cases to visit, but they could wait for an hour. After all, a doctor was entitled to some life of his own. There was a delightful suggestion of intimacy in an invitation to breakfast, and he permitted his disciplined breast to expand a little.

When he drove into the yard he saw Clare in the flower garden behind the house. She waved to him, and he headed in that direction. She was wearing a pale yellow dress with one of the crossed-over white collars that became her so well, and she was picking pink snapdragons and blue delphiniums for the breakfast table. The sight of her dark head bending over the flowers and her hands busy with the garden shears gave him so intense a pleasure that he slowed down in order to prolong it.

When she straightened up to bid him welcome, she looked like a woman born with the morning. That which she had kept hidden before was showing itself in spite of her. Her eyes had a new luminousness; her lips were parted and redder; there was a dove-like note in her voice. For an instant a wild hope sprang up in Dave; had she not telephoned him to come? He gazed at her, forgetting everything.

A look of compunction appeared in Clare's face. "Breakfast is ready," she said in her "bright" manner.

It brought Dave down to earth with a thud. Reason whispered to him: Her gladness is not for your coming; it's an overflow. With the thought came a tormenting anxiety: if not for him, whom was it for? Meanwhile it was up to him to match her superficial brightness. "And I'm ready for breakfast," he said.

Clare started for the house saying: "You must be! When I asked you for late breakfast I forgot that you had to get up hours earlier. I hope you've had something to eat."

"Miss Maddie made coffee for me," said Dave. What a pity they had to waste the moments together in such exchanges!

As they went up the back steps Clare said: "We have another guest."

"Anybody I know?" asked Dave, bracing himself for her answer.

"Yes, he already looks on you as his friend. That's why I asked you this morning. It's Lance Corder."

Dave dropped a step behind her. While they were covering the space between the back hall door and the dining-room he fought it out with himself. Clare was talking, but he didn't hear what she said. There was a howling inside his head; he subdued it. Why not Lance Corder? he asked himself. The boy was made to gladden a woman's eyes. You knew there was somebody. This is no surprise. Take it and smile.

Tom Eltonhead was in the dining-room reading yesterday's paper. "Hello, Doc!" he sang out. "How's drug trade?"

"Steady," said Dave. When he perceived that Tom saw nothing amiss with him, he felt surer of himself. He could take it.

Aunt Maria stuck her head in from the kitchen, saying: "Is you-all ready now?"

"Sure!" said Tom. "We won't wait for Lance. He's as slow dressing as a girl!"

They sat down at the table. Clare, keeping her eyes down, busied herself with the coffee things. A smile of dreamy remembrance hovered about her lips. In Dave's eyes, lovely and heart-breaking. Presently Aunt Maria brought in an omelet with garden peas, French fried potatoes and egg pone which steamed up when it was cut. Tom served and they fell to. Dave discovered that he had not lost his appetite. He said to himself: You know the worst now; accustom yourself to it. For the most part Clare avoided his eye, and he was free to look at her.

"Was down to Absalom's Island last night," said Tom. "Always a big night, Saturdays. Three, four yachts in harbor; crowd down from town for week-end fishing. In Leech's pavilion a guy hit another guy over the head with a bottle and all hell broke loose. Ev'body fighting ev'body else, and none knew what 'twas all about. They rampaged up and down the river front for hours."

"Anybody hurt?" asked Dave.

"Reckon there was many a scalp opened and nose bloodied," said Tom. "Nothing serious. Doct' Dabney opened up his office. Somebody telephoned for the constable, but what could he do? He let 'em fight 'til they was tired."

Lance breezed into the room looking like the man God had made as a pattern for the race. Grace clothed his youthful person like a garment. Dave

saw how his eyes flew first to Clare's face and quickly turned away, and how Clare's eyes lifted to his and dropped as if stricken. Dave sickened at the revelation, yet he couldn't hate Lance. He felt the same helpless admiration he had felt the day before.

"'Morning, everybody!" cried Lance. "Hey, Dave! Grand to see you again!" He expected to shake hands. His hand was cool and firm. He plumped himself in a chair. "What a lovely morning. The air's like wine! By God! I'm hungry!"

Clare, smiling, not looking at Lance, tinkled her bell, and Aunt Maria came in. "Beat up another omelet for Mr. Lance," said Clare. "Four eggs."

"Yaas'm, Miss Clare," said Aunt Maria, rolling her eyes fondly in the direction of the blond, curly head. Everybody's favorite! thought Dave.

Lance was the hungry man, pure and simple. Under the white shirt his broad breast rose and fell evenly. Clare, obviously, was taking pleasure in every mouthful he put between his businesslike teeth. And how he ate! Dave thought: He'll be a man-mountain before he's fifty! There was little satisfaction in the thought. It was too long to wait. Sitting opposite such a pattern of manhood Dave felt like a shriveled little ape. Yet, when Lance smiled across in frank friendliness, he was painfully drawn to him.

When Lance had taken the edge off his appetite he was ready to talk. Towards Dave, as his new friend, he adopted a proprietary attitude, and undertook to show him off to the Eltonheads. He said: "I told these folks about our talk yesterday. They gave me the laugh when I said you were against work, Dave. You tell them."

Dave hoped that his grin did not look as pained as it felt. "Work's all right in its place," he said, "but it can be overdone."

"There!" cried Lance. "It's a worker who speaks! When I spoke of knuckling down, he said it was a pity."

Clare bristled a little. "What did you mean by that, Tascott?"

"Oh, call him Dave," put in Lance. "Aren't we pals?"

That part of Dave's mind which looked in on him from the outside, suggested: This guy is being ingeniously tortured! He said: "If Lance was a scientist there would be nothing for it but work; but as he wants to write, it seems as if he ought to have the chance to flourish 'round a bit; a commercial job would cramp him." Clare was pleased by this answer, and Dave thought: I can only make good with her by boosting *him!*

Lance, with an extravagant gesture, cried: "I am justified!"

Tom said teasingly: "But he's got to eat. Look at him eat! His folks can't feed him indefinitely."

"His father doesn't support him," Clare put in quickly. "Lance makes himself useful."

"Thanks, darling," said Lance. "It's true, I get by in my fashion, but I don't progress much."

"A writer must have freedom," said Clare. "If he's swallowed up in commercial work when young, he will never find himself."

"Maybe so," said Tom, "but in this world it's root hog or die."

"Anyhow," said Clare, "Lance has a grand idea for a play, and while he scratches for a living, he will find time somehow to write it. With the play he will go places."

Dave thought: First and last, she is for him. She gives everything. What does she get?

The talk jumped from one subject to another; the latest play put on by the Vagabonds; the sport of crow-calling; the murder in yesterday's paper. Lance was continually calling on his admired older friend for an opinion. "Dave's a wise old bird," he said, "but he doesn't say much; you have to draw him out." Dave went on grinning and speaking his piece.

Clare remarked on how much good the night's rain had done her flowers, and Tom said: "Speaking of rain, when I came home at three o'clock there was a big wet spot on the porch floor. Never was there before. I can't imagine what loosened the slates on the porch roof."

Dave, whose eyes were on Lance at the moment, saw him change color and swallow. Dave's heightened senses required no further elucidation. Clare was looking at Lance with a silent command in her eyes. The young man got up quickly and, muttering that he had forgotten his pipe, left the room. Dave suffered horribly on Clare's account; but she was equal to the situation. Dave heard her cool voice saying to Tom:

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, the squall yesterday afternoon blew a branch out of the top of the tallest tulip tree. It struck on the porch roof and slid to the ground. That must have been what loosened the slates."

"I didn't see the branch when I came home to supper," said Tom.

Clare said: "I had already thrown it over the bank."

Tom was satisfied, and Dave breathed again. Lance returned to the room displaying his pipe a little too ostentatiously. He and Clare did not look at each other. Dave thought:

The boy is her lover. She lay in his arms last night.

Leaving Genizir, Dave drove blindly along the road. He was driven mad by the pictures that came into his mind unbidden. He was in the right state to have driven his car over the edge of a cliff—had there been a cliff; instead, he had to visit a negro whose arm had been crushed in an automobile smash on Saturday night. Good old Saturday night! Always made work for the doctors! Dave was giving the arm twelve hours to see if he could restore the circulation. If not, it had to come off. Afterwards, he had a bad mastoid up in the third district, and a threatened stomach ulcer at the other end of the county. Anaesthesia for all except the doctor! jeered the inward voice.

Arriving home for a late dinner, he had to find cover somehow from Miss Maddie's unassuming keen gaze. Then to listen to three garrulous office patients who had nothing the matter with them. Oh, the hell with them! the hell with them! And back to the road again to see his negro patient. He had taken off the arm—a working-man's right arm!—and he was afraid the man might tear off the bandages in his despair. Only Dave was able to restrain him. Naturally, they could understand each other. Finally supper under Miss Maddie's eyes and more office patients. He felt that he had reached the end of his string now. If one more whining neurotic came to the door, he would have to let go.

At eight o'clock he locked the outer door with a feeling of relief, and returning to the consulting-room, pulled the cork from a bottle of whiskey and regarded it with voluptuous desire. He poured himself a stiff drink and downed it. As the fiery spirit spread through him the pain lessened. He thought: I'll drink tonight until I pass out, and tomorrow I'll feel so God-damned rotten I won't be able to think. Tomorrow night I'll go blind again.

The bell whirred and somebody rattled the outer door. "Go to hell!" said Dave, pouring himself another drink. But when the bell rang again, duty or habit or whatever it was, forced him to go to the door.

It was Lance Corder. "Hey, Dave!" he sang. "Thought I'd catch you after office hours. It's my last chance to see you this week. I borrowed Tom's car to drive over."

Dave, looking at him, thought: He's not a patient. I'm not obliged to go through with this. But he bit back the curses that made his mouth bitter. Lance would run right to Clare and tell her. And then she'd know that Dave knew. It would shame her. Dave heard himself saying, with false heartiness, "Come on in, Lance! Come into the consulting-room. Sit down and smoke up. I just poured myself a drink. You'll join me?"

"Just a little one," said Lance. "I have to go slow with that stuff."

Dave grinned. “Don’t you like it?”

“Sure, I like it. But it plays hell with me. I’m saving it until I’m old.”

Dave thought: Young love passes up whiskey. He said with a laugh: “Well, I’m old before my time and I need it!” He downed the drink that was waiting, and poured another for himself, a shorter one for Lance. Lance looked at him askance, and Dave thought: He’ll go back and tell her that he caught me fuddling myself. What the hell! Maybe she’ll understand.

“I felt a hankering for a little male company,” said Lance. “Tom Eltonhead isn’t much good to me. He can only talk about one thing. That’s all right with me, but Tom can’t let himself go with me because I’m Clare’s friend. Tom fools himself by thinking that Clare knows nothing about his life.”

“A little male company,” said Dave with a laugh, “that’s me! . . . When you going back to town?”

“Tomorrow morning on the bus,” said Lance.

Dave thought: Another night with Clare! “Coming down again next week?” he asked.

“I reckon so.”

“That’s fine!” Dave swallowed his drink.

Lance had plenty to say for himself. Dave, whose head was beginning to hum, scarcely heard it. He was fascinated by the young man’s person. Clare’s lover!—and no doubt a highly satisfactory one! He was horribly tempted by the desire to see Lance drunk; to make him drunk and get him talking. Though the disclosures maddened him. It would be easy enough for an older man to overcome the youngster’s scruples. Get him stinking drunk and send him back to her with foul breath, reeling and unmanned. Would she kiss him then?

But Dave did not urge Lance to drink. All the time the other half of him was suggesting: The kid’s all right; he’s as open as the day. He’s fond of you; he looks up to you, God help him! He’s a good egg. He’s fitter for love than you are. With that clear eye and vigorous maleness he’s magnificent. He was made to bring joy to a woman! Face it! Face it! You’re rotten with jealousy!

Not finding what he had come for, Lance did not stay very long. It was all one to him, of course. He flung an arm around Dave’s shoulders in the best of humors, saying, “You’re drunk, old fellow! A sober man is poor company for you.”

Dave edged from under the arm. “Do you blame me?” he snarled.

Lance affectionately put his arm back. “Good God! no! I’d like to be drunk with you. I will be some day. But tonight I can’t.”

Dave thought: A little whiskey inspires Cupid, but too much lays him low!

“Reckon you’ve had a hard day,” said Lance.

“Harder than you’ll ever know,” growled Dave.

Lance laughed. “Bless your old gizzard! You can’t make me mad. I like you fine, Dave!”

“You don’t know me,” sneered Dave. The shelves of bottles suddenly began to totter towards him, and Lance caught his arm.

“Steady!” he said, laughing. “Let’s go upstairs and I’ll put you to bed. You’ll be more comfortable.”

Dave snatched his arm away. “The hell with you! I haven’t reached that point yet.”

Lance laughed. “Okay, Pal!”

Dave was not too drunk to mark the light that came into the young man’s face when he turned it towards the door. He thought: In half an hour she’ll be in his arms! At the outer door he found himself stammering humbly enough: “Say, Lance, don’t . . . don’t tell Clare that I was drinking.”

“Sure, I won’t!” cried Lance. “I’m not the kind of man that blabs everything to a woman!” He offered Dave his hand and Dave took it. “Dave, you’re one of the best,” he said, “and don’t think I don’t know it!”

“Same to you,” muttered Dave. The words, as it were, were torn out of his flesh.

As Lance drove out of the yard, he gripped the doorframe. “Oh, God, why do I have to like the kid!” he groaned. “Why isn’t he a sonofabitch that I could hate!”

When he went back, the room rolled and pitched and he knew he was drunk. He thought: Lance is turning into the Pope’s Point road now. Driving like hell to get to her. And she’s sitting at the end of the porch watching for his lights. Dave’s body was drunker than his mind, and he made haste to swallow another drink. If I persevere, he thought, I’m bound to go blind.

He decided to go to bed while he could still navigate the stairs. He locked the door and turned out the lights. He went up the stairs carefully, clinging to the balustrade with one hand, and grasping the neck of the whiskey bottle with the other. He found himself in bed without any recollection of how he got there. His clothes were strewn around the floor. He could drink just as well in bed. Didn’t need a glass. His consciousness

was getting a little numb. I'm drunk, he thought, and nothing can touch me now. After all, whiskey's a man's best friend!

A long time passed without his being aware of it. There was a knock on his door. Another patient! I'm no good to him now, Dave thought, laughing silently. Miss Maddie spoke: "Doctor, are you sick?"

"No," said Dave.

"Why do you leave your light burning?"

Dave fumbled for the switch and finally succeeded in turning out the lamp at his bedside. Miss Maddie waited a moment and asked: "Can I come in?"

"No," said Dave. "Go back to bed."

After another silence Dave heard her open the door and enter. She felt her way to the stand at his bedside and switched on the lamp. With a comprehensive glance she took in the whiskey bottle, the strewn clothes and Dave's condition. "I'm drunk!" he said defiantly.

Miss Maddie nodded, not at all put about. "Can I take this now?" she said, laying her hand on the whiskey bottle. "You must get some sleep."

"No, by God!" said Dave, starting up. "I'm not blind yet, it seems." Miss Maddie could easily have escaped from the room with the bottle, but she released it politely. "Blind, I said," Dave repeated, making his voice hateful. "Doesn't that disgust you?"

She shook her head. "No. There have been times when I wished I could go blind."

"But you didn't!"

She shook her head. "Women can't."

She stood beside his bed with hanging head, momentarily at a loss. Her dark hair was braided in a skimpy pigtail that hung between her shoulders, and she was wearing a frilled white cotton nightgown that hung from her bony shoulders without touching her anywhere. The old gnarled feet were bare. Drunk as he was, Dave marked and remembered something stark and clean-drawn in her aspect. She was like an immensely wise little girl.

Though he fought against it, he began to soften. "What do you mean by coming into a man's room like this?" he said to carry it off.

She looked at him with mild scorn. "You might be my grandson." Glancing around the room, she spotted a glass on a stand by the door, and fetched it to the bedside. "Give me a drink," she said.

"Good God, no!" Dave said in horror. He took the bottle and put it on the floor between the stand and the bed.

Miss Maddie pulled a small rocking-chair nearer the bed, and sitting, began to rock gently from long habit, holding the empty glass in her hand. "What are you stopping for?" asked Dave roughly. "You're not doing me any good."

"Say it's for myself," said Miss Maddie. "Like you, I'm alone. When I felt that you were having your bad time, I couldn't stay away. You don't have to talk."

Dave flung an arm over his eyes. "Oh, for God's sake, cut it out!" he cried. "I was hardening myself, and you're only breaking me down again!"

"You weren't hardening yourself, you were getting drunk," she said composedly. "That's just putting it off. You can't keep on putting it off. Only gets worse."

"Then what *can* I do?" he cried.

Miss Maddie said: "See it through." Dave laughed.

Miss Maddie held out the glass. "Give me a drink," she said; "it's good for the old."

Dave fished up the bottle. "All right, one won't hurt you." He didn't take any himself.

"In the morning your work will be waiting for you," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. "That's a better cure than whiskey. It will take all you've got. What's more, you have the satisfaction of knowing that it's worth the doing. You're lucky to have it."

"Sure, I'm the lucky guy!" said Dave from under his arm.

"Well, I only had housework," said Miss Maddie. "Not so interesting."

Presently she asked: "Want to talk about it? Good for you, if you could." Dave made no answer. She took this for assent and went ahead. "Of course, I knew this was coming."

"What did you know?" he asked sharply.

"That you had . . ." she hesitated; "had placed your affections in the wrong quarter."

"You knew there was somebody ahead of me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"Well, it was only gossip. I had no evidence."

Dave sprang to a sitting position. "Gossip?" he said, staring. "Do you mean to tell me that they say . . . they say he is her lover?"

Miss Maddie looked him in the eye. "That is what they say."

“Oh, God! how filthy!” groaned Dave. “Nobody could *know* such a thing! Their evil minds surmise it! Don’t you believe there is such a thing as clean love?”

“Certainly. I was young a long time ago,” said Miss Maddie.

“This is the real thing!” cried Dave. “She loves him as truly as I love her. I’m out of luck, that’s all. It’s not true that they are lovers, but even if they were, would you blame her?”

“I couldn’t help blaming her some,” said Miss Maddie. “I’m old-fashioned. Why don’t they marry?”

“They haven’t a cent. Mind, I didn’t say they didn’t have enough to marry on, I said not one cent. Neither of them. He is still dependent on his father, and his father is poor.”

“Then they must wait,” said Miss Maddie. “Like others.”

“Sure!” he said, grinning, “young people must wait!” He reached for the bottle.

Miss Maddie said: “Give me another drink.”

“I’m damned if I will!” he said, putting the bottle down. “I couldn’t bear to see you get drunk.”

“Why?”

“Because you stand for decency and firmness of purpose in my eyes; the old-fashioned virtues; I respect you.”

“That’s funny,” said Miss Maddie, “I have the same feeling towards you, young as you are.”

Dave shouted with bitter laughter. “Then you’re out of luck! You placed your respect in the wrong quarter! I’m a louse!” He reached for the bottle.

“If you go drunk and bitter and reckless,” said Miss Maddie firmly, “they will say that it is her fault. The gossips are watching you. It would be proof in their minds that she is bad.” With the bottle half-way to his lips, Dave paused, staring at her while this sank in.

He passed the bottle over to her. “Take it and go to bed,” he said. “You’re a devil. You’re never satisfied. You’ve got to heap more on me! More and more. I’ve got to do my work with a grin, as if I enjoyed my life, eh? Can’t even relieve a sore breast by getting drunk and cursing. All right. You win!” He flung himself down and turned his back. Miss Maddie switched out the light. Her roughened fingers sought for his hand, touched it lightly, and she was gone.

Chapter 10

JUNE passed and July. The laurel blossoms, which old-fashioned people called ivory, gave place to scented honeysuckle, and honeysuckle in turn to the scarlet trumpets of the exuberant cow-vine, breaking down the fences of lazy farmers. Blue-bottle, mantling the neglected fields, seemed to reflect patches of sky; and the chigger-weed, which survives without multiplying vulgarly, picked out spots here and there by the roadside to display its fiery little clusters.

When the breathless nights of July gave place to cooler August, the social season opened in Travis County. Every Friday during August the people gathered in one or another of the villages to hold tournament. Young knights on horseback tilted at rings, the winner crowning the Queen of Love and Beauty and the runners-up her Maids of Honor. An *al fresco* supper (for the benefit of the church) followed, and the day ended with a ball in the village hall. Field and ballroom were the haunts of aspiring politicians, and a deal of oratory was spilled, featuring the ancient chivalry of Maryland, her fair women and brave men, etc., etc. On Saturday afternoons in fields up and down the county there were red-hot baseball games between the village teams. Such were the amusements that Dave Tascott glanced at in driving by.

Meanwhile the fishing season was in full swing at Absalom's Island, and on week-ends a procession of cars poured down the state road from the inland towns; the occupants meekly paying whatever was asked to be carried out in the Bay in motor boats with fishing tackle and soft crabs for bait. The Absalom's Islanders, Dave learned, were not looked upon as belonging, by the up-county people, because their grandfathers had been fetched over from the eastern shore seventy-five years ago to operate and supply the first oyster cannery in that part of the world. Every Saturday night there was a rowdy dance at Leech's pavilion which did not always end in a fight. Every Saturday night also, there was a more decorous dance at Bayside at the upper end of the county, but Leech's was more popular.

During these days Dave did not go again to Genizir. Clare asked him a few times, but he could not face it, and she stopped asking him. He had the best of excuses; he was too busy. Nowadays there was a continuous stream of patients during office hours, and betweenwhiles Dave was always on the road. "Doct' Taskout's a bugger for work," the men said; "he don't spare rubber." Thus they accounted for the fact that Dave's lean gray face did not profit by Miss Maddie Basilon's cooking and the generous sun. They hardly noticed that his humor had taken on a bitterer flavor. As they came to know him better, Dave's patients were not so prompt in paying him; even so, he and Miss Maddie were safely beyond the reach of want. Miss Maddie had a full-time servant now.

Occasionally Dave met Clare riding the Colonel in the soft stuff alongside the road. Clare's friendly greeting was unchanged: "Hey, Tascott! When are you coming over?" She had been well-trained socially; she could rattle indefinitely. But she knew why he didn't come to Genizir, and Dave knew that she knew, so there could be no real letting down of the bars. Such a meeting only made Dave sorer, yet whenever he was in the Island Creek neighborhood his eyes would be sweeping the roads for her. His divided self did not fail to remind him that he was a poor sap thus to lick the hand that caressed another.

One night he was called to Genizir in a hurry. Aunt Maria Phillips had an acute gastritis. In the frowzy cabin furnished with cast-offs from the big house, Dave and Clare worked over her together. She was a formidable patient. "Aunt Maria, for God's sake shush your hollering!" cried Clare. "I can't hear what the doctor tells me."

"T's goin' die, honey-lamb!" wailed the old woman. "T's sholy goin' die!"

"Die?" said Clare. "Doctor couldn't kill you with a club! You can't die till some of that fat melts down. Where would we get a coffin big enough?"

"Ain't fittin' t' die! Ain't fittin' t' die!" yelled Aunt Maria. "Ah spend a quahtah out the mission money!"

"You black sinner, then you better pray to God quietly," said Clare. "He'll think this is the devils howling in the pit!"

Mistress and servant understood each other. Aunt Maria clung to Clare's hand, gabbling: "Honey, honey, honey, stand by me!" The dialogue went on for an hour without stopping. Thus to be sharing a job with Clare; to be able to watch her and take in the sound of her voice, laid a quiet spell on Dave. The changing expressions of her thin, scornful face as she affectionately scolded the old woman, fairly destroyed him with pleasure.

Aunt Maria recovered as quickly as she had been taken sick, and there was no excuse for him to linger. "Come up to the house and have a drink," said Clare.

The spell was broken by the first words she addressed to him as an individual, and he shook his head, suddenly scared at his own softness under her eyes. "Sorry," he said, "I got to beat it down to Pardee's store before I go to bed."

He got drunk that night. "I'm entitled to it, and I don't care what you say!" he announced to Miss Maddie in advance.

"Go ahead," she answered, undisturbed; "but you better limit yourself to a pint."

Lance Corder spent every week-end at Genizir. The Eltonhead household led an existence apart, and Lance and Clare never appeared at the more intimate county gatherings. At the tournaments they showed themselves with Tom for the riding, and drove home before supper. Dave never attended any public gatherings, but he always knew when Lance was in the county. Occasionally he found Lance, with obstinate friendliness, sitting in his waiting-room when he showed out the last patient of the day. Dave would not discourage these visits, because it seemed important to show the county that he and Lance were friends.

To Dave it seemed that each time he saw him Lance increased in good looks and verve. In Lance's presence he experienced a nameless excitement. He dreaded it in prospect and was afterwards ashamed. Yet he was innocently fond of Lance, too. When he went out of his way to treat Lance roughly, and Lance only laughed and flung an arm around his shoulders, he was doubly grateful. He could have groveled before him. He had to be on his guard against the impulse to flatter him, to subserve himself. He would find himself looking on Lance as a kind of king among men. Had he not won Clare?

Sometimes when Lance came, Dave apprehended something rapt in him, like the quality of the stilled sea. Then he knew that Lance had come straight from Clare's arms. On another occasion, there was a hurt in Lance's candid eyes, and his loud laugh had a bitterness like Dave's own. The lovers had quarreled. On this occasion Lance, looking around the consulting-room, said: "How about a little drink, Dave?"

Dave jumped up to fetch the bottle, filled with a wicked joy. However, since the suggestion came from outside, an opposition instantly set up inside him, and he stopped. If you get drunk with him where will it end? he asked himself, and was frightened at the prospect. "I forgot," he said lamely. "Miss

Maddie has taken me in charge. She hides the bottle. And I'm ashamed to ask for it."

"Never mind," said Lance, gloomily. "She's right, of course. You have to keep a steady hand."

Lance flung off his coat and lit a cigarette. "What you been doing all week, Dave?"

"What have I been doing?" said Dave. "What would I be doing? Handing out white, yellow and pink aspirin tablets and trying to keep a straight face!"

"No fooling," said Lance, "tell me about your work. That's what I like to hear. I'm sick of myself."

"Why?" asked Dave.

"Oh, I suppose it's because I'm so damned conceited. Ordinarily I think I'm a hell of a fine fellow, but when any little thing goes wrong I discover that I've got nothing to draw on. I'm empty inside. I suppose that's why I run to you. God! I wish I could be like you!"

Dave laughed long. "Oh, of course, you don't think much of yourself," said Lance, "but others do."

"What's gone wrong now?" asked Dave.

"Nothing worth telling about. Only I have suddenly waked up to a sense of my own inadequacy."

"Is that all?" said Dave. "That won't last long."

Lance laughed and began to feel better. "Go to hell! You think I'm stuck on myself, too, don't you?"

"Well, I have no fear that you'll cut your throat," said Dave.

Lance soon talked himself into a confident humor. "You're as good as a tonic," he said to Dave.

"Not me!" said Dave. "You're self-intoxicating."

"Ha! That's damn good!" cried Lance. "Can I use it in my play? There's a place where it would just come in."

"It's yours," said Dave.

Lance made a note of it. "It's funny what good things unliterary people sometimes get off," he said, and failed to understand why Dave laughed.

He told Dave about his latest plans. Beside the play, he had a story in hand, and a new idea for a series of broadcasts. He strode up and down the little room acting out his imaginary scenes with sparkling eyes and inspired gestures. Voice, glance, gesticulation compelled his listener. It did no good

for Dave to tell himself there was nothing in Lance's talk; that he was only a lightheaded kid like any other. He yielded to it, hating Lance's power over him.

This shine or zest or verve that comes out of him is unnatural, Dave thought; it has bewitched Clare—she doesn't love him in the common way; he has put a kind of spell on her—and, God damn him, he's making a woman of me! The thought then came crawling into his mind: But after all Lance *is* only human. This bright light could be put out forever by a knife or a bullet. . . . Clare would be free of him . . . I'd be myself again. Dave's eye picked out the right spot under Lance's shirt.

In the middle of his talk, Lance, with an involuntary impulse, snatched up his coat, and Dave discovered that hell still had reserves of brimstone. The kid was preparing to speed his glory back to Clare. Dave said in a casual voice: "It's early yet."

Lance had already forgotten him. "I know," he muttered, "but I just remembered something I forgot. I'll be seeing you."

Dave thought: What a meeting after their quarrel when he comes back to her shining! Passion will register an all-time high!



The Rector's Aid Society of All Angels Church, which met in rotation at the houses of its members, came to Mrs. Basilon's in September. All the married ladies of the Episcopal Church belonged, and Mrs. Chynne (who was the secretary) looked forward to the meetings with the greatest pleasure because she then had an opportunity to question certain ladies at whose houses she could not, for one reason or another, call. Indeed, Miss Utie had piously suggested more than once that the Rector's Aid meet fortnightly, but had been overruled.

There was a full meeting at Miss Maddie's for two reasons: firstly, Miss Maddie's food was so good; secondly, Miss Utie had let one or two of her intimate friends know in advance that she was going after Maddie Basilon for an answer to the question that was agitating all the ladies in the village. The hostess of the day was always chairlady of the meeting, and when the members had settled down in the parlor, Miss Maddie rapped on the arm of her chair for order, and gave out the opening hymn. The brisk Miss Utie attacked the old square piano in the corner, and the ladies sang:

“Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Jesus’ love:
The fellowship of Christian minds
Is like to that above.

“We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.”

When they had finished singing, Miss Maddie read a prayer—that is to say, she had the prayer-book open in front of her. It was very brief. “Merciful God; we pray thee to bless this meeting of thy servants, and to make our labors fruitful. Fill our hearts with charity, O Lord, and good will to all men”—Miss Maddie hesitated for the fraction of a second—“and women. And this we ask for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.”

Miss Maddie kept her eyes down when she finished praying. Utie Chynne whispered indignantly to Aggie Darnall: “That isn’t in the book! She made it up out of her head a purpose!” The youngest member of the circle snickered, and was severely frowned upon.

Miss Utie then read the minutes of the previous meeting. The minutes gave no secrets away.

“Is there any new business before the meeting?” Miss Maddie asked in the mild manner that they all distrusted. Nobody spoke. “Motions?” she asked.

Utie glanced meaningly at Aggie, and the latter spoke up. “Madam Chairlady, I move that we now sing the closing hymn.”

“But why?” asked Miss Maddie, surprised. “We just started.”

“Well, I think it more seemly to close the religious exercises before we start general discussion.” Beck Lewger promptly seconded the motion, and it was carried *nem. con.*

“Before giving out the hymn,” said Miss Maddie, “I move that instead of spending the time in talk, we delegate one of our number to read aloud from an improving book while we sew. I have several suitable books here. . . . Will anybody second the motion?”

The ladies glanced at one another in silent embarrassment while Miss Maddie, surveying them blandly through her spectacles, waited. Miss Utie, not to be overborne, popped up and said: “Madam Chairlady, I’m against the motion. All us ladies are workers with but little time to visit. Maybe we see our next door neighbors, but not another soul from week to week. It is only

at these meetings that we have an opportunity to exchange news of our families, et cetera.”

A murmur of approval went around the room and Miss Maddie’s motion found no seconder. “Very well,” she said, with a dry smile; “let us sing number 405. ‘Peace, Perfect Peace, in This Dark World of Sin.’”

After singing, the ladies settled down to their sewing. At the moment they were making baby-sacques for the home missions. Miss Utie fired the first gun. As the oldest woman in the group, Miss Maddie was addressed by all with a title of respect. “Miss Maddie,” said Utie, “your doctor is working too hard.”

“Why do you call him my doctor, Utie?” asked Miss Maddie, moistening the end of a thread preparatory to inserting it in the needle.

“You take care of him, don’t you?” said Miss Utie. “He works too hard.”

“I have no control over his hours of work, Utie. He is called for all hours, day and night. He says he has always been accustomed to working hard and would miss it. His health is good.”

“I don’t know,” said Utie; “he is too pale for a young man. ’Tain’t natural. ’Tain’t natural neither for a man as young as that to work from morning till night and night till morning, and never see a soul but the sick.”

“I agree,” said Miss Maddie, “but I can do nothing with him. Why don’t you speak to him yourself, Utie? You see him often.”

The youngest member snickered again, and bent low over her sewing. Miss Utie turned on her with a red face. She looked at the youngest member, but her words were addressed to Miss Maddie, as all knew. “And why shouldn’t I see my physician when I need him?” she demanded. “I don’t hang him up like some do. I pay him out of my own egg money.”

There was a young wife named Maggie Bourne present, who was not considered “hard good” as they said. She giggled in her inconsequential way, saying: “Doct’ Tascott, he’s a caution! Before you know where you are he hev you stark nekkid!”

Miss Utie turned on her indignantly. “Doct’ Tascott don’t undress *me*, I’d have you know!” There was general laughter.

“Sho, Utie!” said Miss Maddie placatingly. “Nobody blames you for seeing the doctor when you want. That’s what he’s here for.”

Gradually Miss Utie smoothed her ruffled feathers. Beck Lewger, a large, placid woman, supported her. “Miss Maddie, don’t young doctor make no friends outside office hours?” she asked.

“Why, yes,” said Miss Maddie. “He goes to see Ed Shenton in the first district. And Abram Ewbank. And Mort Copping over on the bay side.”

“Only old men?” put in Miss Utie with raised eyebrows.

“He joins the young men at the hotel nights when he has time.”

“Don’t he never call on any young women?” asked Miss Beck.

“I couldn’t tell you, Beck.”

“Ain’t no manner of use making out you don’t know, Miss Maddie,” said Utie. “For he’s been heard to say you’re the best friend he’s got in the county!”

“I am pleased to hear that,” said Miss Maddie. “Howsoever, I never ask a man where he goes.”

“How old is young doctor?” asked Miss Beck.

“Twenty-nine,” answered half a dozen voices.

“He’s got a start here,” Miss Beck went on; “already in three months he has built up a good practice. You’d think he’d be wanting to settle down now. Why don’t he like our girls?”

“I don’t know that he doesn’t,” said Miss Maddie.

Miss Utie shot out a forefinger like a district attorney. “Did he have a girl before he come?”

“He has never mentioned it,” said Miss Maddie.

“Seems strange a man of his age want to live like a priest,” said Miss Beck, “when he could marry. ’Tain’t natural. They say he drinks pretty hard.”

Miss Maddie’s eyes glittered quietly behind her glasses. “Did any of you ever see him drunk?” she asked. There was no answer. “Well, I have, twice. After office hours. What is that as our men rate drinking?” They had nothing to say.

“What’s the matter with him he never goes with a girl?” persisted Utie.

“You’ll have to ask him that yourself,” said Miss Maddie. “Takes all kinds to make a world.”

“There must be some reason for it,” said Utie.

“We’ve got plenty of old bachelors here in the county who never went with girls,” returned Miss Maddie.

“Yes,” said Utie, “and they’re looked down on. There’s Sid Brome and there’s Kent Dixon. Something lacking. But young doctor seems a proper man. The girls like him, but he won’t look at them.”

“What of it?” said Miss Maddie.

Miss Utie's forefinger came into play again. "Why don't he go over to Geneezay no more?" she demanded.

"Doesn't he?" parried Miss Maddie.

"He does not. When he first come he was there to supper and to breakfast—that girl never asked anybody else in the county to a meal; but he ain't called at the house in two months now."

"How do you know?" asked Miss Maddie.

"Aunt Maria Phillips told her Onyx and Onyx told Verna Eltonhead here." Mrs. Tom Eltonhead vigorously nodded her head in agreement.

"And 'tain't for want of being asked, neither," Miss Utie continued; "for Aunt Maria Phillips heard that girl ask him over the telephone more than once. But he didn't come."

"What girl?" asked Miss Maddie mildly.

"You know who I mean. Clare Eltonhead."

"Why don't you name her?"

Miss Utie tossed her head. "Don't want t' soil my lips, Miss Maddie."

"That's pretty strong language, Utie."

"Not too strong. Ask Verna Eltonhead."

"Let's talk about something else," suggested Miss Maddie.

It was useless. Mrs. Eltonhead, a disappointed, fading woman with lurid rouged cheeks, was not going to forego her day in court. "That girl is a true Eltonhead!" she said acidly. "Heaven knows I have enough cause to regret the day I took that name! How was I, an innocent girl, to know what kind of a family I was marrying into! Nobody will ever know what I suffered, or the fears that fill me because my innocent children have to bear that name! Nightly I go down on my knees to pray that they may take after their mother's side! And week after week that shameless woman entertains her lover in what is by rights *my house!*"

"This is only county gossip," objected Miss Maddie.

"Gossip?" said Mrs. Eltonhead. "I know what I know! Is it gossip when Jim Duckett is sent for to Geneezay to fix the slates on the front porch roof? Clare sleeps in the front room on the north side, and her young man in the front room on the south side. Tom's room is in the back of the house. What do you make of that?"

"Nothing," said Miss Maddie. "You-all were talking about Doctor Tascott. What has this got to do with him?"

This provided the opening Miss Utie had been waiting for. "That is what we are asking ourselves," she said, preening her feathers. "Perhaps it is

something more than hard work that makes young doctor look so grim and tight-mouthed. And given him such distaste of girls. When he first came 'twas reported he was struck with Clare Eltonhead—I say it with sorrow. Then suddenly he stopped going there.” Miss Utie leaned forward and squinted her eyes for emphasis. “Was it because Doctor found out how she was carrying on with the young man from town?”

Miss Maddie sewed away. “I don’t know anything,” she said calmly; “but it couldn’t be that.”

“Why couldn’t it be?”

“Because Doctor and young Corder are such good friends. Most every time the young man is in the county he comes here to spend an evening with the doctor.”

Chapter 11

ON SUNDAY morning Clare was out of bed at seven o'clock. After tidying and sweeping her room, she went to the bathroom and sponged herself in the old-fashioned tub. The chilly artesian water made her gasp, but she pressed her lips together and went through with it. She splashed the water repeatedly in her face, and, looking at herself, realized with bitterness that all the cold water in the world could not make her look refreshed this morning. The sight of her beautiful body in the long mirror—the body she had lately been so proud of, filled her with loathing, and she hastily covered it.

After dressing and putting on soft-soled slippers so that the clack of heels would not waken the men, she covered her broom with a damp woolen cloth and swept the upper hall and unoccupied bedrooms. In all her movements there was a kind of swift desperation. Fetching wax from the housemaid's closet, she applied it to the stairs and polished them down from step to step. On the lower floor, she flung open back door and front door. She loved the house she had been born in, and especially the great bare hall, wide open front and back to garden and lawn. She went out on the front porch and stood looking at the view.

The yard descended gently under the archaic trees, ending at a hedge of ragged yew. The hedge cut off a view of the intervening slope, and the eye leaped directly to the flat bottom fields far below, the wide blue river and the further wooded shore with its own hills. Far down at the left, the creek, starting as a mere thread of water, widened into its estuary and wound out with unique grace to join the river. From this knoll the prospect up and down was enormous. To Clare where she stood, a whole half of the tender September sky was revealed. Delicate, successive curtains of haze were lowered between her and the distances.

As she looked, tears gathered in her eyes and began to roll silently, one by one, down her thin cheeks, while her lips trembled. Her hands twisted her skirt; her breast began to be shaken by rising sobs. Suddenly becoming conscious of her weakness, she turned and ran fast into the house and up the

stairs. In the bathroom with a desperate air she continued to splash cold water in her face until she overcame the sobs.

Returning downstairs with a bleak, composed face, she went out the back door and down the slope to Aunt Maria's cabin. Nobody answered her knock, and she opened the door, stepping back to allow the first puff of noxious air from inside to dissipate itself. Aunt Maria was peacefully sleeping and sweating on a cot on one side of the room, while her grandson, a youth of eighteen, sprawled on another, opposite. In the room upstairs slept the oldest son and his wife and a swarm of different-sized children.

Entering with quick steps, Clare began to shake Aunt Maria's mountainous shoulder. Her hand sunk deep into fat. "Wake up! Wake up!" she cried.

Aunt Maria opened her eyes and groaned. "Wha' time, honey?"

"Eight o'clock. Get up!"

Aunt Maria groaned reproachfully. "Sunday morning, honey. Men folk doan want breakfast 'fo' ten o'clock."

"There is work to do," said Clare. "You didn't clean up last night."

" 'Twas Sat'day night, honey-lamb!"

"I don't care what night it was. The kitchen floor and tables must be scrubbed before you start the breakfast and the stove blacked."

"Nobody see stove but you'n me, honey."

"Quit your stalling and get up, I tell you!"

With heart-breaking groans Aunt Maria heaved herself up and sat on the edge of the cot, bleary-eyed and collapsed in fat.

"If you opened the doors and windows you wouldn't feel so bad in the morning," stormed Clare. "How many times have I told you! You poison yourself with foul air."

Aunt Maria's eyes rolled. "Who know wha' come in?" she muttered.

"Get your clothes on!" warned Clare. "If you go back to bed I swear I'll come down here and take a stick to you!"

"I's getting up, honey-lamb! I's getting up!"

Back at the big house, Clare continued to push the clanking weight back and forth over the waxed floor of the lower hall. After a while Aunt Maria appeared in the kitchen doorway, wiping a dish. "Honey-lamb, whaffor you get up so early Sunday?" she protested. "You need yo' sleep!"

"I get plenty of sleep," said Clare.

“Ev’body got have they sleep,” insisted Aunt Maria. “You doan look so good ’s mawning, honey. Dead leaf under yo’ eye.”

Clare dropped the handle of the polisher and ran to a wall mirror. What she saw was not reassuring. “Go back to your work,” she said to the old woman, and started running up the stairs again. In her own room, she twisted her hands together and the tight lips parted. “I can’t keep it up,” she murmured; then laughed briefly. “You fool! You’ve damned well got to keep it up!”

She sat down at her dressing-table and studied her face in hard earnest. Too much would be worse than none. She pulled out the flat middle drawer which contained her meager store of cosmetics. She worked a cream into her skin, and afterwards applied the smallest of drops of liquid rouge to each cheek, spreading it and working it in. After dusting a tinted powder all over her face she looked at it this side, that side, full front. She pulled the window blind half down and looked again. There was no design of coquetry in her somber glance. Finally, with a shrug, she pushed in the drawer and ran downstairs.

In the kitchen she sat down with a bowl of green beans and started cutting and splitting them for the midday meal. Aunt Maria said: “That my work, honey.”

“This is easy,” Clare murmured. “You’ve got plenty of heavy work to do. Keep at it.”

By and by Clare, very attentive to the beans, said: “How many babies have you had in your time, Aunt Maria?”

“Law! honey,” said Aunt Maria, “I got stop and figure. . . . I got six important chillen.”

“What do you mean, important?”

“Six growed up,” said Aunt Maria. “So many lil babies die, I ’clare I lose count.”

“Did you want all those little babies when they came?” asked Clare.

“Want um?” said Aunt Maria, puzzled. “Law, chile, they come without my asking.”

Clare took another line. “Aunt Maria, how many children are there in your cabin, anyhow? Your daughter-in-law Georgina told me her youngest was eight, but there are three or four younger than that. Almost every time I go down I seem to see another. And all about the same size.”

Aunt Maria laughed comfortably. “My unmarried girls got send their babies home,” she said. “They working. So Georgina mother them. I used

mother them mahse'f, till got so old 'twas scan'alous. The littlest, cutest one, that's Teedo. He Martha's child. She goin' have 'nother come Christmas. Fine time to have baby!"

"It must come pretty hard on John," suggested Clare.

"The girls send money home when they working," said Aunt Maria. "Baby doan cost much."

"Does Martha expect to go on having one baby after another indefinitely?" asked Clare.

"Sho! she get herself husband when she can. How you gwine stop it, honey? It's nature."

"There are ways of not having babies," said Clare.

"Not for colored folks, honey. They always forget."

"Well, even when the baby starts," said Clare with her head bent over the beans, "can't it be stopped?"

"It's perilous," said Aunt Maria, shaking her head. "My Eva, when first she know it, she too scare to tell me; she fool with herself, get defected."

"Infected," corrected Clare.

"Well, she die. Better have baby."

"These old women that come to you when you're confined," said Clare, "don't they know how to stop it if you tell them in time?"

"They 'low they do," said Aunt Maria, "but any girl is a fool to ask them. They take all the money she got, and give her bottle colored water. Baby come jus' same." Aunt Maria chuckled at an old recollection. "Law! I 'member first time how scare I was to tell my mammy! They used say a girl could bring herself back if she chew spruce gum. Reckon I et a pound that stuff. Only give me the dyspepsia. Baby come jus' same. 'Twas my John. Strongest baby I ev' make."

Clare sighed. Sounds could now be heard overhead, and she roused herself saying: "Mr. Tom is getting up. Start the breakfast."

After she had finished setting the table, Clare pulled the buff shades half-way down and glanced in a mirror to observe the effect on her complexion. When Tom came in he had a head, and was grouchy. "Place 's as dark 's a barn!" he grumbled, and proceeded to snap up the shades. Clare smiled. Tom scarcely looked at her. "Coffee, for God's sake," he demanded. "Black and hot!"

He swallowed his breakfast and went out. Lance could be heard singing loud in the bathroom. Clare pulled the shades down again. Soon Lance came cascading down the stairs. "By God! I feel good!" he cried, pounding his

chest. He took Clare in his arms. "You look lovely!" he murmured. "Love is the best cosmetic! And you smell so sweet!" He kissed her repeatedly. "I could never, never get enough of you!" Clare smiled because men were so easily fooled. Even while Lance held her in his arms her breast was laced with iron. "You ought to be tired," said Lance, "but you don't show it! How long you been up?"

"Not long," she lied, smiling. "You're the one who ought to be tired."

"Never!" cried Lance. "Love exhilarates me!"

She fed him, and afterwards they went out on the front porch and smoked. "I shall lie here all day long and recuperate," said Lance. "By God! you're good to look at! I forbid you to stir from my side."

Clare was vivacious and elusive. She kissed him with affected scorn; she made him laugh with her story of the parentage of the Phillips pick'nies. "Marvelous woman!" he murmured. "You behave as if we had just been introduced! Did last night never happen? Must I begin at the beginning with you every day?"

Clare suddenly surrendered all over. "Oh, my darling! my darling!" she whispered. "I love you so!" She began to shake in his arms and big tears forced themselves from under her lids.

"Baby! what's the matter?" he implored in distress.

"Nothing," she said, smiling with dreadful lips. "Only I am too happy!"

Presently she separated herself from him. "Let's talk," she said.

"The hell with talk!" said Lance lazily.

"No," insisted Clare, "we have all day. Tell me about the Vagabonds."

"Bunch of dumb clucks!" said Lance.

"What about the play they are rehearsing now?"

"It's a poor thing," said Lance. "Broadway success. What the heck has a Broadway success got for the Vagabonds? Their only excuse for being is to produce plays that the commercial theater is afraid of."

Clare let him run on until he had exhausted the subject. She then dropped a casual question: "Haven't I heard you speak of a doctor in the organization?"

"Max Brenner, yes," said Lance.

"What kind of a doctor is he?"

"General practitioner. His palaver goes over big with die Weiber, I understand."

"Is he a good friend of yours?"

“Good God, no! One of these blond Nordic males always swinging his shoulders before the women. He was bound to be an actor. Acting’s a poor business for men. . . . What on earth put Brenner into your head?”

“I’ve heard you speak of some doctor who was a friend of yours.”

“You’re confusing me with some other fellow, honey. I don’t pal with any doctor.” Clare sighed.

Lance drew her down beside him. “Let’s forget the world and the Vagabonds! Let’s lie all day and kiss and laugh at nothing! How I love to hear you laugh!”

Clare laughed for him. He couldn’t see her eyes. “Tom has only gone to the stable,” she said warningly. “He’ll be back.”

“Why don’t we tell Tom we’re engaged?” he said. “Then it wouldn’t matter. Tom’s no prude.”

“Not the same thing at all!” she said quickly. “You don’t know Tom. Things must stay as they are.”

“All right,” said Lance obediently.

She sat up again, and smiling down at the lazy Lance, smoothed his hair back. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could be together always!” she said.

“Nice!” said Lance. “What a word! It would be enchanting!”

“Well, why don’t we get married?” she asked lightly. Her smiling lips were carved in stone.

“That’s a joke,” said Lance, “—but a very nice one!”

“You have a regular job with the broadcasting station now,” said Clare.

“Thirty dollars a week!”

“We could manage,” she said, affecting still to laugh at the idea, and speaking slowly to hide her breathlessness. “We could get a tiny flat for forty dollars a month. I’ve looked at them. And I could feed us for ten dollars a week. Nothing fancy, of course.”

“Darling!” said Lance, “don’t tempt me to such folly! A job in a broadcasting station is no anchor to windward. Suppose I lost it?”

Clare said: “I have a few odds and ends of jewelry that I could sell until you got another.”

Lance became a little uneasy. “But, darling, if I was married, don’t you see, I’d have to take *anything*. I would never be able to get ahead by waiting.”

“Everybody gets ahead if they are determined,” said Clare. “You’re so much cleverer than the average!”

“Thanks, darling, but cleverness isn’t always marketable.”

“You could count on me, too,” she urged. “Housework wouldn’t take all my time. I could be taking courses at the Y.W.C.A. to fit me for a job as secretary—no, not secretary, because I can’t spell, but a trained attendant. Tascott said I had a talent for the sickroom. Trained attendants are always in demand because they’re so much cheaper than nurses. They get three dollars a day.”

Lance sat up. “This isn’t like you,” he said. “I always thought you were a wild bird like myself, and hated to be tied down.”

“I’ve never known anything else,” said Clare, smiling. “I was tied down when I lived with my aunt, and I’m tied down here. Don’t you think it would be an improvement to be tied to the man I love?”

“It would be Heaven for both of us!” cried Lance. “But not yet! Not yet!” Clare, looking down at her hands, said nothing.

Lance was seriously disturbed. He looked a little badgered, a little imploring. “Clare, I’ve always been honest with you—at least as honest as a man *can* be with a woman, and I must be honest with you now. I’m too young to marry. I’m not ripe yet—oh, of course, ripe in body, but not in temperament, in character.”

“Why not ripen beside me?” she whispered.

“Oh, you don’t understand,” he groaned. “I couldn’t be tied down yet! The very thought of marriage makes me sweat in my palms!”

“Then of course you’re not really in love with me,” she said with a judicial air. “This is just the first flare-up of passion in you. Any woman might have excited it.”

“No!” protested Lance, distressed. “That’s a horrible thing to say! You are everything in the world to me! I live in you! It is impossible that I could love another woman!”

“But you think you may change when you ripen?” said Clare.

“I will never change as far as you are concerned! Only,” he pleaded, “give me a little more rope, darling! A year or two!”

Clare threw back her head and her laugh rang out—her delicious laugh that was like strings of different-toned silver bells shaken one after another in a descending scale. “You absurd boy!” she said. “Did you think for a moment that I was in earnest? I just wanted to see what you’d say. Why, of course! marriage is out of the question for us for years to come! How could I abandon poor old Tom?”

Lance laughed with her. “Of course,” he said, “if a certain thing should happen, all bets would be off. Oh, boy! that would ripen me! I’d damn well have to get down to tacks then! But it’s hardly likely, we’ve been so careful.”

“I’ll take good care that that doesn’t happen,” said Clare calmly, “until we’re ready for it to happen.” Lance kissed her. She got up saying: “I’ve got to speak to Aunt Maria about dinner. Back in a minute.”

She ran into the house. Lance presently fell asleep, sprawling on the glider with a half-smile.

Chapter 12

ON MONDAY morning when Clare returned home after having driven Lance to the early bus, Aunt Maria persuaded her to drink a cup of coffee and eat a hot biscuit. “You din eat a mou’ful when Mist’ Lance have his breakfast.”

“Can’t eat so early,” said Clare.

Onyx Phillips, who worked for Mrs. Verna Eltonhead, came home every Sunday; consequently Aunt Maria was charged with the village gossip on Monday mornings. She related it to Clare, who listened with a distant smile. Back of her eyes she was absorbed with other matters. However, at a certain point in Aunt Maria’s tale, she became definitely interested.

“Ov’ on the Neck,” said Aunt Maria, “Mist’ Sid Southam and his wife both got the typhus fever.”

“I suppose you mean typhoid,” said Clare.

“Sumpin like that. Anyhow, they real sick. First Mist’ Sid have Doct’ Hoskey. But when his wife get it, he send for Doc’ Taskout. He come twice ev’ day.”

“What do they do for nursing?” asked Clare.

“Have Miss Teewee Southam. Doc’ Taskout say she best nurse in the county.”

Clare, still pursuing the matter in the back of her mind, said: “I’ll ride over to the Southams’. I’ll get Mr. Tom to give me a bottle of his old corn whiskey to carry.”

Tom reluctantly yielded up a bottle of his precious liquor, and after changing into her riding clothes, Clare went down to the stable. While Plug Phillips was saddling her horse she joked with him in her customary fashion. “You, Plug! Your fingers are all toes! Can’t you put a strap through a buckle? What would you do with thread and needle?”

“Yaas’m, Miss Clare,” grinned Plug.

She mounted and turned into the farm road which led down between the fields of Genizir to the abandoned wharf on the creek. When she was alone

it was a blessed relief to release that which she had to hide; her terror; her uncertainty; her desperate unhappiness. Her face softened and broke up like a child's, but she did not cry. She rode slowly with head down, relaxed and dumbly suffering.

Gradually a new spirit began to work in her and the torment of her mind was quieted. When she finally raised her head, her face had assumed the hard simplicity of a classic mask, which expresses emotion by transcending it. She had withdrawn from the struggle; even Lance would have been a stranger to her then; she was alone with her resolve.

At the same time she became aware of her surroundings. Her steady eyes glanced gratefully at the sky, the water, the endless tents of shocked corn in the brown fields, suggesting the bivouac of an army. At the foot of the hill she pulled up and gazed at the water for a long time; then, rousing, stroked the Colonel's neck, murmured to him affectionately, and turned his head into the track following the shore of the creek.

In Sumach Bottom there was a ford across the creek with a dirt track on the other side which would bring one eventually to the main road serving the Neck. This way was miles shorter than around by the motor road. "The Neck" was that part of the county to the south of Genizir, lying between the river and St. Barnabas' Creek, a deep inlet which drove a wedge six miles long up the middle of the county.

Reaching the hard-surfaced road, Clare glanced at her watch; ten o'clock; not time for him yet. She walked her horse alongside the macadam, frequently glancing over her shoulder, but she came to the private road into the Sid Southam house without being overtaken. The house was a quaint seventeenth century dwelling with a peaked roof, standing on a low bank above the river. Clare was received by Miss Tilly Southam, who was called Teewee, a stout old woman, strong and able still, with wrinkles of fun and kindness around her eyes. Towards Clare her bearing was cool.

"I was so sorry to hear that your brother and sister were sick," said Clare. "How are they today?"

"I can't say as they are any better, Miss Eltonhead."

"Has the doctor been yet?"

"He telephoned he had an accident case, and would be delayed."

"Is there anything I could do to help?"

"Oh, no, thanks!" said Miss Teewee, letting Clare understand by her tone of surprise that the offer was somewhat uncalled-for.

Miss Teewee relented a little at the sight of the bottle that Clare was pulling from the pocket of her jacket. "It's some of my brother's old corn,"

said Clare. "It's as good as brandy for the sick."

"Now I take that real kind of you, Miss Clare," said Miss Teewee. "It's something we need. Won't you come in?"

"Not unless I can help. I thought perhaps I could help with the nursing."

"Oh, no," said Miss Teewee. "Dr. Tascott has sent to town for a trained nurse. She'll be down on the bus this afternoon. The two of us can manage."

Clare saw that the old woman wanted to get back to the sickroom, and there was nothing for her to do but go. She walked her horse back to the main road and all the way up the main road to the place where the dirt track struck west, but still she did not meet Dave Tascott. At the dirt road she dismounted to wait for him.

Dave, delayed by a broken arm that was brought into his office as he was starting out, was speeding down the Neck road towards Sid Southam's place. Rounding a bend, he came on Clare Eltonhead, dismounted beside her horse, and made a quick stop. She appeared to be intent upon fixing her saddle girth. "Hello there!" cried Dave. "Anything wrong?"

"Hello!" said Clare in seeming surprise. "Nothing wrong. Just tightening my girth before I start down the hill."

This was far off her regular beat and Dave was at once startled, scared and delighted. He couldn't find anything to say, but Clare's tongue was always quick in an emergency. "Isn't it a lovely morning? The Colonel and I came across by Sumach Bottom and we're going back that way. We know lots of lovely places where you can't go in your gasoline buggy."

"I reckon," said Dave, smiling, lost in looking at her.

"You're beginning to talk like a born Southe'n Mar'lander," said Clare. "I carried a bottle of old corn down to the Sid Southams'."

"That was fine! Just what they need."

"Are they very sick, Tascott?"

"Very sick. But I believe I can pull them through. There may be other cases. An outbreak of typhoid is a disgrace to a modern community. However, I have located the source of infection. It won't go any further."

"I thought perhaps I could help with the nursing," said Clare diffidently.

"Oh, no!" said Dave in the same tone of surprise that Miss Teewee had used.

"Why not?" said Clare, affronted. "I'm not afraid of the contagion."

“It isn’t that,” said Dave. “Typhoid germs can only be taken through the mouth.”

“I wouldn’t be kissing the patients,” said Clare with a strained smile.

“It’s a simple matter to avoid contagion,” said Dave. “But the Sid Southams are well-to-do. They are able to pay for what help they need.”

“It’s a neighborly custom,” pleaded Clare; “I want to be neighborly.”

Dave couldn’t very well tell her that the Southams had condemned the whole house of Eltonhead. “It’s out of the question!” he said.

Clare turned her head away; the ready tongue failed her. Dave, not knowing what to say, said precisely the wrong thing. “How are you? You look a little peaked this morning.”

Clare looked at him with quick laughter. “Why, everybody else tells me I never looked better!” Dave thought with pain: That’s just the paint you have rubbed into your dear pale cheeks. It doesn’t fool me! Nor your merry laughter!

He slipped the shift lever into first gear. “I must get on,” he said heavily. “I am very late.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” said Clare quickly, with a touch of coquettishness. In her smile there was something pitiful and a little cheap that seemed to make the rouge stand out on her cheeks. It hurt Dave. Coquettishness was not Clare’s line. He slid the gear shift into neutral and let the clutch pedal come up. There was nothing he could say. Clare rattled on: “I never see you nowadays, Tascott. I thought we were going to be friends. Why do you never drive over?”

“So busy,” muttered Dave.

“You must give yourself some leisure,” she said, “or you’ll get sick yourself, and then what would your patients do?” And so on. And so on.

Dave said nothing. In the middle of it she struck off at a tangent. “Oh! did you see that beautiful gold and brown butterfly?”

“Where?” asked Dave, looking.

“It has disappeared under the trees. Have you noticed how the butterflies seem to come in greater profusion at the end of summer?”

“I haven’t noticed,” said Dave.

“Where are your eyes, Tascott? They are marvelous. I have a glass tray at home. I’m going to paste butterfly wings on a wooden backing and fasten it under the glass. I’ve seen them in the shops in town.”

“So you’re going to turn butterfly hunter!” said Dave.

“Yes! There’s a shining blue beauty that visits the flowers in my garden. I’ve got to have him to put in the middle of the tray. It’s easy enough to catch them with a net. The difficulty is to kill them mercifully. In a book that I have, it says that the entomologists use prussic acid.”

“Do they?” said Dave.

“A tiny drop on the insect’s head and it dies instantly. Prussic acid. Have you any?”

Dave, wondering why she had started to rouge her cheeks, was listening with only half his attention. “No,” he said, “but I could get it for you.”

“Oh, will you?” she asked eagerly. “It must be soon, because the season for butterflies is almost over.”

“Two days,” said Dave.

“Oh, I can never thank you enough!” said Clare. She mounted her horse. “Phone me when it comes,” she said, “and I’ll ride over to the office to get it.”

“Don’t come to the office,” said Dave quickly.

“Why not?”

“The Ladies’ Aid would have a rag baby until they found out what was the matter with you,” he said lightly. Clare gave him an extraordinary look, speechless.

“I’ll drive over to Genizir with it,” he said.

“Thanks, Tascott,” she said, clapping heels to the Colonel and loping away through the trees.

Dave started his car. He drove down the road automatically, blindly, in growing confusion and anxiety. Before he had gone a furlong, he brought the car to a stop with a jerk and threw the gears into neutral. He was livid and staring; a fine sweat broke out on his face. “Oh, God!” he whispered; “she would! . . . she would!”

He looked over his shoulder, but of course Clare had disappeared, and he could not follow her through the woods in his car. It was more than ten miles around to Genizir by road. And there were two desperately sick people waiting for him ahead. In any case he had to see them first. He wiped his face repeatedly. He waited a little to recover control of his shaking muscles—and drove on. Ten minutes later he was moving back and forth between the adjoining sickrooms absorbed in his work.

It was nearly one when he got back to Genizir. He left his car in the yard. There was nobody visible about the place. At the bottom of the porch steps he came to a stop, feeling as in a nightmare, that there was a hundred-pound

weight fastened to each foot. His heart was pounding; his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth; he suffered excruciatingly. He felt that he *could not* go through with what was before him. Neither could he run away from it. In the end his legs carried him up the steps and through the open door.

He saw with some relief that lunch was over. Aunt Maria was clearing the table; Tom had gone. "Doc' Taskout," murmured Aunt Maria in polite greeting.

"Where's Miss Clare?" he asked huskily.

"She upstairs, Doctor. I call her."

However, Clare had heard him come, and she was already coming downstairs in her usual precipitate manner. Her eyebrows ran up higher than ever. "Why, Tascott, what brings you over so soon?"

Dave could not speak at first. His eyes dwelt on her, imploring assurance that what he dreaded might not be true. He had his back to the light and she could not read his face clearly; however, she guessed that something was very wrong, and became wary. That wary glance turned the knife in him. She deliberately walked by him so that he was forced to turn around and face the light. "What's the matter?" she asked with pretended concern on his account.

There was no need for Dave to answer. As soon as she saw his face she learned that some men were not so easy to fool as others. Instantly she adjusted herself to the situation. Glancing into the dining-room to see where Aunt Maria was, she went out on the porch and Dave had to follow. Meanwhile she was saying with breathless swiftness: "The Southams? There is a crisis? You want me? I can be ready in two minutes. What should I take? Will an ordinary cotton dress do for a uniform?"

Dave paid no attention to this rigmarole. "Clare, for God's sake, be yourself!" he muttered.

She feigned not to hear him. There was a look of complete unreason in her eyes. "I only have to tell Aunt Maria about dinner," she gabbled, "and fetch a hat and a bag. Give me two minutes."

She started to run into the house and he caught her wrist. "Clare, look at me!" Brought to bay, she turned a face suddenly hard with enmity. "Are you going to have a baby?" he asked huskily.

She snatched her arm away; her face flamed. "What's the matter with you, Tascott? Are you crazy? Have you been drinking? How dare you speak to me like that! If my brother was here he'd horsewhip you! Get out before I call the negroes! Get out, do you hear, and never let me see you again!"

Dave, because he loved her, was at her mercy. He went down the steps with his head sunk between his shoulders, walked across the yard, got in his car and turned it around without looking back at the porch.

He was not deceived by her parade of anger. Before he reached the outer gate of Genizir, he stopped his car. He thought: This quarrel with me . . . after what she has been through already . . . will be the last straw. She will certainly do it now. I don't care what she says. . . . I can't leave her.

He got out and rummaged through his valises for certain articles that he required, and which he transferred to his pockets. Getting in again, he turned his car and drove back to the yard. If it was hard to enter the house before, it was doubly hard this time. He set his teeth and went up the steps. He found Aunt Maria in the kitchen. "Where's Miss Clare?" he asked.

"Upstairs," said Aunt Maria. "She doan feel so good today."

"Go and tell her I came back," said Dave. "I want to see her. Tell her . . . tell her I forgot something."

Aunt Maria obediently waddled out into the hall. It was an undertaking for her to mount the stairs. She took it one step at a time, pausing at the top to recover her breath. Dave waited very still at the foot, with a hand on the newel post. He heard Aunt Maria shuffle along the hall overhead and knock at Clare's door. Presently he heard her fat contralto repeating his message through the door. "Doc' Taskout come back, honey. Say he forget sumpin'." There was a long silence. If she won't come I'm going up, thought Dave. Then Aunt Maria shuffled to the head of the stairs and started down. "She comin'."

When she had disappeared into the kitchen, Clare came down the stairs, slowly now, with a hand sliding along the rail and her chin up. Her face was a mask of scornful indifference. Behind the mask, Dave apprehended the despair of a forsaken child, and was thankful he had come back.

"Are you prepared to apologize?" she asked.

"Anything you like, Clare," he said quickly.

"That's not a proper apology."

"Clare," he said, "you must know that I'm your friend. Under any circumstances. We've got to be honest with each other. What good are these pretenses?"

"Pretenses," she said, running up her eyebrows.

"I'm a doctor," said Dave. "I'm the proper one to advise you. I'm the only one who can advise you."

Clare cast a terrified glance towards the kitchen. “Come in here,” she said, opening the drawing-room door. When he was inside, she closed the door and leaned back against it with her hands behind her.

“I’m a doctor,” Dave repeated. “I deal with natural things. I have no romantic illusions. This is my job. You can talk plainly to me.” She closed her eyes and shook her head as it rested back against the door. He marked the pulse beating swift as a lizard’s in her throat.

“Listen,” he pleaded; “answer one question plainly and I swear I’ll torment you no longer. I’ll do anything you want afterwards. I’ll go jump off the old wharf if you think that will keep the secret better. God knows I don’t value my life a straw’s worth. But answer me first!”

“What?” she whispered.

“Do you want to get rid of it?”

Her eyes opened and she stared at him like a terrified, gentle animal. “Could you see?” she gasped. “Could anybody see?”

“No! No!” said Dave impatiently. “Nobody could see. And I’m no psychologist either. I understand you a little because— Oh, well, the heck with it! Answer me!”

“Would you help me?” she whispered. “*You!*”

“Why, of course!” said Dave.

She stared at him. “It’s . . . It’s against the law!”

“I will take the responsibility,” Dave said.

She clapped her hands over her face. Her breast rose. She struggled hard, but the soft cries were forced from her at last. She ran across the room and flung herself face down on a sofa, racked and torn with sobs. It had a dreadful sound in Dave’s ears. He followed her, pleading: “Clare, don’t! don’t!” and involuntarily he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” she gasped, and he jerked it away again.

“Sorry!” He walked away from her and stood with his back turned. He could not bear her sobbing. He returned to the sofa, saying: “Don’t! Don’t! Everything’s going to be all right now.”

“Don’t notice me,” she gasped. “It’s only relief. . . . I felt so terribly alone! . . . I . . . I was getting ready to kill myself when you came.”

“I know,” said Dave. “That’s why I came back.”

“Oh, you’re a friend! . . . a friend!” she whispered. “I don’t deserve such a one!”

“Let’s not go into that,” said Dave.

When she had got her grip, and was sitting up again—they avoided looking at each other—he said: “I must ask you a question or two. We can talk plainly like doctor and patient, can’t we?” Clare nodded. “How long has it gone?” asked Dave.

“Two months,” she murmured. “I have just missed the second period.”

“Fine!” said Dave. Clare laughed weakly. “I mean,” he said, blushing, “it’s less serious than it would be later.”

“Will I be very sick?” she asked.

“Not sick enough to betray you.”

“Aunt Maria never goes upstairs,” said Clare.

“There’s something else,” said Dave. “I don’t want to pry into your affairs, but these are questions doctors must ask.”

“You have the right,” she murmured.

“Has he let you down?” he asked bluntly.

“Oh, no!” she said quickly. “He knows nothing about it.”

“Why not tell him?”

“Because he would insist on marriage.”

“Well, why not? You’ll get along somehow.”

“He doesn’t want marriage,” said Clare, reddening, “and I don’t want it for him. I’m not going to force a marriage on him. I’d sooner die!”

Dave got up quickly, and walking away to the window, stood there looking out. “You wouldn’t betray me to him!” she said in fresh terror.

“Not going to betray you to anybody,” he growled. After a while he turned around, saying: “The heck with him anyhow. You’re the one I’ve got to think about.”

“I would have it if I had any money,” she whispered. “I’m not afraid of what people would say. I could face it out. I would love to have a baby. . . . But I have no money; no place to go. I have no way of supporting it afterwards.”

Dave gritted his teeth. “For God’s sake, that’s enough! Don’t talk! . . . Let’s get busy. Is Tom safely out of the way?”

Clare’s face lighted up in one great astonished question. “You mean now? right away? this afternoon?”

“Why not?” he said. “When you’ve got a hard thing to do, the thing is to do it quick. Where’s Tom?”

“They’re sowing wheat in the river field,” she said breathlessly. “He won’t be back until supper.”

“Is there any way of boiling water upstairs?”

“Yes. Electric stove.”

“Come on then,” he said harshly. “What are we waiting for?”

“I must think! I must think!” said Clare a little wildly. “. . . If you bring your satchels into the house and carry them upstairs Aunt Maria will see. She’s fond of me, but she can’t keep anything to herself.”

“I already thought of that,” said Dave. “Everything I need is in my pockets.”

Clare stared at him. “Dave!” Her eyes slowly filled.

“For God’s sake, don’t start to cry again,” he said, looking away. “Neither of us seems to have had the best of luck, but we can take it, can’t we? For God’s sake, don’t cry. I can’t stand it!”

“All right,” said Clare.

It was after two when Dave got home and half a dozen patients had been waiting for upwards of an hour. He entered by one of the house doors, avoiding the waiting-room; Miss Maddie heard, and followed him into the consulting-room. “Will you come to the dining-room?” she asked, “or shall I send a tray in here?”

Dave had his back to her. He turned around, saying: “Can’t eat. I could drink a cup of coffee.”

When she saw his face her grim self-possession failed her. “Doctor . . . Doctor, what has happened?”

Dave was only dimly aware of her. “No need to be scared,” he muttered. “It’s over.”

Miss Maddie’s hand stole to her mouth. “Oh, Doctor!”

Grinning, he went on: “I’m not going to get drunk, either.”

“Don’t smile like that!” she murmured.

“I’ve got a couple of real sick ones over in the Neck. I’m going back to them as soon as I get rid of these belly-achers.”

“You’re not fit to see these people!” she urged.

“Nonsense! They’re full of their own symptoms. They won’t notice anything.”

“Please let me send them away, Doctor.”

“No! It mustn’t get around that the doctor is sick. . . . Give me ten minutes by myself and I’ll be all right.” She went out.

Chapter 13

CLARE wrote to Lance suggesting that he had better not come down for the following week-end. She was not very well, she said. On the succeeding Saturday, Lance in an emergency was obliged to play a part in the current Vagabond show. When he did finally come on the bus one Saturday in October, she sent Tom over to King's Green to fetch him to Genizir.

Lance found Clare more herself than ever. She was in what she called one of her gales. She wouldn't let Lance touch her. The corners of her mouth were provokingly turned down and her mocking laughter beat around his ears. It flicked his vanity and charmed him afresh.

All through supper Clare was putting it over Lance, to Tom's huge delight. In order to get back at her, Lance said good-humoredly to Tom: "Going out tonight?"

"Sure," said Tom.

"Does your route by chance take you through the village?"

"It does."

"Drop me off there, will you? I want to chew the fat with Dave. Good old Dave! I've missed seeing him!"

A change came over Clare's face. "How will you get home?" she asked indifferently.

"Oh, Dave will drive me over."

"You don't know what his engagements may be."

"Well, I'll phone him," said Lance.

"It's useless. I happen to know that Dave has a couple of very sick patients in the Neck."

"Who's sick over there?" put in Tom.

"The Southams."

"But they're on the mend," said Tom. "Heard it this afternoon."

Clare said calmly: "Sid Southam has had a relapse. I was just talking to Dave. He's got to drive down there as soon as he's through with his office

patients.”

“That’s bad!” said the good-natured Tom.

The subject was dropped. When they had left the table, Tom followed Clare into the kitchen. “Is it true about Sid Southam,” he asked, “or were you just talking?”

“I was just talking,” said Clare coolly. “I have no intention of being left alone here all evening.”

Tom laughed and patted her shoulder. “That’s the girl, Sis!”

When Tom had left the house Clare kissed Lance sweetly and unexpectedly as he sat. “Oh, you charming devil!” he groaned, jumping up. “How you love to plague me!”

“Your conceit is insufferable!” said Clare. She evaded his arms. “How much of the play have you written?”

“First act and a bit of the second.”

“Did you bring it?” Lance nodded. “Go and get it,” she commanded. “You can read it to me in the drawing-room.”

“Good God, Clare, not now!” he protested. “After three weeks how could I sit up straight and read you a play?”

“It must be now or never,” she said. “You know how you always are on Sunday.”

“Have a heart!” he begged. “I’m starving!”

She kept a chair between them. “Go and get it,” she said, smiling.

Lance ran upstairs for his script. She made him sit under a lamp, and she sat in another chair apart from him. During the reading Lance was another man, not the lover. Clare, sitting very still, glanced at him only occasionally, swiftly turning her eyes away. There were two Clares; a woman who was intensely happy and a critic who listened.

When he had finished he put down the script without looking at her, and lit a cigarette, trying to hide his anxiety. Clare bit her lip; her happiness was obscured. She was searching for words. “It’s fine!” she said, and Lance’s eyes leaped to hers, overjoyed. “In parts,” she doggedly added, asking forgiveness with her eyes.

Lance was intolerably wounded. “In parts?” he said. “What do you mean?”

“The lovers are all right,” she went on quickly. “You can feel them and hear them, and that’s the important thing. But the younger sister’s no good.”

“No good!” echoed Lance furiously. “You can’t see what I’m going to do with her!”

Clare was near tears, but she stuck to her point. "I don't care what you're going to do with her. Instead of being young and gay and lightheaded, as you intended, she is merely acting kittenish. Any woman could see through her."

Lance snatched up the script and flung it down. "God damn it! What are you trying to do, kid me?" he cried.

"You know better than that," murmured Clare, holding her head down; "I take the play seriously."

"Kittenish!" stormed Lance. "You destroy my whole work with a word! That's not criticism! That's just trying to be smart!"

Taking the script, he strode out of the room and went upstairs. Clare's eyes followed him piteously. She was all on edge to jump up and fling her arms around him, but she did not. She sat still, having it out with herself. Hearing him stamping around overhead, she raised her eyes to the ceiling. Was he packing his bag? She went to the door, and came back to her chair again.

After a long time Lance came slowly down the stairs. Clare snatched up a book and made believe to be reading. He came into the room with a hangdog air and stopped, looking at her. She would not raise her head. He dropped to his knees beside her chair, and put his arms around her. "Honey, I'm sorry!" he mumbled.

Then Clare's arms went around him like lightning. The book fell to the floor. She drew his head hard against her breast, and for a long time they clung to each other without speaking. "It was so hard!" murmured Clare at last. "But I had to do it! For the sake of the future, I mean. Or I never could have been of any help to you!"

"I can do nothing without you," said Lance. "You keep me at it. I write for you. . . . I was just a plain fool. It was so damned hard to take criticism from you!"

"Why from me?" she asked, surprised.

"Because you're my girl," he said. "And every man wants to shine in the eyes of his girl. He thinks: My God! if my girl doesn't admire me, who will?"

"Silly!" murmured Clare. "Love is a better standby than admiration."

"Sure," agreed Lance. "I told you I was a fool. You were perfectly right about the younger sister. I knew it all the time. That was what burned me up; that you *were* right, I mean. I'll rewrite all that part." He raised his head. "What else did you want to tell me about it? We had just started to talk when I blew up."

Clare looked into his eyes, smiling. “Nothing more tonight. You don’t know what a frightful effort it takes for a woman to tell the truth to the man she loves. I’m exhausted by it.”

“I’m so sorry, Clare!”

“Silly, I’m joking now. We have made a stage tonight. After this, I won’t be afraid to tell you the truth. The rest about the play will keep. I’ve told you the worst. Love me now!”

“I can do that!” he said. With one arm behind her back and the other under her knees, he planted a foot on the floor, and rose up, bearing her easily.

“How strong you are!” she murmured.

“It’s lucky I’ve got something,” grinned Lance. He carried her to the sofa and sat down, nursing her like a child.

Presently Clare slipped out of his lap. “Lance, I’ve got a confession to make,” she murmured, hiding her face on his shoulder.

“Shoot!” he said, not in the least disturbed.

“I was lying tonight, when I kept you from going over to see Dave.”

Lance chuckled. “I hadn’t the slightest intention of going out tonight.”

She played with a button on his coat. “There’s more, Lance. I didn’t mean to tell you, but I see that it’s going to be necessary. Something has happened since I saw you.”

He began to be concerned and, holding her away so that he could see into her face, he asked: “What was that, honey?”

She clipped him hard, obstinately holding her head down. The words came with a rush. “Lance, I started to have a baby, and Dave stopped it.”

He jerked back in astonishment. “Good God, Clare, what are you saying? . . . *When?*”

“I knew it when you were here last.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I started to tell you, but you made it impossible for me to finish.”

“*Me*. What do you mean? How, impossible?”

“You said,” whispered Clare, “you said . . . that the thought of marriage made you sweat in your palms.”

“Oh, God!” murmured Lance in horror. “What must you have thought of me! . . . I would have felt differently if I had known! . . . I had a right to know!”

“No!” said Clare. “It was right for you to tell me the truth, because I would have found out anyway when it was too late, and that would have killed me, I think.”

Lance gathered her close. “Honey, honey, honey,” he murmured. “A baby! You and I started a third life in our selfish love! How strange!”

Clare put a hand over his mouth. “Don’t talk about it that way. Makes it hurt more! . . . It was nothing yet. Only a bit of protoplasm, Dave said.”

Lance was still confused. “So you went to Dave,” he murmured. “By God! Dave’s a good friend! I’m so thankful you had Dave to go to instead of a stranger. . . . But I should have been the one to tell him.” He was silent, thinking it over. “Dave is the ideal doctor,” he went on; “so dry and matter-of-fact. A woman could easily confide in him. All doctors ought to be undersexed men like Dave.”

Clare stirred uneasily in his arms. “How do you know he is?” she said. “Dave has such control, I don’t see how anybody could know what he’s like underneath.”

“Oh, Dave is a man,” said Lance carelessly, “but it stands to reason he’s undersexed. In a strongly sexed man it can’t be hidden.” He laughed. “It’s lucky I didn’t set out to be a doctor.”

Clare withdrew herself. “Do you mean to say that any woman would excite you?”

“I wouldn’t want to,” said Lance, grinning, “but I might forget myself. A wise man avoids temptation.”

“I don’t like that,” said Clare.

“Honey, you must face the facts of sex.”

“I thought I had,” she murmured in a voice so small he didn’t hear it.

“It is impossible for a vigorous man to be a Galahad,” said Lance. “Anyhow, the bodily act of love isn’t important. It’s what goes on in the consciousness.”

“I can’t separate the two,” murmured Clare.

“We’ve got to be more careful,” said Lance, brooding over her.

“That’s all right,” said Clare. “There’s no further danger. Dave told me things.”

Lance sat up, frowning. “Well, damn Dave anyhow,” he said; “he ought to have told them to me, not to you.”

“What difference does it make?” said Clare. “If you and I were married I would naturally go to Dave for advice.”

“I don’t like it,” muttered Lance. “If Dave was a married man himself, it would be all right.”

After a little Lance grumbled: “How often does Dave come over here?”

“He has not been since I got better,” answered Clare, “and he won’t come any more unless I send for him.”

“Why the heck won’t he come any more?”

“Because,” said Clare, carefully choosing her words, “he feels sorry for me, and it softens him. And you know how Dave hates anything that turns him soft.”

Lance was silent again. Conflicting feelings chased across his face. “Oh, God! what a low hound he must think me,” he murmured finally.

“Not at all,” said Clare. “I told him that you knew nothing.”

“But,” said Lance, “you *would* have told me if I hadn’t acted like such a child. If it had been a man like Dave you would have told him.”

“Oh, that’s so far-fetched!” said Clare impatiently. “Dave can’t blame you for something you didn’t know about. . . . And he doesn’t blame you.”

“Just the same, I’ll feel pretty funny the first time I am with him,” said Lance. “Dave knows everything, and now I know that he knows. What the hell am I to say to him?”

“That’s just what I was coming to,” said Clare. “I don’t think you ought to go there any more.”

Lance’s face fell. “But Dave’s my friend! He likes me. I’ll be able to square myself with him.”

“I couldn’t have you two talking this over together,” said Clare quickly. “I couldn’t bear that.”

“Women are queer!” murmured Lance.

“Believe me, it has become too difficult all around,” said Clare. “Please be guided by me. I want you to promise me you won’t see Dave any more.”

“Not any more?” said Lance. He considered it. “There’s one thing that has to be tended to, Dave’s bill. I’ll take care of that, of course.”

Clare’s eyes widened. “For God’s sake, don’t suggest such a thing, or Dave would go crazy! I told you he helped me because he was sorry for me.”

“I don’t like it,” grumbled Lance.

After a silence, he said: “I’ll promise never to see him again if you’ll do the same. He knows too much about us now. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“I can’t help accidental meetings around the county,” said Clare.

“I know that. But promise not to ask him here any more.”

“I promise not to ask him here again except in case of sickness.”

“That’s a deal,” said Lance. “Kiss on it!”

Clare surrendered with a sigh of relief.

Chapter 14

AGGIE DARNALL, cleaning up after dinner, glanced at the kitchen clock from time to time. Finally she hung her apron over a chair and trotted on her heels across the grass to Utie Chynne's kitchen door. "What's the time, Utie?" she asked. "Ain't sure my clock's just right."

"Five to two, Aggie; I got it off the radio."

The two proceeded into Utie's living-room where Miss Aggie perched herself gingerly on the edge of a Turkish rocker facing the radio. Utie took an American rocker near by, and rocked vigorously. Not finding themselves interested in the swing music of the moment, they fell to talking while waiting for the program to change.

"I hear Judge Lomax is down again," said Miss Aggie with a certain satisfaction. "They say it's for the last time now."

"I reckon," said Miss Utie with affected indifference.

"So it seems your doctor ain't such a miracle worker as at first reported."

"I'm not responsible for Doct' Tascott," said Miss Utie. "He don't have to worry. He's well established now."

"Some might say 'twas through misrep'sentation," said Miss Aggie.

"Some people would say anything," said Miss Utie. "I always said he was a good doctor. I say so still."

The end of Miss Aggie's nose wiggled. "You would, Utie!"

A chime sounded through the radio followed by a strain of music. Miss Utie stopped rocking. "He's coming now, Aggie. Listen!" Through the instrument issued a fresh, deep, male voice saying:

"Ladies and Gentlemen: Every Wednesday afternoon at two o'clock Maryland Stores Incorporated have the privilege of presenting the condensed version of a famous play for your entertainment. If you are pleased, go to the Maryland Store in your own community and say so. And at the same time take the opportunity to purchase more and better food for the same money! Today we bring you 'The School for Scandal.' . . ."

There was a disquieting quality in the young voice that caused Miss Aggie to say with agitated nose: "I see what you mean about him, Utie. He's got a voice that would beguile a woman."

"Beguile!" said Miss Utie scornfully. "'Twas she beguiled him! Poor young man! She's six years older!"

"Not so much, Utie."

"Well, four years, anyhow. What chance had he?"

The performance began, and Miss Utie said: "Now listen good, Aggie."

"What for?" said Miss Aggie. "Such hifalutin talk don't interest me."

"There's more in it than you hear," said Miss Utie darkly. "Verna Eltonhead says when he writes out the speeches, he puts in secret messages for Clare over at Geneezay."

"How are we going to know what's for her?"

"Listen," said Miss Utie. "Maybe we'll get a clue."

They listened to the end without reward. "I'm glad that's over," said Miss Aggie. "All foolishness. We got scan'al enough right here in Travis County 'thout that old stuff!"

"Ssh!" cautioned Miss Utie. "He's goin' speak again now." The disturbing young voice issued from the instrument:

"So, ladies and gentlemen, ends 'The School for Scandal' by the immortal Richard Brinsley Sheridan. We may congratulate ourselves that we live in happier times. In Sheridan's day there were no Maryland Stores where the housewives of England were assured of getting more and better food for the same money. Patronize your own Maryland Store! Next Wednesday afternoon at two o'clock we will bring you that immortal drama, 'The Old Homestead,' by Denman Thompson. Don't forget, Wednesday afternoon at two. This is Lawrence Corder bidding you good-afternoon."

Miss Utie turned down the volume button so that subsequent programs would not interfere with their talk. She said: "Mark, Aggie: this week he said: 'And so, Ladies and Gentlemen, ends "The School for Scandal."' Last week he said: 'And so the curtain falls.' Maybe that's part of the code. Maybe he's telling her: 'I'll be down on the bus, Saturday.'"

"Sho!" said Miss Aggie, "if it's secret code, be sure it mean worse than that, Utie."

"I'll find out," said Miss Utie with a resolute nod. "Verna Eltonhead, she's listening, too. We'll talk it over."

"Utie, how much does he get for that, do you reckon?" asked Miss Aggie with a jerk of her head towards the instrument.

“Don’t know,” said Miss Utie. “Can’t be much; just half an hour once a week.”

“Well, he has to get it up beforehand,” said Miss Aggie. “Rehearsals and all.”

“I hope it’s enough to support a wife,” said Miss Utie. “It will soon be up to him.”

“Have you heard anything?” asked Miss Aggie with eager nose.

“I have indeed,” said Miss Utie. “Verna couldn’t rest ’til she found out who Tom Eltonhead is calling on. Bus-driver said he ain’t carried Tom up to town for five weeks now. That means something. Every two, three nights Tom drives up the state road and nobody knows where he goes. Verna asked here and asked there. Joe Taggart said Tom drove on past his house; Nat Bourne said Tom passed on by him. Then you’re in Ann Aranel County. It came out at last through the man who drives the mail truck. Tom Eltonhead is calling on Livia Teasdale up Ann Aranel County, three, four times a week.”

“Livia Teasdale?” queried Miss Aggie.

“You know who she is,” said Miss Utie, “Livia Tandy that was. Her mother was a Foster from upper part of the county. She is related to the Bournes, Kings, Hutchins, all those families.”

“Sure,” said Miss Aggie, “I mind a Jenny Foster that married out of the county.”

“That’s Livia’s mother,” said Miss Utie. “Her father was Claude Tandy who made some money contracting for a piece of the state road and ran off with a city woman. I don’t know if he’s still alive.”

“Who was Teasdale?” asked Miss Aggie.

“A foreigner from Connecticut. He come down to Ann Aranel twenty year ago to buy up timber for railway ties, and married Livia Tandy. Years later when old Tandy run off, Teasdale turned in and worked the Tandy farm. He died two years ago, pneumonia.”

“Ever seen this Livia Teasdale, Utie?”

“Sure, I met her at the tou’nement, St. James’ Church.”

“What like woman?”

“One of these pale, soft-speaking women, with hair slicked down,” said Miss Utie. “Looks as if she ate soap. Too meek by half, Aggie. I distrusted her at sight.”

“Sho, Utie! How old a woman?”

“About my age, Aggie. Thirty-eight.” Miss Aggie wiggled her nose provokingly, but let the figure pass. “Has she anything, Utie?”

“Frank Teasdale, he didn’t leave her anything. Of course, she’ll have the Tandy farm some day. Good tobacco farm. But her mother may live twenty year. The Fosters are long-lived people.”

“Any children?”

“No. She’s the type of woman that don’t have children. Too luxurious.”

“Do you think Tom Eltonhead mean anything?”

“Certainly I do. Tom ain’t drivin’ up to Ann Aranel three, four times a week without something in it.”

“She don’t sound like a woman would attract Tom.”

“You never can tell about these pale women with downcast eyes, Aggie. I reckon she’s got what Tom wants. And we all know what *that* is.” They wagged their heads.

“Tom Eltonhead’s no great catch, anyhow,” said Miss Aggie.

“With that big house?” said Miss Utie. “He would be to her.”

“If Tom Eltonhead set up another woman at Geneezay I think Verna Eltonhead would choke on her own bile, Utie.”

“Reckon she would, Aggie. And who cares? At any rate we’d get the girl out of the county. That’d be something.”

“Sho, Utie! That girl give you something to talk about.”

“Well, I ain’t noticed you were averse to listenin’, Aggie.”

Chapter 15

ON a warm, sunny Saturday in November, Tom Eltonhead, as he was leaving the house after dinner, said to Clare: "Reckon Lance is comin' down on the bus this even as usual?"

"Yes," said Clare.

"Good!" said Tom. "You go fetch him. I got to dress before dinner. Going out after."

"All right," said Clare.

Tom lingered at the top of the steps in visible embarrassment, and Clare waited in some anxiety for what might be coming next. Tom, with the grin that made him look so boyish and unreliable, went on: "I'm sick of playing gooseberry week-ends. I'm going to ask a friend mine down for Sunday, to make it a foursome."

This was the sword which hung by a hair over Clare's head, and she had to wait a second before she could answer with a smile: "Who is it?"

"Somebody I want you to know, Sis. Livia Teasdale, of Ann Aranel County. I'll fetch her down Sunday morning, and take her back in the even."

"All right," said Clare. "I'll kill chickens and boil a ham."

"Fine!" said Tom. He ran down the steps, leaving Clare sitting on the glider staring ahead of her with a blank face. The purport of Tom's words was unmistakable. The sword was about to fall.

The daily mail was left in the box at midday, and Tom, climbing in the car, drove to the outer gate to fetch it. He sent Plug to the house with the letters while he went back to oversee the hauling and stacking of the winter's fodder. There was a letter from Lance which Clare tore open with a fresh anxiety. It was not like Lance to write if he were coming the same day.

"MY DEAREST:

"I finished the play in a drive on Wednesday, and what do you think? I suppose you read in the paper that Ronald Eversley has been playing in Baltimore all week in 'The Saving Grace,' his last

season's Broadway success. It's a lousy play, by the way. Saw it Monday. Well, I managed to get an interview with Eversley after the show Wednesday. A grand guy. So darn friendly. I told him a little about the play and he got interested right away; said he'd read it before he left Baltimore. I told him the first draft was in such a state nobody could read it but myself, and there wouldn't be time to have it typed before he left. He then of his own accord suggested that I could read it to him at his hotel on Thursday night, if I was willing to sit up that late. Was I willing!

"So I went to the Belvedere last night and we had a couple of drinks in his suite and I read the play to him. And by God! I read it well, darling, if I do say it myself. (Maybe it was the drinks!) And it went over! This actor who must have to read hundreds of plays was really impressed. He didn't say much—a man in his position couldn't—but I could see by his eyes that he liked it a lot. Oh, boy! did I feel triumphant! And that's not all. Mr. Eversley has actually suggested that I come up to New York with him on Sunday as his guest and read it to his manager. Am I walking on air today! On the same day that I wrote 'Curtain' to the last act, I began to get action! I believe this is a record!

"The only fly in my amber is that I can't come down to Genizir this week-end. Lark, I am horribly disappointed. . . ."

For a long time Clare sat staring at Lance's scrawling lines without reading them. The private endearments with which he closed his letter comforted her not at all. Nor could she as yet feel glad about the play. There was only room in her consciousness for one thought: He isn't coming!

She didn't see Tom again until he rushed in to bathe and dress before supper. "Why haven't you gone for Lance?" he asked. "You'll be late."

"He isn't coming."

Tom stared. "What!"

"He wrote to say he had to go to New York."

"Oh, damn!" said Tom. "And I'm going to be away tonight. It's too late now to change."

"That's all right," said Clare quickly. "I don't mind staying alone. Go get your bath."

Tom wouldn't drop it. "I'll get Aunt Maria to stay with you. You can give her a shake-down in the kitchen."

“No,” said Clare. “The negroes are having a dance at Herman’s tonight. Aunt Maria’s been looking forward to it for a week.”

“Isn’t there somebody else you can get in to stay with you?” he asked.

“I don’t want anybody.”

Tom, like a man with a bad conscience, lost his temper. “Damn it, Clare, why don’t you make friends in the county? You can’t sit here moping by yourself day after day. You’re young. Why don’t you go out and mix with people?”

She did not remind him that it was owing to his misdeeds that the county had received her coldly. She merely repeated: “I don’t in the least mind staying here alone. I have plenty to read.” Tom ran upstairs, grumbling under his breath.

After supper, when he had driven away, Clare dutifully got her book and sat under a lamp in the drawing-room. She couldn’t fix her mind on it. She had too much to think about and all of it hopeless stuff. As her spirits went down she became the easier prey to imaginary terrors. The house was so big, so empty and so still! The windows were closed now, and there were no small sounds from out-of-doors to reassure her. She tried closing the door into the hall, but that was worse, because if anything did stir out there she wanted to know it. She opened the door again.

The old pieces of furniture would creak suddenly, giving her a horrible start; a mouse scratched behind the wall and her skin turned cold. In spite of reason she became convinced that something was moving on the back porch. She forced herself, trembling, to go and look. Nothing was there, of course, but when she returned to the parlor, she was sure she heard the sounds again. Her courage broke. In sheer panic she ran out of the front door and down the porch steps.

Under the trees she stopped shaking. Out-of-doors there was nothing to be afraid of. It was the close vault of a house that appalled her. The chilly night air was good in her nostrils. Far across the river a dog barked and behind the house a cow lowed in the Genizir stables. She thought of the Colonel in his stall; he had not been out all day. It was like an inspiration: I’ll go for a ride! She found the courage to re-enter the house and run upstairs to put on breeches and boots.

When she entered the stable, the Colonel whickered and she was glad she had come. She saddled and bridled him, and rode away filling her lungs with the night air. The Colonel danced along the dirt road on his toes, delighted to get exercise. Clare’s heart was like a lump of lead in her breast,

but she was comforted by the dark fields and the starry sky. Pain did not cut her off from the calm night; she belonged.

Next door to Herman's store stood an old shed, his former place of business, that he now rented occasionally to the negroes for their gatherings. They called it their "hall." When Clare rode up, the door was open for air, and a rollicking sound of banjoes, guitars, drums and human shouts was billowing out. Pulling up, she sat her horse and looked through the door. The young negroes were dancing together as only negroes can dance, with snapping fingers and intricate steps, every black face grinning and a little drunken. Clare watched them enviously. Everybody can be drunk and gay but me!

Aunt Maria, long past the dancing age, had spread herself on two chairs against the wall, and was happily clapping her hands and slapping the floor with an incredible foot in a broken shoe. Plug, dancing by, saw Clare through the door, and told his mother, whereupon Aunt Maria came waddling out, full of solicitude.

"Honey-lamb, whaffor you ride out at night?"

"I was lonely," said Clare.

"Sho! I go back with you now!"

"No," said Clare. "Have your fun out first. I'm going for a long ride. When the party's over you can come up and sleep in the kitchen. I'll make a bed for you. And if I can't sleep I'll come down and make you talk to me."

Aunt Maria chuckled. "Okay, honey, I be there."

Clare's eyes searched among the dancers as they swung past the door. "Where's Hylas?" she asked. Hylas was another of Aunt Maria's younger sons, a favorite of Clare's because he reminded her of a black-skinned Lance.

"Hylas' girl, Nettie, she bad," said Maria. "Her baby come bum first: can't get it out."

"I didn't know Hylas was married," said Clare.

"Ain't exactly married," said Aunt Maria, "but Hylas 'low it his baby, and doan want leave her. Reckon she gwine die. That's what she pay for last winter's dance."

"Has she got the doctor?" asked Clare.

"Doctor can't do her no good, honey. It's nature gone wrong!"

"Certainly the doctor can do her good," said Clare, "and I'm going to telephone for him. Who is the girl?"

“It’s Nettie Tawney, honey. Her folks live on Mist’ Giddy Coppage’s place. Doct’ can drive there in his car.”

Clare dismounted in front of the store next door, and, tying the Colonel to a porch post, went in. A sudden embarrassed silence fell on the group of white men sitting around on boxes and counter. None knew which way to look. “Good evening, everybody,” said Clare. “Mr. Herman, may I use the telephone? I want to send for the doctor.”

“Sure, Miss, with pleasure,” answered the fat storekeeper, polishing the transmitter with his sleeve. Clare, as she took down the receiver, glanced anxiously at her watch. Nearly eight-thirty. However, Dave was sometimes kept in by his office calls.

Dave had a patient in the consulting-room when the phone rang. The doctor’s curt manner of speaking over the telephone was a matter of talk up and down the county. The curt voice changed in spite of him when he heard who it was calling him. He put a hand over his mouth to hide his grin of pleasure from the patient.

“Tascott, are you very busy tonight?”

“Always busy, but I could take a call.”

“There’s a negro girl over here in labor. I think it’s what they call a breech presentation. Anyhow, she’s in a desperate way, and I’m sure the negro midwives don’t know what to do. Could you come over? This case must be at my charge.”

“The heck with the charge!” said Dave. “Sure, I’ll come. Who and where is she?”

“Her name is Nettie Tawney and her folks live on Mr. Giddy Coppage’s place next to us. I’ll have somebody at the gate of the Coppage place to guide you to the right cabin.”

“Be there in quarter of an hour,” said Dave.

When he drove up to the negro cabin, his headlights revealed Clare waiting outside. Her horse was tied to a tree. Inside the cabin, the laboring girl’s screams had subsided to an inhuman moaning. Coming to Dave, Clare murmured: “It’s too dreadful! There is nothing I could do without instruction. Nobody here knows what to do.”

She followed Dave into the cabin. Several negro women were standing helplessly around the bed. A little further away a stalwart young black man crouched on a stool, with his head pressed between his hands. After a brief examination of the patient, Dave said to Clare: “Nothing you can do here.

Go outside.” Clare obeyed meekly. Dave took the young negro by the arm and led him out. “There’s a flask in the cowl of my car,” he said to Clare. “Give him a drink.”

Dave set the cabin door wide open, and brought his car up close outside with the headlights turned on. The women helped him move the bed into the middle of the room where the glaring light beat upon it. He kept them moving briskly. There was a stove in the room with water heating. As he bent over the patient, the thought flitted across his mind: I hope Clare doesn’t see what I’ve got to do. Then he forgot her.

It took him a long time. He finally washed his hands, helped move the bed back, and went outside to turn off the headlights. When his work was done, he realized that he was in a dangerously wrought-up state. Clare was sitting on a stump near by, a strangely detached little figure in front of the negro cabin. The sight of her cut all the ground from under his feet. Trying to carry it off lightly, he said:

“Nasty job. I had to destroy the baby. The girl’s all right.”

“All that agony,” murmured Clare, “and nothing to show for it!”

Her head was lowered and Dave guessed that tears were falling. He drew a long breath to steady himself. “She’s all right,” he repeated. “She can have a dozen more babies.”

Clare laughed—not her own laugh; it sounded falsely. “I guess it was not her I was feeling sorry for . . . but myself.”

Under the strain, Dave’s voice became harsh. “You can have a dozen too, if you want them.”

“Fat chance!” said Clare.

Dave kept a tight hold on himself. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Anything new?”

“Nothing new,” said Clare. She tittered again. “I guess it’s just the green sickness of a maiden. . . . But I’m not a maiden, am I?”

Dave’s voice began to shake. “Clare, for God’s sake, don’t be flip!”

“Isn’t flip the best thing to be?”

“Not for you, Clare!”

“I guess you rate me too high, Tascott.”

Dave took her hand—he couldn’t help himself. He said very low: “I sound like a fool, Clare. I’m so dumb! I’d do anything in the world . . . anything, if I could make things easier for you!”

“I know it,” she said, quietly freeing her hand.

The involuntary action hurt him to the quick. "I don't expect anything for it, either," he muttered.

"Oh, Dave, I'm sorry!" she whispered, offering him her hand, but he wouldn't take it.

"That's all right," he said gruffly.

"I know what you were trying to say," she went on. "I know you hate it when you are obliged to speak of your feelings. . . . Dave, I came out tonight hoping I'd run into you. But . . . it's impossible to talk. Let's skip it."

After a silence he said: "All right, I'll take you home now. I'll drive on ahead slowly and you follow. Then I won't scare your horse with my lights."

He brought his car to a stop in the yard at Genizir, and Clare dismounted alongside. He waited, full of a mighty longing for her to ask him in; meanwhile the reasonable part of him was gibing: Don't you know when you've had enough? Slipping an arm through her bridle, Clare came and leaned her arms on the car door, and he was hard put to it not to take her face between his hands. She doesn't know what she's doing to me, he told himself.

"I can never thank you enough for coming so quickly," she said.

"The heck with it!" muttered Dave. (Why doesn't she ask me in?) "Where's Lance tonight?" he asked suddenly.

"Not coming this week-end," said Clare.

So that's her trouble tonight! he thought bitterly. That's why she was hoping she'd run into me. "Are you alone here?" he asked.

"No. Aunt Maria's sleeping in the kitchen."

Clare lingered at the car door. There was something in her asking glance that he did not comprehend. A world of unhappiness he could see, but it was not the same as the other time. This was less tragic than piteous. What does she want? he asked himself, searching her eyes. It's not what I want. "What is it, Clare?" he asked.

"Are you unhappy?" she asked.

"Sure!" he said, surprised into harsh laughter. "What of it?"

"So am I," she said softly, "and we can't do anything for each other."

"So it seems," said Dave.

Clare gave close attention to smoothing her hand back and forth over the edge of the lowered glass. "Still," she said, "it's something that we're both in the same boat."

Dave, suddenly warmed, leaned towards her. "Sure!" he said eagerly. "Now I get you!" He was careful not to touch her.

She looked in his eyes. “You’re strong,” she murmured.

“Oh, God, no!” groaned Dave. “You don’t know!”

“Yes, you are,” she said. “And I’m weak. It does me good to be with you.”

“Well, that’s all right,” said Dave; “anything you think I have is all for you.”

“Thanks, Dave.” She turned to go.

“Couldn’t I come in for a little while?” he asked very low. “It’s only eleven.”

“No, please, Dave. It’s not necessary now.”

“Not necessary?” he repeated, hurt again.

“I mean, we understand each other now, don’t we?”

“Oh, sure!” said Dave, grimly taking his medicine. “Good-night, Clare.”

“Good-night, Dave.” He drove away.

Chapter 16

DINNER was ready to go on the table when they drove into the yard on Sunday. Clare, concealed behind the curtains of the side window in her bedroom, watched them getting out of the car. She felt that it was essential to get a preliminary observation of the woman before showing herself. Having no opinion of her brother's judgment she had braced herself to receive some horrible creature, and her first feeling was one of relief. Mrs. Teasdale was at least presentable.

Clare had plenty of time to make her observations, because Tom led his guest around to the front of the house to show her the famous view. Mrs. Teasdale's gestures were ecstatic. She had the kind of figure that was considered the ideal before women became athletic; pretty, sloping shoulders, a high bust, a waist still slender, big swaying hips. She was wearing a close-fitting coat that clung to every curve. She was about forty years old, and very carefully preserved. From the window Clare could not get a good view of the face under the smart little hat, but received an impression that it was smooth and demure. On the whole, an improvement on Verna, Tom's first choice.

Clare ran downstairs and received them as they came up the porch steps. Mrs. Teasdale's face was a pale, pretty oval, scarcely marked by time; masked gray eyes; small mouth blazoned with lipstick; inclined to simper, but well-enough looking on the whole. "This is Livia," said Tom with a fond smile. It had not occurred to him that it was an awkward meeting, but the woman knew; her simper betrayed it.

"*Dear Clare!*" she murmured. "I was *so* anxious to meet you!" She was going to kiss Clare, but thought better of it.

Clare's bristles rose immediately. "And I to meet you!" she brightly answered, unhappily conscious that her voice was pitched too high, and that the other woman had marked it. "Will you come upstairs to take off your things? Dinner will be ready directly."

Livia paused effectively in the hallway. "What a darling old house!" she exclaimed. "You must show me all over it after dinner."

Crude, thought Clare. “Surely!” she answered brightly.

Clare led the way upstairs while Tom went to shake up a cocktail. Livia went into a rapture over Clare’s room. “So plain and cool! What good taste you have! I hate fussy rooms myself.”

Clare thought: I bet that’s a lie! She said: “I’m afraid it’s not my taste but my poverty that is responsible. The first Mrs. Eltonhead took half the furniture, you know.” Finding herself blushing hotly, she turned her back. What a clumsy slip! she thought. She’ll think I said it on purpose!

Behind her she heard Livia murmuring: “Don’t speak of *her!*” as if the name wounded her. “Poor Tom! . . . No,” she went on, “the plain, simple effect is exactly right for the big, square room. It goes with open windows and the pure air out-of-doors!” Clare smiled unhappily. If only she wouldn’t lay it on so thick! she thought. I know I’m the kind of woman she hates. I can’t help that.

“Which is Tom’s room?” asked Livia.

“Back of this,” said Clare. “You won’t find that plain and bare. Tom keeps all his odds and ends of hardware in his room, because he says otherwise he can’t find anything. And, of course, I daren’t touch it. It’s a fearful mess!”

“Just the same, I’d like to have a peep,” said Livia, simpering. “Dear fellow!” Clare thought: I know it’s all settled. You don’t have to rub it in.

Livia began to apply lipstick in front of the mirror. In Clare’s opinion she already had too much on. “I, too, have been unhappy,” she murmured sentimentally.

Clare became exquisitely uncomfortable. The hell with your confidences! she thought. I’m not asking for them! Livia was waiting for her to say something and she hurriedly asked: “Were you divorced?”

A sad shake of the head answered her. “No. I’m too old-fashioned. I couldn’t bear to expose my hurts to the public gaze. It sounds like a terrible thing to say, but I was released by death. He was never a real husband to me.”

Clare thought: What am I supposed to say to that? “In what way?” she asked flatly.

“Ah, my dear,” said Livia, “the tragic secrets of the marriage bed must never be whispered.” Clare thought: Well, you brought it up. “And certainly not to a dear, fresh, unspoiled girl like you!” Livia added.

Clare said nothing. She thought: Well, if what I hear is correct, you’ll find Tom willing and able in bed! . . . And then with horror: God help me, if

this woman stays I'll turn into a perfect bitch!

When they entered the dining-room Livia broke into fresh raptures. "Oh, the darling old room! All wainscoted! And the table! How on earth did you ever get such a finish on it, Clare?"

Tom put in: "A couple of hundred years of spilled grease did it."

Livia presently observed that her place had been set facing the front windows. Coolly gathering up silver and mats, she carried them around the table. "Darling, you don't mind, do you?" she said to Clare. "The light hurts my eyes."

Clare thought: And shows up the fine wrinkles! "Certainly not!" she said. "Please feel as if you were at home!"

Tom made Clare ashamed to look at him, he was so completely fatuous. She thought: And telling himself all the time that this is a pure love which will make a better man of him! Livia affected a pretty confusion under Tom's ardent glances, and would smile at Clare in a deprecatory manner, as if to ask her sympathy. These men! Livia seemed to say, they don't understand a woman's finer feelings! The comedy turned Clare as grim as stone inside. It was hard not to look stony.

"She's a caution!" said Tom, looking at Livia and addressing Clare. "Livvy, tell Sis what you said to the man who tried to pick you up on the bus."

"Oh, that was nothing at all," said Livia, moving the pretty shoulders. "Every woman who is not exactly a fright has to learn how to protect herself. Isn't it so, Clare?"

"I suppose so," said Clare; "I never thought."

"Livvy's the one knows how to deflate a man!" cried Tom. "I'll nev' forget the first time I . . ." Livia stopped him with a swift look which was not pretty at all. "Go ahead, tell Sis what you said to the man," he mumbled.

"Up in town," Livia began brightly, "I was sitting in the bus waiting for it to start, when this creature got in. He was a handsome, gentlemanly-looking man, like a stock-broker, and he ought to have known better, but I knew immediately by the way his eyes fastened on me that I was going to have trouble with him. I hastily dropped my packages in the seat alongside, but the creature just came up and stood there, and as there was no other vacant seat I had to move my packages. He sat down and I looked steadily out of the window, but I could *feel* him staring at me . . ."

The story went on for a long time, while the teller pecked at her food with a fork, gracefully ducked and turned her little head to meet the fork on its way up, nibbled delicately, dabbed her napkin to the carmined lips, and

crumbled a bit of bread with little finger raised. Clare, smiling until her face hurt, thought: If this goes on much longer I'll be sick at my stomach. Finally the end of the story came in sight.

“When the bus stopped at St. James’,” said Livia, “I gathered up my packages, and I said: ‘Pardon me, please. This is where I get out.’ He moved out of the way and, as I stood up, whispered in my ear: ‘I’m getting out here, too.’ I turned and gave him one look, and I said, loud enough for everybody to hear: ‘I don’t know who you are, and I don’t care. I’m near home now, and let me warn you, sir, that the men of Southern Maryland know how to protect ladies from annoyance.’ My dear, he sat down without another word!” Livia took a sip of water.

Tom roared with laughter. “Boy! that was sticking a pin in his tire! Good for you, Livvy!”

Livia repeated proudly: “I said: ‘The men of Southern Maryland know how to protect ladies from annoyance!’ And he sat down without a word!” Clare laughed politely. My God! she thought; and an Eltonhead can fall for that!

After lunch she arranged so that it fell to Tom to show Livia around the house. There was already a gleam of anticipatory possession in Livia’s eye. It had been Clare’s mother’s house; Verna Eltonhead had profaned it since, but Clare had not been a witness to that regime. The task of showing this common woman around her mother’s house, *her* house on which she had spent so much thought and pains, was decidedly more than Clare could face. While the two were about it, she ran back to the stable and relieved her feelings by giving the Colonel a vigorous grooming.

Supper brought her another long-drawn-out ordeal. Immediately afterwards Livia prepared to leave. She invited Clare to accompany her and Tom, but in such a manner that it was impossible to accept. Not that Clare wanted to accept! So she was faced with another long evening alone. Tonight she was too angry to feel sorry for herself. She stormed through the rooms, checking every object, picking up everything of her own and carrying it into her own room until she should get time to pack it.

She could not think of going to bed until she had talked to Tom. Her chief care was to keep her temper. If she lost her temper it would justify Tom in his own eyes for anything he might do. She *must not* lose her temper. A pauper couldn’t afford it. In order to build up reserves of good humor, she kept up the kitchen fire, and had cocoa and sandwiches ready for him when he came in at midnight. Tom was touched.

“Sis, you shouldn’t have done this! Why didn’t you keep Aunt Maria with you?”

“I didn’t have the heart,” said Clare. “Sunday night at their church means everything to them.”

“I reckon,” said Tom; “sin on Sat’day, repent Sunday.” He laughed loudly.

“Well, how’d you like her?” he cried with jovial self-consciousness.

“She’s all right,” said Clare. Further than that she could not bring herself. Tom was hardly satisfied.

“Didn’t you *like* her?”

“Of course I did,” said Clare.

Tom said solemnly: “She’s an angel!”

Clare thought: My God! She said: “Are you going to marry her?”

Tom turned ugly. “Anything against it?”

“Certainly not,” said Clare. “She seems just the right person for you!” (And that’s no lie!) “But I’ve got to know, so I can make my arrangements.”

“Yes,” said Tom. “I calc’late to marry her.”

“When, Tom?”

“She ain’t set a date yet. Soon. Why should we wait?”

“Why should you?”

He looked troubled. “What you mean, make arrangements? Why can’t we go on as we are, the three of us?”

“That wouldn’t be fair either to her or to me,” said Clare. “As your wife this will be her house. What would I do with myself?”

“Well, what you aiming to do?” grumbled Tom.

Clare said: “Find a job in town.”

“You have no training.”

“I’ll get training.”

“How will you live meanwhile?” Clare was silent.

“I must tell you, wouldn’t know where to lay hands on a dollar cash money, Sis,” Tom went on with a hangdog air. “I’m already far in arrears in payments to Verna. Expecting her to send Sheriff over any day now.” Clare thought: Not a very good time to take a new wife; but she held her tongue. Tom went on: “Livvy’s got a little money of her own, but naturally I couldn’t make a touch off her to stake you, Sis.”

“Naturally,” said Clare, and was silent, waiting for him to speak further.

As he did not, she said diffidently: "There's that twenty acres on the creek which adjoins Giddy Coppage's land. I understand he's been after it for years. Couldn't you sell it to him? You wouldn't miss it. You have more land than you can take care of."

Tom shook his head lugubriously. "The land's not mine, Sis. Before I could sell any I must have signatures of all heirs. Even if the others were willing, that damned Englishman, Ann's husband, would hold it up. I already tried him. He said he wouldn't sign anything until he had chance to come over and look into things. Much as to say I had no right on the place anyhow."

Clare thought: Well, you haven't. She said: "Did you tell him it was for me?"

Tom looked uncomfortable. "No. I wanted money for another purpose then. . . . Can't be done nohow, Sis," he went on. "'Twouldn't be legal to make a cash settlement with you without satisfying the others at the same time. How could I do that?"

Clare said: "They're all married and well off; perhaps if I wrote to them they'd give their consent."

Tom looked at her, terrified and imploring. "Oh, for God's sake, don't say anything to them, Sis. 'Twould stir up a regular hornet's nest in the family. When they hear I'm married again 'twill make stink enough. As if 'twasn't ev' man's right to have a wife! So long as I'm supporting you, they can't say anything, see? Now if you make trouble for me 'twill give them an excuse to insist on a general settlement. And nobody would be the gainer. There's no sale for the place. If 'twas put up at auction would go for a song! And where would I go? Where would I go? And my innocent children?"

Clare thought: And your two wives! She said: "Have you explained the situation to Mrs. Teasdale?"

"Can't you call her Livvy?" grumbled Tom. "Sure, I told her."

Clare knew by his shifty glance that he was lying. "Say you won't make no trouble for me, Sis," he implored. "Say you'll stand by me!"

Clare was unable to compete with such a naive selfishness. It shamed her. "I'm not going to make any trouble," she said, and went slowly upstairs.

Chapter 17

ON MONDAY after dinner Tom Eltonhead again started off to see the girl friend. “Back after supper,” he called over his shoulder, as he ran down the steps. Clare thought resentfully of all that was left undone on the farm; the negro hands scarcely made a pretense of working when Tom went away. If this place was properly worked there would be plenty of money, she thought.

When the dinner dishes were washed, Aunt Maria announced that Aunt Rosa Tawney had a misery and she was going to sit with her for an hour. “Very charitable of you,” said Clare, “but the kitchen floor has to be scrubbed.”

“I do it aft’ supper, honey,” said Aunt Maria cajolingly. “I goin’ stay all night up here. Mist’ Tom he give me . . .” A sudden fright caused her eyes to roll. “Sho, I done forget Mist’ Tom tell me not t’ tell. Doan tell’m I tole you, honey!”

Clare smiled stiffly. She thought: Tom doesn’t even take the trouble to cover his lies! She said: “That’s all right, Aunt Maria. I knew he wouldn’t be home. You go along.”

Towards the end of the afternoon a young man unknown to Clare drove into the yard and, coming to the porch, handed her an envelope addressed in Tom’s hand. “Ain’t no answer,” he said with a meaning grin, and went back again. Clare, observing the grin, thought: There’s a joke on me in this! She was hardly surprised by the contents of the letter.

“DEAR SIS:

“Soon as I got up to Livvy’s house we start talking things over, and decide so long as you know all and promise to stand by us, we might as well get married right away. Livvy say I spend too much for gasoline running up and down the road. She’s going take me in hand now. Truth is, Livvy ain’t happy at home. Her and her mother don’t gee. Anyhow I always believe in following that impulse. A thing is spoiled by too much thinking about it. Once

we're married the county people got to lump it, and to hell with their talk.

"So Livvy and me make up our minds to drive up to Elkton this afternoon and get joined. Elkton's the marrying town. All the ministers hang out a sign there. Excuse this letter, Sis. I couldn't telephone you because there'd be twenty people listening in. We couldn't make all the way home tonight, so we'll stop off in Baltimore and be home Tuesday some time. I'll bring you something from Baltimore. Get Aunt Maria to stay with you tonight and fix up the front room for Livvy and me tomorrow. I'm never going to leave home no more, Sis.

"Your loving brother,
"TOM."

The reading of this letter left Clare feeling numb. She noted with a wry smile that it was written on paper such as that which Tom kept in his own room. What a childish liar! He had spent hours in composing the letter before he started out. Sooner than face Clare with the announcement of his sudden marriage, he must have spent five dollars, perhaps more, in hiring a man to carry it twenty miles. I could have used that five! Clare thought.

She wandered dumbly through the house, now no longer hers, touching the various things that she was fond of. At the sight of the old-fashioned telephone hanging on the wall in the hall, the thought of Dave Tascott stole into her mind, and she lingered in front of the instrument. It was just the time when he would be coming home for his evening office hours. She unconsciously shook her head, thinking: What could I say to him? A man and a woman can't be anything to each other unless they're everything. She went upstairs.

She sat in front of her dressing-table, and pulling open the middle drawer, spread in front of her the pieces of old jewelry that constituted her assets. It wasn't much; the youngest daughter's share of the family heirlooms; a butterfly brooch with the wings formed of rows of garnets; a gold brooch curiously wrought in early Victorian style with a big turquoise; a pair of black-enameled bracelets with a design in seed pearls; a necklace of thin gold leaves.

Garnets and turquoises aren't valuable, she thought, but the brooches are quaint and old-fashioned, and such things are all the rage. She rubbed each piece affectionately; an ache filled her at the thought of letting them go. She would then be a rootless person, one without any attachments to the past. But it would be useless to pawn them, she thought; they say a pawnbroker

will only advance a third of a thing's value. They had to be sold. I wonder where's the best place to take them. I reckon I'll be swindled wherever I take them.

Suppose I got a hundred dollars for the lot, she thought. They must be worth that. I could live at the Y.W.C.A. for ten dollars a week if I didn't eat too much. Ten weeks. Could I be trained to take a job in ten weeks? That's the question!

On Tuesday, noon came and passed without any word from the honeymooners. In the mail there was a letter from Lance.

“MY DEAREST:

“The joke is on me! It's not easy to tell you what happened, and I'll make it brief. Ronald Eversley and I came up to New York on Sunday afternoon; drawing-room in the parlor car and all the fixings. I was acutely conscious that the seat and elbows of my best suit were getting shiny. He was so damned friendly during the journey that I began to smell a rat, and a particularly dead rat, but of course on account of the play I put off facing it.

“In New York we went directly to his Park Avenue apartment; ga-ga paintings; primitive negro sculpture (damned primitive!) and bowls of colored glass balls, if you know what I mean. Slimy servants. He left me while he went away to make believe to telephone his manager. Came back to say it was impossible to arrange for a reading of the play until Monday, and of course I would spend the night in his apartment.

“In my room I found dinner clothes laid out with a velvet jacket! Ye Gods! The pants were too short in the leg and too full in the waist but I made a picture in the outfit! We dined in glittering fashion on caviar, suprême of pheasant, etc., and something from the confectioners called a *bombe St. Honoré*, washed down with lashings of champagne and weird liqueurs.

“After dinner came the show-down. I won't go into particulars; it's too fantastic. Suffice it to say that I mistook the nature of Eversley's interest in me. It was not my play, but my person which had attracted him. I blacked his eye, Clare (that is, I hope I did; didn't wait to see it turn), and threatened the same to the servants if they interfered with me. They turned green with

fright. I changed back to my own old clothes and got out of the place.

“I walked the streets a couple of hours until I cooled down. It was not Eversley, of course; such worms are plentiful everywhere, and I wasn’t born yesterday. It was the ghastly wound to my vanity, letting myself think I had put my play across an hour after it was finished and all that.

“I could not bear to return to Baltimore and confess failure. I looked up Jack Mahaffie, a graduate of the Vagabonds who has become a professional actor, and he asked me to spend the night in his place. Jack’s a good fellow—for an actor. He gave me the big laugh when I told him what had happened. Eversley is notorious for it, he said, and I ought to have known. Of course I ought to have known, and it didn’t make me feel any better to be told so. The innocent curly-head from Baltimore!

“Jack is rehearsing now. It’s a Sam Sorgen show called ‘Who Laughs Last.’ He said they were going to let out one of the juveniles, and advised me to apply for the part. So I did this morning. They looked on me as a rank amateur, but I have had acting experience. Anyhow, they liked my looks (my fatal beauty!) and I got the part. The pay is seventy-five a week, which sounds a lot, but it will take almost every cent of it for expenses, because of course I have to live at a fairly decent hotel and dress the part. Rehearsals have three weeks more to go. Then we play a couple of weeks on the road, and open in Chicago for a run. That is, if it goes over. After one rehearsal it looks to me as if the show was set to lay an egg, but you never can tell what the public will like. I have telephoned to Baltimore to have somebody else take over my radio program.

“So that’s that, darling. God knows I don’t want to be an actor. Women seem to take to it without any loss of self-respect, but it’s a foul business for a man—unless he plays character parts. They would never let me do that. It’s demoralizing to men; it seems to unsex them. However, for a brief period it will give me valuable experience, and bring me into contact with the people I want to offer my play to. Sam Sorgen, for instance; he’s scarcely literate, but he commands all kinds of money.

“I miss you hideously, Lark. I feel as if I had left a vital part of me at Genizir, and was only half functioning. You come between me and everything I look at. When I took this job I stipulated that

I must have a week-end 'to settle my affairs in Baltimore' before we start out on the road. I'll be down on the bus on Saturday, December 4th. I'll have to leave on the late bus on Sunday in order to catch the midnight to New York. We have a dress rehearsal in Albany on Monday afternoon, and open that night. Save yourself for the 4th, darling. It is a hell of a long time to wait. I dare not let myself think about it. But when it comes . . ."

Clare read and re-read this with a bleak face. All the endearments at the end of the letter could bring no warmth to her. She was forced to think of herself. . . . I can't write him anything. I've got to wait. When Lance sees the situation here and when I see how he takes it, perhaps . . . Eighteen days! . . . She worked a little sum in multiplication with her forefinger on the letter . . . Over four hundred hours! Where will I get enough self-control to see it through?

The afternoon passed without any word from up county. Suppertime came, and Clare ate alone again. It was like a reprieve. Now I won't have to stand at the door and bid them welcome, she thought. I can go to bed and leave a light burning. In the morning, after they have slept in the house, it will be a more natural meeting.

Shortly before midnight she heard them drive into the yard. She lay still in bed. They came up the stairs scuffling and giggling like a pair of country lovers. The door of the room across the hall closed after them. It was the room where Lance had always slept, where Clare had visited him at night, and in the mornings after Tom was gone, had sat on the edge of his bed and washed his sleepy smiling face with a washrag, before feeding him the thin slices of brown bread and butter that he loved. Now it was Tom's room—dissolute old Tom with his nasty-nice widow! Clare wrapped her arms around her head, terrified that she might hear something.

Tom came downstairs at ten o'clock, grinning and sheepish. He kissed Clare clumsily. He was pitiful, but she could not relent. "Hey, Sis, what's for breakfast?"

"Sausage in ten minutes," said Clare.

"Livvy's going to lie abed this morning," said Tom. "She's tuckered out . . . Say, Sis, fix her up a tray all nice, will you? and take it up. I got to run down to the barn to see what's doing."

Clare thought: So I am expected to play the part of maid to the second Mrs. Eltonhead! She sent Aunt Maria lumbering upstairs with the tray.

Chapter 18

DAVE TASCOTT, having called on the wife of Julius Southam in the first district, found himself approaching the road leading into Ed Shenton's place, and turned in on impulse. There was something generous and salty in old Mr. Ed that strongly attracted Dave. Mr. Ed made him feel at home in Travis County. Glancing at his watch, Dave thought: I could steal half an hour to talk to the old man. I could even stay to supper if I was asked.

The road led through pine woods for half a mile, and after dipping into a sandy hollow, rose on the other side and rounded the corner of Mr. Ed's barn. The house, standing on a high knoll, enjoyed a magnificent prospect up and down river and over silvery Shenton creek at the foot of the knoll with its five little arms spreading in like the fingers of a hand. It was a small house and meagerly furnished, for the Shentons were poor. Mr. Ed's make-up lacked calculation. In addition to farming, he was a clever carpenter, but he had compunctions against accepting more than a dollar and a half for a day's work.

The day had been warm for the season, and he had set up what he called his trussles under an ancient cedar tree outside the yard. He was making a pair of handles twenty feet long for oyster tongs. "Hi, Doc!" he sang out. "Did anybody tell you there was sickness here?"

"No," said Dave. "Just stopped by for a smoke with you on my way home."

"Good boy!" said Mr. Ed. "I'm ready to stop now. The light is failing, and my sight not what 'twas. We'll go sit in the barn doorway. It grow right chill when the sun go down."

They sat down on two blocks looking out through the doorway. The barn was still comfortable with the stored heat of day. Outside there was not a breath of air stirring. Cedar trees were blackly silhouetted against a pure winter sunset. Dave offered his tobacco pouch which Mr. Ed accepted. "It's mellower than the twist I raise," he said, grinning. They exchanged views on the news of the day.

After a while Mr. Ed said with a sly, sidelong grin: “You’re a new kind of doctor down thisaway, Doc, a learned man. We had good doctors before you, knowable men they were, but not to say learned. There was old Doc Carsley who died twenty year ago or more, one of the best, he was, but always a question how much learning he had.”

Mr. Ed paused to press down the coal in his pipe. “He was known up and down the county as ‘Physic,’” he resumed; “a little fellow, a mighty ranter and a tanter with bald head and big mustachios. He was too free a man for the liking of the church-goers, and there was right smart scandal one way and other. But I was always fond of Physic. There was a power of life in the little man.

“When folks got mad at him they said he hadn’t the proper education for a doctor. I don’t know. There was a sheepskin framed on the wall of his office all in order. Howsoever it rankle in Physic’s mind, and many’s the time I hear him say: ‘Jehu Kingdom Come! If I had a skeleton hanging in the corner my office ’twould stop all this talk.’ Physic, he reckoned a skeleton would impress our people more’n any God’s amount of sheepskins.

“Well, one day in summertime a deckhand fell overboard from the steamboat down at Absalom’s Island and drown before they could fish him out. He was a kinless man and old Mr. Button Billings, the magistrate, called a jury together and they sat on him in the shed alongside Vergil Longcope’s store. The shed is still there. He was a big buck nigger with an ugly blue scar from eye to chin, right side. Verdict was death by accidental drowning.

“Physic, being County Medical Officer was present, and he up and make little speech. He say: ‘Mr. Magistrate and Gentlemen of the Jury,’ he say, ‘in all the large cities of this great country of ours it is the usage and custom for the bodies of paupers to be handed over to medical men for the investigation of science. Being as I am cut off from the meetings and gatherings of my fellow medical profession,’ he say, ‘I ask Mr. Magistrate and Gentlemen of Jury, that this here body be handed over to me for the proper investigation of science.’

“Now Mr. Button Billings, he was a churchwarden along with ev’thing else, and there wa’n’t no manner of love lost between him and Physic. He up with his gray beard sticking straight out and trem’ling, and he say: ‘As to the ungodly customs and usages of our large cities we hear too much,’ he say. ‘Please God while I am at the hellum,’ he say, ‘such hideous practices shall gain no hold in this God-fearing community!’

“He call in Jimmy Kemp, the odd-job man, and give him a dollar. ‘Mr. Kemp,’ he say, ‘take the body of this unfortunate man and bury him decently

on Moll Legg Island. Let all be done in a proper Christian manner,' he say, looking at Physic. 'Set up a wooden cross at head of the grave and letter it: Unknown negro, drown such and such date.'

"Moll Legg Island is that little lump like a vessel at anchor out in the harbor at Absalom's, Doc. Don't belong to nobody. Nameless and kinless men been buried there since time out of mind.

"So Physic was sent home with a flea in 's ear, as they thought. They hadn't taken the measure of the man. He had a negro working for him call' John Stagg, a fellow of similar kidney. And the two of them fix to row out to Moll Legg Island that night, and fetch the body.

"It was a right dark night, I mind, suitable for the work in hand. They put out with a couple of spades, a lantern and a jug of corn to keep their spirits up. Out on the island Physic hang his coat over a bush, and put the lantern behind it so light wouldn't show on the village side. Well, they get the corpus up all right, and fix the grave like 'twas before. 'Twas right gruesome work by lantern light, and first Physic would take pull at the jug, then John Stagg. So when they come to row home, the jug was empty and the men was full.

"Midway across the creek, John Stagg drap an oar ov'board, and in reaching for the oar, he pitch in hisself. When Physic scram'le to pull him out, the skiff capsize, and all were thrown in the water together, the living and the dead. John Stagg, he swim like a walloon, Physic not so good. John Stagg help his master ashore and fetch in the skiff and the oars after. As for the corpus, it float away quiet in the dark.

"Now Miss Molly Carsley, Physic's wife, she was entertaining the Rector's Aid that night with husbands. That's how I come in on this. Physic, he despise card parties, so nothing was made of him not being there. We was having the refreshments, and a wench who was handing round cake sort of nudge me in passing, and then look towards the door. So I santer out, feeling for my pipe, like, and out in the yard I find Physic and John Stagg all wet and chattering. John couldn't get Physic in the house 'thout running foul of the Rector's Aid. There wa'n't no back stair in that house.

"So John, he plant a ladder against the front porch, and together we drug Physic up and over the porch roof and through a window. Made unholy noise. My wife tell me after, that the guests make out to take no notice of it, but only talk louder to drown us out. That was their politeness. All knew 'twas old Marster coming home drunk again.

"Upstairs Physic was in a way. 'Jehu Kingdom Come!' he was crying; 'that so-and-so of a black corpus is floating out in the harbor, and when he's

found, the whole story will come out! Stand by me, Ed,' he say real pitiful. 'Take my skiff out before sun-up: take the fifty pound anchor out of my shed, and go look for him. It won't rouse no suspicion if they see you rowing around. And when you find him, tie the anchor to him good and let go.'

"I say I would. Come morning, when I got down to Absalom's there was two three men on Longcope's wharf. They say Bill Hanson done bring in a dead body before light. Bill been out to fish his net. Nobody reco'nize it for the same body in the dark. It was locked in the shed there, and word sent over to Mr. Button Billings. Inquest was called for eight o'clock. Same jury.

"That was the news I had to take back to Physic. He was like a crazy man. Want to jump in his old buggy, and light right out for California. I had to wrestle with him right smart. 'Sure, there'll be a stink,' I say, 'but you got to see it through now. It'll be an all-hell stink, certain, but it'll blow over, it'll blow over. Think of all the stinks been raised this county, past ten, fifteen years. Where are they now?' So I get him quiet down some.

"I take a bite breakfast Physic's house, and him and I walk down to the inquest. He muttering and cussing the whole way. 'Grave-robber!' he say, 'that's a fatal word to put on a man! A man could never live that down! I'll see my wife and children starve by the roadside, Ed!' Then he come to a stand and bust out: 'I could stand it!' he cry. 'I could stand it if anybody but that condemned old Heaven-pointer wasn't magistrate! Jehu! Jehu! it burn me up to give Button Billings the chance to exhort me!'

"We was the last to get there. Magistrate and jury was standing outside the shed discussing the price of fish. So we go in. Body was lying under a sheet on a door across a pair of trussles. Old Button Billings, he make a speech while Physic trem'le and cuss under his breath beside me. About myster'ous ways of Providence and the sea giving up its dead on our fair green shores and all that. Button Billings was never one to scamp a period. Tournament or inquest, 'twas all one to him when he speechifying.

"He say: 'It's a very remarkable thing,' he say; 'we ain't had an inquest in three year come August and now we got two, two days running! Very remarkable!' Then he say: 'Let us view the remains, gentlemen,' and Physic catch holt me, and whisper: 'Now it's a coming! Now it's a coming!' Mr. Button Billings, take the edge of the sheet and pull it down . . ."

At this point in the story, Mr. Ed made believe that his pipe had stopped drawing, and interrupted himself while he searched about on the ground for a splinter. "Well, what happened?" Dave demanded.

“Corpuses face was et away by crab,” Mr. Ed said casually. “It wa’n’t reco’nized for the same nigger.” Dave laughed.

After performing an imaginary operation on his pipe, Mr. Ed resumed: “Mr. Button Billings he give Jimmy Kemp another dollar for this one. ‘Let nothing proper be omitted,’ he say. ‘Set up a wooden cross at the head of the grave and letter it: Unknown negro found drowned such and such date.’ ”

Dave, thinking the story ended, laughed again. He forgot that Mr. Ed’s stories always had a sting in their tails. With great carelessness the old man knocked the ash out of his pipe and blew through it. “And if you want to go and look,” he said, “them two crosses is out on Moll Legg Island side by each today, and if you want to dig, you’ll find ne’er a bone under either!”

“What! no body at all!” exclaimed Dave.

“Couple of weeks later a skeleton was setting corner Physic’s office,” said Mr. Ed. “He give out he ordered it from a surgeon’s supply house in Baltimore, but I look real close when Physic was out, and I seen a little nick on the cheekbone, right side, and another under it on the jaw!”

Dave had his laugh out then. “Mr. Ed, you’re an artist!” he said. The story-teller did not in the least resent the implied doubt as to his veracity. He laughed too.

“Come on in,” he said, “and let’s see what Nanny has got for supper.”

Chapter 19

MISS UTIE and Miss Aggie settled down in the bay window of the latter's living-room for a quiet afternoon's talk. Miss Utie was knitting a blouse for herself; Miss Aggie hemming aprons. "I'm sorry bay windows are going out," said Miss Utie.

"Are they?" said Miss Aggie.

"Ain't you noticed, Aggie? None of the new houses have them."

"They can have their new houses, Utie. I wouldn't give up my bay window for all of them!"

"Just so, Aggie; from a bay window you can see people coming *and* going. Nowadays the cars pass so fast you can't see who's in them by looking straight out."

"How come, you didn't have a bay window your house, Utie?"

"Well, I had to yield to modern ideas, Aggie."

Presently Miss Aggie said: "Here come Doct' Tascott in his old blue coop."

Both ladies craned forward to see. Miss Utie glanced at her watch. "Only two o'clock. Must be a special call. I reckon Millie King's time has come. She's been expecting. Look, do he turn the corner, Aggie, or keep straight on?"

"Straight on up the state road," said Miss Aggie.

"Then 'tis Millie King, certain. It's her fourth in six years."

The ladies settled back to their work. "What's the matter with young Doctor, Utie?" asked Miss Aggie.

"Nothing as I know," answered Miss Utie, bridling a little. "He's the best doctor we ever had in the county."

"I ain't questioning his skill," said Miss Aggie; "but he look so grim for a young man. Is't true he's eating his heart out for Clare Eltonhead?"

"Nothing in it," said Miss Utie scornfully. "Doct' Tascott's no such a fool!"

“What’s the news from Geneezay, anyhow, Utie?”

Miss Utie moistened her lips. “There’s the devil to pay there, Aggie; just as I told you!”

“I didn’t contradict you, Utie.”

Miss Utie went on: “Aunt Maria Phillips say Livia Tandy lie in bed all morning, and read novels. Clare do everything about the house . . . But of course I don’t believe all Aunt Maria say. She favors the girl.”

Miss Aggie’s nose was active and censorious. “It agrees with what I hear about Livia,” she said.

“I met Clare riding into town this morning,” Miss Utie continued. “Believe me, Aggie, her cheeks are thinner than ever, her eyes bigger. She shows the strain!”

“The other woman holds all the cards,” remarked Miss Aggie.

Miss Utie went on: “Verna Eltonhead says there’s bound to be a bust-up before long. She is right pleased about it. She says the girl’s got to go . . . Funny thing, Aggie, Verna hates the girl more than she do Tom’s new wife. Why would that be?”

“Because the girl is quality, Utie, and Verna is trash.”

“You always were for the girl,” said Miss Utie a little acidly.

“No, Utie, I take neither one side nor t’other; I just take note. . . . Go on.”

Miss Utie changed her chair for a small rocker. “Can talk better when I rock,” she explained. “Verna say, if the girl goes, there is sure to be a general family fuss, and Tom hisself and his new wife will be put off the place.”

“And Verna is pleased about that?” put in Miss Aggie incredulously. “She is like to lose her alimony by it.”

“She don’t figure as far ahead as that, Aggie. Only wants to get back at Tom. It’s her passion.”

Miss Aggie sucked her tongue against her teeth. “Tclk! Tclk! Tclk! What fools some women are!”

“Aunt Maria say, Livia Tandy is all the time telling stories at the table of how men run after her. Clare smile and encourage her. She give Livia no opening to quarrel. Livia can’t understand that. It drive her wild. Livia’s eyes glitter at Clare like a snake’s, Aunt Maria say, and Clare look over her head. . . . Mind, Aggie, I’m only passing this on. Aunt Maria is a known liar.”

“Verna don’t get all her information from Aunt Maria,” Miss Aggie pointed out. “She egg the children on to question their father when they see

him. Can't do much with the boy, but the girl is clever. She can turn Tom Eltonhead inside out, looking as innocent as a lamb, and bring all home to her mother! . . . Go on, Utie."

"Aunt Maria say, Livia is scared of Clare, and dassent say nothing to her face, but, oh, boy! when Clare go out riding, do she give Tom pepper! Already after two weeks of marriage Tom cringe before her like a whipped fyce."

"Naturally, she has him by the short hair now," put in Miss Aggie.

"Aunt Maria could hear her clear out in the kitchen," Miss Utie went on. "Livia hollered at Tom: 'Clare queens it 'round this house as if 'twas hers! She poisons the servants' minds against me! She treats me like the dirt under her feet! What I want to know is, is this my house or hers?'"

"Tom was all the time trying to smooth her down. Aunt Maria couldn't hear what he say, but Livia hollered: 'Oh, she never *says* anything! She's too clever to say anything! She only looks it! A woman knows when another woman is trying to put it over on her! If you had the courage of a toad-fish you would take her down a peg!' Livia hollered. 'I've stood all I'm going to take! Either she leaves this house or I do!'"

"Has it come to that?" said Miss Aggie, shaking her head. "Already? Tom Eltonhead certainly got scratched when he took her into his bed!"

"Are you sorry for him?" demanded Miss Utie.

"I am not . . . What a pair of wives! Between Verna and Livia, they will wreck Geneezay, and themselves be only the worse off for it!"

"And the girl," insisted Miss Utie.

"No, Utie, whatever you may say about her, she is no party to her brother's ruin. She did what she could for him."

Miss Aggie bit off a length of thread with a snap, and presented her contribution to the story. "When all's said and done, Utie, I'd a sight ruther see the girl mistress of Geneezay than that strumpet from Ann Aranel. It irk me to see her come down here flaunting a new wedding ring. Stella Canneday told me all about *her*. Stella got it from her husband. Women may *talk*, Utie, but the men *know*, because a woman can't sin without a man, and the men exchange notes about it. With all her niminy-piminy ways, that woman is as common as a cat!"

Miss Utie shrugged. "Not much to choose, if you ask me, Aggie. Less is expected from a widow than from an unmarried girl."

"You must allow the girl has breeding," said Miss Aggie.

Miss Utie bristled. “Breeding? What good’s breeding to a woman if don’t teach her to put a proper value on herself?”

“Meaning Livia Tandy’s a better woman because she held out for marriage?” queried Miss Aggie.

“I mean just that, Aggie.”

“I don’t agree,” said Miss Aggie, “and no woman thinks so in her heart, however she may say it.”

“I think so,” insisted Miss Utie. “I put the sacredness of marriage above all!”

“Sho!” said Miss Aggie. “You ought write a novel, Utie.”

“What about Clare’s young man?” Miss Aggie presently asked.

“He ain’t been down since the marriage,” said Miss Utie; “nor the week before that. Reckon he’s tired of her. What could she expect after giving him all?”

“Well, there’s men and men,” remarked Miss Aggie, shifting her work this way and that way on her lap. “Some tire quicker than others. . . . I grant you, Utie, Livia was a wiser woman because she trap her man first. A woman has got to collect in advance or she can whistle for her pay.” After a moment she added in a softer voice: “He was a beguiling lad!”

Miss Utie stared. “Aggie, I’m surprised at you! At your age!”

“A woman is never old to herself, Utie, only to others.”



At Genizir Clare had her most difficult moments at the table. At other times she could busy herself about something, and so avoid her sister-in-law. Livia was generally occupied in giving herself treatments of one sort or another, or in manicuring her nails. Clare still sat at the foot of the table. She had offered the place to Livia who refused it, yet continued to resent Clare’s sitting there. The worst times were when Tom was late for meals. Livia’s face, when she was alone with Clare, became pinched and hateful. She refused to meet Clare’s eye. Clare thought helplessly: If she were my equal we could come to some kind of a working arrangement, but what can you do with a female cur?

Tom came in to dinner late, bringing the day’s mail. Tossing a letter from Lance in Clare’s direction, he sat down saying carelessly: “What’s Lance doing in New York all this time?”

“Rehearsing in a play,” said Clare. “They’re starting out on the road next Monday. He’ll be down Saturday to say good-by to us.”

There was an awkward silence. Livia bristled virtuously. Suddenly, without a word, she pushed back her chair and left the room, giving Tom a threatening glance as she passed. “What’s the matter with Livia?” Clare asked mildly.

Tom was horribly ill at ease. “Let me eat my dinner,” he mumbled.

“Better tell me while she’s not in the room,” said Clare. “It will be easier. I’m only anxious to make things go smoothly.”

Tom blurted out: “Lance can’t come here any more.”

“Why?” asked Clare quietly.

Tom lost his temper. “Damn it all, Sis! There’s been too much gossip!”

“Too much gossip! Since when have we begun to care about county gossip!”

“It’s different now that Livvy’s here,” said Tom. “I have to consider her reputation.”

Clare said: “I’m sorry, but for the life of me I can’t see what Lance has got to do with Livia’s reputation.”

Tom raised his voice: (Clare thought: She’s listening.) “I’m not going to bandy words with you, Sis! Women talk all round a thing. I say Lance can’t come here any more! Let it go at that!”

“I’m sorry,” said Clare, “but since you’ve started this, we’ve got to see it through. For my sake you must tell me what’s behind it. What is this gossip? What are people saying and about whom?”

The badgered Tom showed his teeth. “About you and Lance, that’s who. They’re saying . . . they’re saying . . . well, you can guess what they’re saying. After you and Lance spending so many nights here alone.”

Clare stared at her brother in astonishment. After all, it seemed, she did not yet know Tom. “My God!” she murmured, “and are you blaming me now because you left Lance and me so many nights alone?”

“You never objected,” grumbled Tom.

“Well!” said Clare.

Tom squirmed on his chair. “Didn’t say I blamed you. Didn’t say I believed the gossip.”

“I suppose it was Livia who repeated this gossip to you,” said Clare.

“Who else would tell me? . . . Don’t you say anything against Livvy!”

Clare smiled. "I have no wish to. Now that you're married, it would be all right for Lance to come here, wouldn't it? Livia would be our chaperon!"

"Don't try to play with me!" shouted Tom. "I'm serious! It's just the other way round. If Livvy let Lance come here while she was in the house, everybody would say she was standing for the goings-on."

Clare hardened. "I'm serious, too. Just what do you mean by 'goings-on'?"

When Clare looked at him like that Tom's eyes trailed away. "It don't signify," he muttered. "I'm not accusing you of anything. Simple fact is, now Livvy's come here to live, everything is changed."

Clare said: "Then you regard Livia as a different sort of woman from your sister?"

"Damn!" said Tom. "Stop trying to get back at me. I didn't say that. Livvy's a prudent woman; she knows how to watch her step, that's all."

"I would be the last to deny it," said Clare.

Clare sat crumbling a piece of bread, while Tom ostentatiously shoveled in his dinner. There were so many things she *could* have said, but what was the use? She couldn't descend to Tom and Livia's level to fight it out. For some days past Clare had seen that the situation was impossible. Her heart burned with anger at Tom's childishness, ingratitude and falsity, but she could see that hell was yawning for him. Livia would attend to him. Clare could even feel a mite sorry for him. Much, much better to retire from the situation without a degrading quarrel. And quickly!

Tom could not stand the suspense. "Well, what you going to do?" he growled.

"I beg your pardon," said Clare, rousing herself, "there's only one thing I can do, isn't there? This is your house—and Livia's. I'll write and tell Lance not to come. I have no further desire for him to come. I wouldn't want him to see . . ."

"See what?" demanded Tom, scowling.

"My present situation," said Clare.

This passed over Tom's head. He was enormously relieved by his victory—yet suspicious that it had come too easily. "That's the way to talk, Sis. That's fine! I told Livvy you'd be reasonable about it!"

This was a little more than Clare could bear. "Let's leave Livia out of it," she said. "This is between you and me."

There was another silence during which Tom became more and more uneasy. Finally he blurted out: "What you plotting?"

“Plotting? Nothing,” said Clare. “Naturally I’ve got some hard thinking to do.”

“What about?”

“Oh, eat your dinner,” she said. “Give me a little time to get straightened out with myself.”

“What about?” he stubbornly insisted.

“Well, in my position, what would you advise me to do?” she asked with a level glance.

Tom looked away. “Pattern you’s’e’f aft’ Livvy,” he said. “She know what’s what.”

Clare stared at him incredulously, and then burst out laughing. It was real laughter, too, but near the breaking-point. She was thinking: This will be something to tell Lance! Tom was infuriated by her laughter. “What the hell’s the matter with you?” he cried. “I’m not joking!”

“Pardon,” said Clare, struggling with it. “A touch of hysteria, I guess.”

“And what’s more you treat my wife with proper respect, see?” shouted Tom. This took Clare aback momentarily. Then she realized that it was for the benefit of the listener outside. “It’s no use coming to me with complaints about Livvy!” stormed Tom. “She’s all right!”

“Have I ever complained to you about Livia?” demanded Clare.

Tom ignored the question. “As to your position here, you’ll have no trouble if you act decently towards her.”

“Answer me!” demanded Clare. “Have I not always been polite to her?”

“Politeness, my foot!” sneered Tom. “You’re a damn sight too uppity! You never talk to her!”

“On the contrary, Livia won’t talk to me,” said Clare. “When I speak to her she makes believe to be deaf.”

“Don’t tell me!” stormed Tom. “If you have trouble with Livvy, it’s *your* fault!”

Clare became very still. “Do you really believe that?” she asked.

Tom jumped up, knocking his chair over backward, and flung down his napkin. “Damn! I’m not going to sit here and be plagued by you! You know what you’ve got to do, don’t you? Then do it without any more talk!” He stormed out of the room, and across the porch. Clare sat with her head hanging, thinking unhappily: So after all there had to be a nasty quarrel. . . . Well, never again!

A new thought came to her. Springing up, she ran out on the porch. Out of the tail of her eye, she saw Livia inside the drawing-room door. So she

had been listening. “Tom!” called Clare from the porch. “Wait a minute!”

Tom, about to disappear around the corner of the house, turned a sullen face. “What is it?”

“There’s something I’ve got to ask you.”

“Well, spit it out!”

“I can’t shout it across the yard. Please come to the steps.” Clare wanted Livia to hear this.

Tom came back reluctantly. “It’s about the Colonel,” said Clare, “does he belong to me? You gave him to me, you know, but I want to be sure.”

“Why bring that up?” said Tom, scowling.

“It’s important to me, Tom.”

Before Tom could answer further, Livia came quickly through the house door. Her face was working in an ugly fashion. “You have the use of the horse when you want it,” she said stridently. “He goes with the rest of the stock on the place. He’s not your property!”

“I beg your pardon,” said Clare, “I was speaking to my brother.” She turned back to Tom. “Please answer me.”

Livia was livid with rage. “He’s not hers! He’s not hers!” she screamed. “I won’t have it!”

However, she had pushed Tom too far now. He looked away with a sick face. “Damn it, Livvy,” he muttered, “I can’t go back on my word. I gave her the horse.”

“Thanks,” said Clare.

Livia, screeching continuously, flung herself down on her back on the glider, clenching her hands and beating a tattoo with her heels on the mattress. Clare stared at her in astonishment. It was the first time she had seen the third degree applied to a refractory husband. Tom came running wildly up the steps. “Help her! Help her!” he cried. Clare, however, went into the house. She was in time to see Aunt Maria scuttling through the kitchen door, and was thankful there had been a friendly witness to the scene.

“Aunt Maria,” she called sharply, “go help Miss Livia.”

Clare got her old saddle bags out of the hall closet and carried them upstairs. She changed into her riding clothes and packed a few essentials in the bags. When she came down she heard Livia wailing on the sofa in the drawing-room and Tom trying to soothe her. Clare stole out of the back door, and across the garden in the direction of the stable, praying that Livia might hold Tom in the house for five minutes longer.

Chapter 20

DAVE TASCOTT, answering the telephone in his consulting-room, heard Clare's voice over the wire.

"Dave?"

"Yes?" he said, careful not to name her. It was irritating to see that the patient in the room had taken note of the softening of his voice.

"Will you be starting out on your rounds at three, Dave?"

"Yes."

"I'm speaking from the booth in the hotel. Stop by here on your way out, will you?"

"Sure!" said Dave. "Anything wrong?"

"Well, I'm in a kind of a jam, Dave, but it's not unexpected."

"I'll be right over," he said.

"No! Finish with the patients first. There's no hurry. You'll find me waiting on the hotel porch."

As Dave approached the hotel he saw her horse tied to one of the stanchions supporting the great wistaria vine. The Colonel was not enjoying his close proximity to the parked automobiles. Behind the vine now bare of leaves he found Clare sitting on the shabby porch. Dave did not bother much with county gossip, but he had guessed something of what she had been through during the past fortnight. When he saw her face, he realized that it was worse than he had pictured. They shook hands silently. It was cold out on the porch, but they knew there was no place inside where they could talk unseen and unheard, and they sat down on a bench.

"I have left Genizir," said Clare. "Don't ask me to tell you why. It's too mean and ugly a story."

"Don't want to hear the details," Dave said gruffly. "What you going to do?"

Clare did not resent the gruffness. "I'm going to town to train myself as a practical nurse." Dave looked at the horse. "Oh, not on horseback," she said with a bleak smile. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about." She hesitated.

"Go ahead," growled Dave.

Clare said diffidently: "I know I have no business to be coming to you. You have more than you can do already. But . . . but . . ."

Dave grinned suddenly. "You don't have to apologize for coming to me. It sets me up like a shot of liquor."

Clare, with a startled glance, went on hurriedly: "The Colonel is my main asset, and he must be sold. Azrael Cohn deals in horses, but if I went to him . . ."

"Certainly you mustn't go to Cohn," said Dave. "If he thought you had to sell, he'd give you nothing . . . Wait a minute! Let me think this through."

Clare looked down at her hands. "You're so good to me!" she murmured. "Already you've taken a load off my mind!"

"Please," said Dave unsteadily. "Just take me for granted. Or I'll have to bust out . . ."

He went on: "I don't see why Cohn should figure in this at all. The horse is good; he's known in the county."

"Yes," said Clare eagerly, "the boys who ride tournament have their eyes on him."

"Good!" said Dave, "then I suggest we board him in Cohn's stable for the moment, and let the word go round that he's for sale. Put an ad in the county paper and wait for offers."

"That would be better," said Clare, "but . . ."

"But what?"

"I haven't the money to pay for his board."

"That can simply go against the sale."

"You make everything easy," she murmured.

Dave jumped up. "Then that's settled. I'll put him in the stable right away. The poor beast is unhappy amongst the cars."

"Let me get my saddle bags," said Clare. He watched her while she unfastened the bags. She lingered to stroke the Colonel's neck and to murmur in his ear. It suddenly came to Dave what this horse was to her. She kept her face carefully turned. Guessing that it was to hide the rising tears, he made haste to lead the Colonel away.

Since Cohn's was next door to the hotel, he was back in five minutes. Clare's face was composed. "Is he all right?" she asked.

"Fine!" said Dave, "a clean stall and an armful of hay!"

"Of course, I'm not in a position to dictate," said Clare diffidently, "but if you can . . . I mean, if there are two offers, I'd rather take less if I knew he was going to a man who was kind."

"I'll take care of it," said Dave.

A silence followed, demoralizing to him. Say something quick! he thought. "Look here," he blurted out, "we have got to be as blunt with each other as two men. How much money have you?"

"Enough," said Clare, blushing.

"That won't do," said Dave. "I've got to know."

"Enough to pay my fare on the bus," she said. "I'll go to the Y.W.C.A. and get a room for the night."

"Haven't you got friends in Baltimore?"

"Nobody I'd care to go to at this time . . . I have some things that I can sell tomorrow to raise more money."

"What things?" he demanded.

"Well . . . some articles of jewelry."

Dave swore under his breath. "I can't stand for that," he said. "When you're up against it you get nothing for things you have to sell. It's not necessary to sell your trinkets. The horse is a good property. I'll advance you the money until he's sold."

Clare's cheeks flamed. "No! I wouldn't take it from you!"

"You've *got* to take it!" he said angrily.

"I won't!" she flung back, angry too.

Dave put the clamps on his feelings. "Listen, it's just a business proposition. I make you a loan, and you leave the horse for security."

Clare began to weaken. "You can't spare the money."

"Certainly I can spare it. It's at home in my safe this minute."

She started to thank him, and he abruptly walked away. When he came back there was another painful silence. Clare said nervously: "You must leave me now. I'm keeping you from your patients."

"I can't leave you here," said Dave. "It's too cold. The bus doesn't go until six o'clock. If you go inside to wait, every loafer in the village will drop around to look you over."

"That's a trifle," said Clare.

“Look, go down to Mrs. Basilon’s to wait,” he said eagerly.

Clare murmured: “You told me not to come to your office.”

“That’s not my office. Miss Beck Lewger’s back windows command the door of my office, and she sits there all day sewing and taking note of those who come and go. But she can’t see the front door. And besides, everybody knows I’m out on my rounds between three and six. I’ve got a short list this afternoon. I can be back at five.”

“I’m a little afraid of Mrs. Basilon,” said Clare. “She doesn’t approve of me.”

Dave knew that Clare was safe from Miss Maddie’s disapproval when she was in distress. “Nothing in it,” he said. “Miss Maddie’s a good scout. She’s the only woman in town who wouldn’t try to pry into your affairs. I’ll phone her from the booth inside that you’re coming. In order to fool folks, I’ll let you walk down there by yourself.”

So it was arranged. Clare walked down the road with her saddle bags over her arm, and Dave drove up county.

When Dave got home he found Clare and Miss Maddie sitting toe to toe in front of a fire in the living-room. Both showed calm faces; he would have given something pretty to know what had passed between them. Clare had changed to women’s clothes, and a new pleasure surged up in him at the sight of her. He loved her in the boyish breeches and in her dresses. Each outfit aroused a different set of feelings. Miss Maddie had lent her a little valise to carry to town, and it rested on the floor beside her.

Miss Maddie got up, saying: “I’m going to fix a bit of supper. The doctor is always hungry when he comes in from driving, and Miss Clare must have something. It is after eight when the bus gets to town.”

Dave dropped in the chair alongside Clare’s. Outside it was growing dark, but he made no move to turn on lights. It was quiet in the room. He dared not look much in her face. The rosy, shifting firelight gave her beauty the quality of a dream. The marks of what she had been through showed only too plainly, and it made him savage with compassion. Clare, unable to bear the silence, began to chatter, and that he hated. He interrupted her, saying gruffly:

“I don’t think much of this practical nurse stunt.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Practical nurses are the drudges of the profession,” said Dave. “It seems to be true of things all the way through, that the less a worker is paid, the

more he or she is put upon. I doubt if you could stand the gaff.”

“I am perfectly healthy,” said Clare.

“Sure, I can see that. But you weren’t designed for a beast of burden.”

Clare bit her lower lip to hold it steady. “You shouldn’t discourage me . . . when there’s no alternative.”

“There *is* an alternative,” said Dave in a dry voice.

“What is it?”

“You could marry me.”

Clare said nothing. They sat looking straight ahead into the fire. After a moment he became aware that she was struggling with a hysterical emotion, and he was afraid. They must, they *must* keep it on a basis of common sense! Finally it broke from Clare: “Oh, Dave! you’re a fool! You’re such a dear quixotic fool!”

“Please,” said Dave unsteadily, “not that line! I don’t want to get passionate. It wouldn’t suit the situation.” He waited until she got a better grip on herself.

“After what you know about me!” she said mournfully.

Dave said quickly: “I’m a doctor and a realist, and *that* doesn’t figure with me at all.”

“But now, after I’ve come to you and told you that I was right up against it!” said Clare, “how could you expect me to accept such an offer? After all, I have my pride. What do you think I am?”

“I don’t see why you have to feel that way,” said Dave stubbornly. “It’s not as if you were hearing it for the first time. You know I’ve been in love with you since the first time I saw you. It has only grown stronger these past months. You’re being up against it, as you say, just gives me my opportunity. It *is* an alternative, whatever you may say, and it’s better than what you propose to do.”

Clare began to tremble again. “Oh, you shouldn’t! You shouldn’t!” she faltered. “It’s so unfair!”

“Unfair?” he put in, astonished.

“When I’ve no place to go . . . frightened out of my wits of what’s before me . . . to be offered security and kindness . . . it’s like Heaven!”

A spring of gladness started up in Dave. “If you feel like that, what’s the trouble?” he asked, leaning towards her.

“I’m in love with another man,” she murmured.

“I’m facing that,” said Dave.

Clare went on: "I'm twenty-five years old."

"Terrible age!" murmured Dave.

". . . and I never felt it before," she was saying. "When I was a young girl I hated the thought; the approach of a man made me savage . . . So I'm thinking perhaps . . . I may be the kind of woman who can only love once."

"That, I believe, is just a romantic notion," said Dave. "It's not borne out by the facts of biology."

Clare shook her head. "Certainly I will not marry you," she said agitatedly, "if you're counting on my falling in love with you some day. That would be going into it under false pretenses."

Dave dropped back in his chair. "I've faced that, too," he said shortly. "Let's leave love out of it. Even so, I say my alternative is better than yours."

"What would you get out of it?" she asked.

"Plenty!" said Dave. "I love to look at you. I would never get enough of looking at you. It makes me absurdly happy just to be with you."

"Wouldn't it . . . wouldn't it be much harder for you if I was here all the time?" she murmured.

"No," he said promptly. "I'm accustomed to holding myself in. It's like second nature to me now."

Clare hesitated. "We have plenty in common," he urged. "We seem to understand each other instinctively."

"That's true," she murmured, "but . . ."

He interrupted her. "It drives me crazy to think of you being a practical nurse, a common servant, that is. Wasted! Wasted! With your looks, your personality, and that extraordinary something which makes you different from every other woman in the world!"

"So you say!" she murmured with the beginning of a smile.

"That's better!" he said, leaning towards her again. "It makes me as happy as a king when you smile!" . . . "You've got to have a bigger field than practical nursing!" he went on.

"Where would I find it?" asked Clare.

"Right here in Travis County as my partner! I need you in my work. These people have come to think I'm a pretty good doctor, but I don't make any real headway with them. To them I am a foreigner, and always will be. If I married a county girl that would be changed."

"I'm not a true county girl," objected Clare.

“You are!” said Dave. “You’re a representative of the county’s first family and you can’t get away from it!”

“They dislike me intensely!” she said.

“That’s merely superficial,” said Dave. “I hear their talk. They’re sore because they think you hold yourself above them. If you pitched in and worked for the county they would adore you.”

“How could I pitch in?” she asked helplessly.

“I need a county hospital,” said Dave. “The idea has to be put across. That’s where you could help me. They wouldn’t take it from a foreigner.”

Clare thought over this, and slowly shook her head.

“Well, you know now where I stand,” said Dave. “What are your objections?” She did not answer. “This is a delicate question,” he said, “but I’ve got to ask it. Have you any expectation of marrying Lance now, or in the future?” Still, Clare said nothing. “Please,” he urged, “let’s chuck sentiment and pride and all those fine feelings, and get down to hard pan.”

“You’re entitled to the truth,” she murmured. “No, I have no expectation of marrying Lance. I don’t want to marry him! . . . that is, even if he should wish it, and I know very well that he does not wish it. I am sure that only unhappiness would come of it.”

“I think so too,” said Dave soberly, “but I would never have said so if you hadn’t said it first.”

“Just the same, I can’t help loving him,” she said with beseeching eyes.

“I understand that,” said Dave woodenly.

Clare said: “I’d have to promise you, of course, never to see Lance again.”

“By God, no!” cried Dave. “That would be a fatal way to start. It’s entirely up to you. No promises, no vows of any sort. We marry out of respect to county opinion, but you are as free as air. If, after a fair trial, it doesn’t work, you only have to walk out. I’ll start a special account for you in the bank to be earmarked for expenses to Reno, if and when necessary.”

Clare began to cry. Dave jumped up and began pacing the room. “For God’s sake, don’t cry!” he begged her. “Or I can’t keep my head!”

“I can’t help it!” faltered Clare. “You’re so good! . . . so good!”

“I’m not!” he cried. “You make me feel like a fool! I want you; I want all of you, God knows, but if I can’t have it, I want what little I can get. There’s nothing high-minded in that. I’m just a selfish male like any other.”

“What would Miss Maddie do?” Clare murmured.

Dave rushed back to her, filled with joy at this evidence of weakening. "That's all arranged. She wants to be relieved of this big house. She's always urging me to get married!"

"Not to me," said Clare with a faint smile.

"No, not to you," he admitted, grinning, "but I'm the one that has to be suited. . . . I've talked to a lawyer here. I'm to buy the place on terms that will allow Miss Maddie to live in comfort and give her something to leave to her girls besides. She's going to take the flat under Mrs. Verna Eltonhead. She won't need all this furniture. We'd have plenty to begin with."

He waited; but Clare said nothing. "It's a good house," he went on, looking around the room with softened eyes. "Not so fine as Genizir, of course, but hospitable in the old style; I'm crazy about it; it asks for a lady to be its mistress."

"You must take time to think things over," said Clare.

"I've had all the time there is," he said; "I've been thinking about it ever since . . . well, you know when. But I never would have spoken about it, of course, if I had not seen that you were faced with worse."

"When you talk like that I can't keep the tears back," she faltered.

"What is it now?" he demanded, scowling.

"It's the same thing. You deserve so much more than I could give!"

Dave was relieved. "Never mind that," he said. "I'm not a schoolboy. I know my mind."

She appeared to have no more objections to raise. Dave, planting a knee in the seat of his chair, leaned over her murmuring breathlessly: "Is it a go, Clare?" She nodded her head. Snatching up her hand, he pressed it hard against his cheek. "Oh, Clare!" This time she did not try to snatch her hand away, but he was very conscious of its limpness within his own. He dropped it, swallowing a groan.

"You go on up to town," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "and stay as long as you like. Then it won't look as if you had fled straight to me to escape the ogress Livia. I'll fetch you the money now from my office."

"I see no reason to put it off," murmured Clare.

"That's up to you," he said, softening; "neither do I. I'll come up to Baltimore to meet you any day you say. We'll be married there and return here the same day."

"Dave," she said very low, "would you mind very much if I saw Lance once, before . . . ?"

The pain it gave him made him straighten up sharply. His face concealed it. “Entirely up to you,” he said quickly.

She went on deprecatingly: “It seems cowardly to write. My seeing him won’t change anything. Don’t you see . . . if I married you without seeing him, all his life he would be raging against me in his mind as a faithless woman.”

“I see,” said Dave. “Go ahead.”

Clare’s voice sank to a mere breath. “I shall just talk to him . . . and come back. . . .”

“You are free,” said Dave gruffly.

As they were about to leave the house to get the bus, Dave said lightly: “There are four big bedrooms upstairs and you can take your pick and your choice, as Mr. Ed says.”

To his astonishment Clare slipped her hand under his arm. “Dave,” she whispered, “when we are married I will be your real wife.”

Dave started away from her: he could feel the blood draining from his face. “No promises!” he gasped. “For God’s sake, don’t raise any false hopes. . . . Leave it to Nature!”

“Just the same, I’m going to be your wife!” she repeated.

Chapter 21

CLARE sent Lance a letter from Baltimore the same night. Determined not to pose as an object of pity, she gave him an expurgated account of what had happened at Genizir, and announced that she was coming to see him in New York next day so that he need not miss any rehearsals. Lance had told her that rehearsals started at noon and lasted until late at night. She wrote that she would take a room at his hotel and wait for him there. She did not mention Dave, nor the real object of her visit to New York.

She went over on a late afternoon train. At midnight she was sitting in the hotel lobby like a lady with her feet crossed and her hands in her lap, eyes fixed on the revolving door. All her faculties were concentrated on Lance's coming, yet when he whirled in, it had the effect of a stunning surprise. He burst on her sight like Apollo in flames, and her carefully built-up defenses collapsed. She forgot she was a lady; she forgot everything. She sprang up, reaching for him like a child. Lance! Lance!

Lance's eyes blazed. Careless of observers, he seized her and kissed her. Clare, immediately self-conscious again, protested in an urgent whisper: "Lance! *Please!* Not here!" Laughing delightedly, he swung her out from him, masterfully tucking her arm under his. Clare was aware that everybody in the lobby was smiling at them; Lance had eyes only for her. "Where can we go?" he said. "Let's eat! I always eat after rehearsal."

"All right, let's eat," she said hurriedly. He started leading her in the direction of the hotel restaurant. "Not here," she objected. "It's too expensive. Can't we go to some other place?"

"Not tonight!" he cried. "This is a gala night; the heck with expense!"

They sat down facing each other across a small table. "Let me look at you!" he kept saying, and Clare felt as if his eyes were burning her to ashes. "Lark! Lark! I'm so happy to see you!" he murmured. "Without you I am only half a man! Do you realize that you've been my girl for more than half a year, and this is the first time I have taken you out! I'd like to make a round of the hot spots tonight just to show you off! I'm so damn proud of you! But we won't, eh, Lark? We've got something better to do!"

Clare smiled at him painfully. He rested his arms on the table, leaning towards her with shining eyes and provoking smile. Enveloped and overwhelmed in the triumphant male presence, she felt as weak as water. "Your letter this morning worried me," he was saying; "it sounded so cold! But you are not cold! You are my darling, darling lover! Your flesh yearns for me as mine for you!" Clare lowered her head. How will I ever have the courage to tell him? she thought.

"How long are you going to stay?" he demanded.

"Must go back tomorrow."

"No, Clare!" he cried in dismay. "The night is half gone already! Why tomorrow?"

"New York is too expensive."

"I'm on salary now. This is my party!"

She shook her head. "I couldn't let you."

He argued with her, and finding her firm, suddenly gave over. "Well, we won't waste time talking about it now."

They had long arrears of talk to make up. In telling of his experiences he said: "The general impression seems to be that I have the makings of an actor. I'm sorry for it. Because if you make the least hit at anything, they bring on a terrific pressure to keep you in the same rut. I hate the life. It's too feverish. You never have a chance to slow up and dope things out. I long for the river and the fields at Genizir."

Clare listened with only half her attention. She was absorbed in taking inventory of the new Lance sitting opposite. The beautifully cut suit, the carefully chosen shirt and contrasting tie lent him an added grace. The wild blond hair had been skillfully cut and somebody had showed him how to comb it effectively; his hands were carefully kept. She thought resentfully: He is always growing handsomer! It's not fair! I am his slave!

Hearing him say: "I can't make friends with actors," she asked, with a laugh: "How about actresses?" knowing that whatever his answer might be, it would hurt.

Lance shrugged. "They have nothing for me. Actresses are too knowing for my taste—at least those in our company. If there was one who had the least strangeness I might be in danger, but they fling themselves at my head, I mean at any man's head. At least they did in the beginning. I was kept busy side-stepping them. They've given me up now. They've decided I'm more fish than man!" Clare thought: Which may or may not be true.

She thought: This is the last time I'll see him; and her eyes dwelt on each feature to fix it in memory; his smooth, warm-colored skin; his irregular, satirical lips, always the same deep red—a red no woman's lipstick could reproduce; his beautiful neck. She wished she might unbutton his collar to see again how, like a sculptured column, his neck rose from his breast. Most of all she dwelt on his expressive hands. Lance talked with hands, shoulders, head, not extravagantly like a Latin, but with precise, speaking gestures that gave edge to his words. Nobody, having watched Lance and listened to him talk, could forget him.

He wanted to hear further what had happened at Genizir, and she told him, still taking care to soften the portrait of Livia. "What are you going to do now?" he asked. That gave her an opportunity to speak, but she was not equal to it. She thought: I *can't* tell him while there are people watching us. So she repeated the story of training herself to be a practical nurse. Lance did not appear to see any difficulties in the way. Clare thought: It's all one to him. He said: "When this job of mine is over, if you're living and working in Baltimore I'll be able to see you every night!"

Lance ordered a bottle of wine. He toasted her: "To a lady of quality!"

"Silly!" said Clare. "In last year's hat!"

"Quality resides not in hats!" said Lance. "Look around at these women. With all their slick smartness they're common! They glitter like ten-cent-store jewelry while you are a pearl from deepest ocean! I am the happiest man in New York tonight because I'm wearing you!"

Clare thought: And I the unhappiest woman! She knew, however, that this was not true. She could not be actively unhappy while Lance was embracing her feet under the table, and assuring her that he loved her. The unhappiness was coming.

She yielded to gaiety with a guilty feeling. It's all right as long as we are among people. If there was a slightly desperate ring in her laughter, Lance did not notice it. He said: "If I never do anything else in life, I can always say: 'Well, anyhow, I made Clare laugh!'" The attention they were receiving from the other people in the restaurant distressed her. "They stare so!" she murmured.

"They envy us," said Lance, "because we are happy. Happiness is a rare commodity in this town. The people are afraid to feel."

When they had finished supper they went up to Lance's room. It was the usual hotel bedroom, neat and characterless, but every detail etched itself on Clare's mind; the brown velvet carpet, the machine-made walnut furniture, a yellow-striped bed cover, an etching depicting a lovers' quarrel which had

been reprinted so many times all the lines were blurred. The only things suggesting Lance's occupancy were a couple of books on the bed table, and on the bureau Clare's own photograph in a silver frame. Looking at herself, she thought: Not a bad-looking girl, but she had no luck! She opened the closet door just for the pleasure of looking at Lance's clothes, and stroking them.

For a moment Lance remained leaning back against the corridor door with his head a little sunk between his shoulders, following her movements with glittering eyes, and grinning like Satan. Charming Satan! Clare's heart beat a bird's wings in her throat. She thought: I ought to have written. I can't stand out against him. I don't want to.

Into his voice came the husky note that she loved and dreaded. "Come here, woman!" She shook her head. In three long strides he crossed the floor, seized her, turned her around, crushed her to him; covered her face and neck with kisses. She lay in his arms breathless and faint. "Lance, stop!" she murmured, pushing against him feebly. "Dear, dear Lance, please stop!"

Laughing, he drew her closer. "Watch me stop! I've been hungering for you this month past! I could gobble you right up, Lark, and crunch your little bones!"

"Lance, you *must* stop!" she pleaded. "We've got to talk first."

He held her away a little, laughing in her face with provoking joy. "Make it snappy, girl! I'm in no humor for talking!"

"Let me go, Lance. I've got something to tell you."

He released her, and she walked away a few steps, turning her back on him because she could not bear to see the flashing light go out of his face. She struggled to get breath enough to speak. "Lance . . . Lance . . ." She covered her face with her hands. "I can't! I'm such a coward!"

He came up behind her, seriously alarmed. "What is it, baby?"

"Don't touch me!" she said sharply. "Lance . . . I'm going to marry Dave Tascott!"

Not a sound came from behind her, and she was forced to turn around to see how he was taking it. Lance's face expressed only a great blankness. His arms were hanging straight down. After a moment he said in a flat voice: "Well, I'm damned!"

Clare clasped her hands together in an agony. "Lance, don't look at me like that!"

"Have you fallen in love with Dave?" he asked in a voice of cold curiosity. She answered him with a glance of unspeakable reproach. "Then

why marry him?" he asked.

"Because I'm thrown on the world," she said with a bitter smile. "He wants me."

"Why not marry me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "You don't want it really."

With the same face of confusion he turned away from her. He walked to the bureau, picked up her picture, looked at it without seeing it, and carefully put it down again. He went to the windows and, though they were high above all surrounding buildings, pulled down the shades, taking his time about it.

"Lance, for God's sake, *say* something!" implored Clare.

"What am I to say?" he asked. And after a moment: "Dave knows all about you and me. Does he think that you have stopped loving me?"

"No. I told him the truth."

Lance sneered. "And still he's willing to take a chance on it? I always told you Dave was undersexed." Clare was so much under Lance's influence that for a moment Dave seemed to her a despicable figure. "It's just what that kind of man would do!" said Lance.

She shook off the obsession. "You don't have to insult him, Lance."

"Came to the rescue like another St. George," said Lance. "I'm not insulting him. Maybe he's a better man for it. Able to devote himself to higher things." The sneer was still there.

Clare, studying his face, made a bitter discovery. "You're relieved," she murmured.

Lance woke up then. "No, by God! Not at the thought of losing you!" he cried. "I know your worth. . . . But I have no good home and steady practice to offer you; it's up to me to keep my mouth shut!" Clare thought: My darling, I would take you with nothing! Ask me! Ask me! He said no more. She saw that in spite of protestations he *was* relieved and tasted the dregs of bitterness.

There was something shocking in the aspect of the triumphant Lance brought down in full flight; glowering at her confusedly like a schoolboy. Clare felt like a murderess. "Don't hate me!" she pleaded. "Try to put yourself in my place!"

"I can be fair," he muttered. "I don't see what else you could do."

"Oh, Lance, darling!"

In an instant they were in each other's arms again. He held her tightly and for a happy moment she thought: He isn't going to give me up! His first

words disabused her. “Honey-lips! Dear little bird, we have tonight anyhow. Nobody can take that from us. All our love must be summed up in one night! We’ll forget everything until morning!”

He was holding her so close he couldn’t see into her face. Clare, with her cheek pressed against his breast, clung to him thinking: I fooled myself! He isn’t very badly hurt! He can lose himself in the moment. How like him!

Lance was murmuring with a boyish note of dread in his voice: “We have tonight, haven’t we? Say we have tonight!”

Clare thought: I can’t deny him to his face. He would beat me down with his kisses. She said, smiling stiffly: “Why, surely! Let me go to my room and you come there.”

“No,” said Lance, holding her tight. “You stay here! I’m afraid to let you out of my sight. What difference does it make to us?”

“No!” she insisted. “All my things are in my room. Let me go and you come in half an hour.”

“Half an hour!” he cried. “Half a lifetime! What will I be doing for half an hour?”

“Please, Lance, because I ask it!”

He released her. “All right. Go quickly so the half hour can begin.” He glanced at his watch. “Half-past one. Well, anyhow, I can be late for rehearsal tomorrow. . . . Make it twenty minutes, honey!”

“All right,” she said with the stiff smile. “Twenty minutes.” She took his face between her two hands and, drawing it down, kissed his lips. That was for remembrance.

“Hurry! Hurry!” said Lance, urging her out.

She hastened to her room. She had never unpacked the little bag. She had only to gather up her few things and go on down to the lobby. In a blind panic she paid for her room, and wrote two lines on a sheet of the hotel note-paper.

“DARLING:

“Never forget that I love you. It has to end, darling. I lied to you because I couldn’t resist you.

“CLARE.”

Sealing it, she said to the clerk: “Please send this right up to Mr. Corder’s room.”

The last train for Baltimore had gone, and she taxied to a hotel near the station. Here she was shown to another narrow bedroom, furnished correctly

in grays instead of browns. When the door closed, she flung herself on the bed in a passion of relief. The struggle was over and, at whatever cost to herself, she had done what she had resolved to do.

Not for long. Her glance fell on the telephone. It stood on the bedside table within immediate reach of her hand. It fascinated her. In half a minute she could get Lance and undo all the harm she had done. She would hear the voice she loved, and the joy in it when he recognized her voice! Quick! Quick! before he went out! . . . No! No! No! She sprang up and paced the room holding her head between her hands. What good all the pain she had suffered if she caved in now!

But such a lie is unforgivable! she thought. Why do I have to make Lance hate me as long as he lives? Why aren't we entitled to our last night together? Dave said I was free. . . . That was the trouble. Just because Dave had told her she was free, she could not do it.

She tried to think of Dave; how honest, how unselfish he was; how deeply he loved her. With Dave she would be safe. The picture would not come to life; the figure of Lance outshone it; Lance, the burning lover; Lance, with whom alone she could achieve forgetfulness!

She saw him lying on his bed with face hidden, the yellow silk of the dressing-gown she had made him stretched tight across his broad flat back, the curly bright head; betrayed and desolate. Big as he was, she had had the experience of gathering him in her arms weeping. They had mingled their tears, and ended in crazy laughter. It made her heart contract to remember his terrible physical need of her. Now she saw him with a hateful, savage face, getting ready to go out in the streets. . . . That she could not bear.

Her hand went out to the telephone; she drew it back. There was Dave to be thought of, too. If she did this she could never face Dave. Before you saw Lance you knew what you had to do, she told herself. The rights of the matter have not been changed because Lance has excited you. Lance doesn't love you; he only has an appetite. Face it! Face it! Face it! This is your test; if you weaken under it, you will never be worth a damn!

She paced up and down the little room. In her torment suddenly a thought came to her as cooling as spring water. She plumped down on the edge of the bed and took the telephone. "Give me long distance. . . . Long distance? I want King's Green, Maryland, number 31, Doctor Tascott. . . ."

Chapter 22

MRS. DARNALL and Mrs. Chynne met in the A. & P. store. It was Saturday afternoon and business was heavy. While they waited their turn they drew a little aside to talk. There was a remote gleam in Mrs. Darnall's usually lack-luster eye. "What's new, Utie?"

Mrs. Chynne looked depressed because she had nothing of moment to pass along. "Nothing to speak of, Aggie. Charley Southam gain four pounds this week. He is safely on the mend. . . . The new wall-paper for Maddie Basilon's dining-room come on the truck yesterday. The package was tore a little. It's yellow, plain yellow. Fancy a yellow wall-paper! What is Maddie thinking of?"

"Reckon it must be Doct' Tascott's choosing, Utie. He run that house, now. Anything else?"

"There is little sickness in the county," said Miss Utie. "Doct' Tascott went to Bal'more today. Medical meeting. He'll be back for his evening office hours."

Miss Aggie smiled. "Sure he's gone to a medical meeting, Utie?"

"What else would he go for, Aggie? I sent my Ninny down there this morning, and Miss Maddie's maid, Flossie, she told him Doct' Tascott gone to Bal'more for a medical meeting."

"'Tain't often I can tell you something, Utie," said Miss Aggie with relish. "Doct' Tascott ain't gone to Bal'more to a medical meeting; he is gone to meet a woman!"

Miss Utie stared incredulously. "How you find that out, Aggie?"

"It's quite a story!" said Miss Aggie.

"We better go outside," said Miss Utie, glancing around.

"Nobody can hear us here," said Miss Aggie. "Listen, Utie. You know Sally English, the night telephone operator, she boards with my Patty."

Miss Utie nodded eagerly.

"Just before dinner," Miss Aggie continued, "Patty stop by, say she got something to tell me she couldn't say over the phone. Sally English told her.

Soon as she start telling me, I see how important 'twas, and I say: 'Wait a minute, Patty. I got to get this from Sally direct.'

"So we go right back to Patty's house and wake Sally up. Sally say, last night, at ten minutes to two, a long distance call come in for Doct' Tascott. It was from New York."

"Well, he come from New York," put in Miss Utie. "He has friends there."

"This call wa'n't from no New York friend," said Miss Aggie. "It was from Clare Eltonhead."

"No!" breathed Miss Utie, amazed. "Lance Corder's in New York. She went to see him!"

"I reckon," said Miss Aggie dryly, "but she call up Doct' Tascott at ten minutes to two!"

"*Ten minutes to two!*" breathed Miss Utie. "Go on, Aggie! What she say?"

"Clare say: 'Is this you, Dave? This is Clare. I am speaking from the Gov'nor Clinton Hotel, New York.'" Miss Aggie interrupted herself to ask: "Is that where Lance Corder is stopping, Utie?"

"No. He is stopping at the Wellington Hotel. I got that from the postmistress. Go on, Aggie!"

"Don't rush me, Utie! . . . Clare she say: 'Speak to me, Dave!' He say: 'Anything wrong Clare?' She say: 'No, I'm all right, Dave, only speak to me!'"

Miss Utie stared at the other woman. "That don't make sense, Aggie. I don't believe a word of it!"

Miss Aggie said: "That's how I know 'tis true, Utie. Nobody could make up such foolishness."

"What else?" demanded Miss Utie.

"Clare keep begging him to talk to her. He laugh and say: 'What shall I talk about?' He say: 'Everything in King's Green is just as you left it, Clare. The whole village is sleeping now.' Clare beg his pardon for waking him up. He say: 'I was broad awake, Clare, and thinking of you!' He say: 'The new wall-paper for the dining-room came this even'."

"Humph!" said Miss Utie, "how much it cost to telephone New York, Aggie?"

"Don't know. Couple dollars, maybe."

"That talk wa'n't worth no two dollars!"

“Wait, Utie, I ain’t told you all . . . Doct’ Tascott say: ‘If you don’t like the wall-paper, we’ll change it.’ ”

Miss Utie’s mouth opened. “What has Clare got to do with Doct’ Tascott’s wall-paper?”

“Wait, Utie! . . . Clare say: ‘I’m going over to Bal’more on the first train in the morning, Dave. Can you come up?’ And Doct’ Tascott say: ‘Only got three bad cases. I’ll get Hoskey to watch them. I’ll be at Southern Hotel eleven o’clock, waiting for you.’ ”

“Waiting for you!” murmured Miss Utie incredulously.

Miss Aggie resumed: “Doct’ Tascott say: ‘You ain’t changed your mind, Clare?’ ‘No,’ she say. ‘We’ll get married tomorrow.’ ”

Miss Utie stared silently. Her face reddened. Miss Aggie gloated a little. “It’s not true, Aggie!” gasped Miss Utie.

“So help me, Utie, I make Sally English say it over two, three times, and each time she repeat it word for word the same!”

Miss Utie said with passion: “I won’t believe my doctor could be taken in by that hussy ’til I see a wedding ring!”

“If she’s got a wedding ring, she’s a hussy no longer,” said Miss Aggie slyly.

“Go to New York to be with Lance Corder!” exclaimed Miss Utie. “And come back to marry Doct’ Tascott next day! It don’t make sense, Aggie!”

“Well, we’ll know tonight, Utie. It’s too bad it grows dark so early. We can’t see them pass.”

“I will go down for medicine this even’,” said Miss Utie. “I’ll know as soon as I see his face.”



Doctor and Mrs. David Tascott got home at six o’clock. Apple House was hospitably lighted up, and as they mounted the front steps Dave said warmly: “Ours, Clare!”

She murmured: “It’s lovely, Dave,” but the note was forced. Dave thought: She’s frightened. It’s up to me to make her feel at home.

Miss Maddie’s greeting, while kindly, was hardly enthusiastic; such was not her way. At the supper table Clare talked too much and too fast, and that made Miss Maddie the more silent. Dave’s breast was sore for Clare, but he

could not blame Miss Maddie. He thought: Only somebody who loved Clare like I do, could see all that is hidden behind her chatter.

Afterwards Miss Maddie took Clare upstairs to show her her room. Clare had chosen the big front room on the south side of the house. Dave hoped that the two women might get along better when he was out of the way, but had not much expectation of it. These two were predestined not to understand each other. He went into his consulting-room.

There was a small crowd of patients waiting, and, though by this time all knew it, it was incumbent on Dave to announce his marriage to each one in turn. The self-consciousness of the men—they didn't know what to say—and the tight lips of the women made it progressively more difficult.

Among the women was Mrs. Chynne, who appeared ready to burst with emotion. Her air of being personally injured by Dave's choice of a wife angered him. As she paid him for the visit, he said: "Miss Utie, you're wasting your money in coming to see me. I have told you there is nothing special the matter with you." She gave him a look of tragical reproach and silently made her way out of the room. Dave cursed her for a fool.

At eight o'clock he was called over to Starr's Wharf on the Bay for a delivery, and he did not see Clare again. It was near morning before he got home.

At the breakfast table he looked anxiously in his wife's pale face. It was smiling and animated—too animated! Signs of strain were visible around lips and eyes. Dave thought: There is nothing much I can do until Miss Maddie leaves the house. It is Miss Maddie who terrifies her. Miss Maddie, who probably thought the same, announced at the table that she was starting her packing that day.

Before going in to his patients, Dave drew Clare out on the back porch. "Didn't you think it strange I gave you no present?" he asked.

She shook her head. "There was no call for it," she murmured.

It hurt. "Please," he said; "it was a big occasion for me!"

"Sorry," said Clare. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Well, I have a present for you. Come and look at it."

He led her across the back yard and into the old doctor's stable which of late years had been serving as a garage. As soon as they entered the door, Clare heard a familiar whicker. "The Colonel!" she cried. Running into the stall, she flung her arms around the beast's neck and murmured in his ear. "Ah, my dear! my dear! I have not lost you!" Dave thought with a wry smile: She loves the horse better than the man!

“Dave, you shouldn’t have done it!” she cried, with tears standing in her eyes.

He looked away. “Why not? It was the most natural thing to do. The stall was still in place. All I had to do was to put in hay, oats and straw. My car can stand outside until I get a shed built.”

Clare murmured: “Coals of fire, Dave!”

“Nothing of the sort! It’s a hygienic measure. It’s good for you to ride.”

“But, don’t you see,” she said, half in earnest, “it would be easier to bear if you treated me brutally.”

“Sorry, I can’t oblige,” said Dave, grinning.

Two hours later, before starting out on his rounds, he looked for her again. She was in her own room and, apparently, doing nothing. That was bad. “Won’t you ride this morning?” he said. “It’s cold, but you’ll soon warm up. The Colonel needs exercise.”

“Give me a little more time,” she murmured; “I couldn’t face their stares today.”

At dinner time he caught a flicker of desperation in her eyes that caused him the keenest anxiety. She *must* have occupation, he thought. Finding Miss Maddie alone, he said: “Couldn’t Clare help you with your packing?”

“My soul!” said Miss Maddie good-humoredly. “No woman could tolerate another woman going through her things!”

“Find something for her to do, please,” urged Dave. “It would be the saving of her!”

“Very well, I will,” said Miss Maddie. Her grave glance said plainly: This is a strange way to start a marriage!

At the supper table Clare appeared to be easier in her mind. After supper Miss Maddie offered to teach her how to play cribbage, and Dave left them together. Before leaving the house, he looked in on them. The scene in the living-room was peaceful. Clare followed him out. In the hall she asked diffidently: “Will you be late tonight?”

“No,” said Dave. “Home at ten or ten-thirty unless there’s a new call.”

Clare, twisting a button on his coat, not looking at him, murmured unevenly: “I’ll be in bed. . . . Come in and see me. . . . It doesn’t matter how late it is.”

Dave was deeply shaken. He searched the downcast face, trying to read the riddle of her thoughts. “Better not,” he said breathlessly. “It’s too soon. Give yourself time. . . .”

“No,” she said. “I want you to come tonight. I’ll be waiting for you.” Dave tore himself away without answering her. I must think! I must think! he was telling himself confusedly.

Driving over the dark roads, he found himself completely unable to think. It was as if at Clare’s words the dam that he had been painfully building up in himself, stone by stone, had burst, letting such a torrent of emotion sweep through him as he had never known. The voice of reason was silenced. He was lost to his surroundings. It was well that he had no critical case to watch that night. He came to to discover that he had driven half a mile past Harry King’s house, whither he was bound.

Such a torrent of rapture that his breath was taken, and his hands trembled on the wheel. Clare! Clare! Clare! Clare, his darling, his wife, actually to be his! Clare, lying in bed in their home, waiting for him to come! She had asked him to come to her. Clare his! Beautiful Clare! There *was* to be happiness for him. He had never allowed himself to credit it. Such happiness as no man had ever known. Because he had wanted her so, and in his mind had relinquished her. Life was about to bloom like a garden. Every mile that he was forced to put between him and King’s Green seemed endless. His patients’ long-drawn-out recitals nearly drove him mad. When at last he was able to turn homeward, he drove like a fiend.

As he circled the house he saw that all the windows were dark. He was trembling violently when he went in the back door, and a cold fear struck through him: Suppose his manhood failed! He could grin at himself. He had heard of it happening to other men, and one always grinned; it was purely a psychological state. And anyhow there would be other nights. He refused to pause in the consulting-room for a drink to steady himself. The thought of putting whiskey in his mouth was profanation.

He undressed and stole across the hall to Clare’s door. He tapped lightly. There was no answer. He tried the handle and the door opened. He could dimly make out her figure in the bed. He dropped to his knees beside her. “Asleep?” he whispered.

“No, Dave.” For a long time he knelt, looking at her. He could see the shadow of her smile in the dark. Finally he felt for her hand and, finding it, pressed it against his cheek. “You’re trembling,” she whispered.

“With happiness, Clare.”

She made room for him in the bed. “It’s cold. Creep in beside me.”

“Wait awhile, dear. I must . . .”

“Must what, Dave?” He shook his head. He had no words.

He took her face between his hands. He pressed his cheek against hers. He dared not kiss her yet; she was too still. He drew his hands over her soft hair, her ears, her neck. For the moment he had a blind man's sentience, who sees what he touches. Over her satiny shoulders he drew his hands, to cup tremulously the perfection of her breasts under the thin silk. "Clare, my wife!" he whispered.

She lay still, too dreadfully still. In a sudden fright his hand reached for the switch of the bedside lamp. "No light!" she said sharply. It was too late. The light flared on and he saw the white-faced Clare, his lovely one, laid out straight in her bed with her arms at her sides, her eyes closed, lips wreathed in an agonized smile, a woman offered for sacrifice. He guessed that the hands under the covers were clenched. Without opening her eyes, she whispered: "Put out the light."

He did so, getting clumsily to his feet. "Go to sleep," he said huskily. "It's all right." He ran out of the room and, getting the door closed behind him, leaned against it. He was surprised to hear himself panting. He could not face the bitterness of that awakening. He went blindly downstairs and took a pull from the whiskey bottle. He carried the bottle back to his room.

Dave contrived to keep out of Clare's way during the whole of the following day. He didn't so much mind having Miss Maddie see his bloated face and bloodshot eyes; she knew him and she would never tell. He drove up to Millie King's before his morning office hours on the pretext of seeing her baby who was ailing, and accepted breakfast from the Kings. The long, cold drive enabled him to present himself to his office patients in fairly good shape. At dinner and again at supper he got Miss Maddie to send the servant into his office with a tray. All afternoon and all evening he was out on his rounds.

Next morning Miss Maddie had left the house. He heard Clare moving around downstairs, and he could no longer avoid facing her. Meeting in the dining-room they looked at each other silently; what could he say? what could Clare say? They sat down; Dave applied himself to his breakfast and Clare made believe to eat. The silence seemed to rake his flesh with sharp points, but he could not speak. In the end it was Clare who said:

"This can't go on."

Dave, not looking at her, muttered: "It would be foolish to give up after only two days' trial."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I tried."

“That was just the trouble,” said Dave woodenly. “You shouldn’t have tried. It must be left to Nature. . . . But you didn’t know that. I’m not blaming you.”

“Why did you avoid me yesterday?” she asked.

Dave laughed shortly. “Oh, that! I got drunk, that’s all. I looked awful. Didn’t want you to see me.”

“I did see you,” she said.

He glanced at her, startled. “I went into your room. . . . Oh, it was hours after you left me. I was nearly frantic, thinking what I had done to you. . . . I couldn’t rouse you. So I turned on the light . . .”

“And saw me lying there dead drunk,” put in Dave harshly, “and the empty bottle on the floor!” Clare was silent.

After a moment she went on: “If I stayed here it would wreck your life.”

“Nonsense!” said Dave. “Nobody can wreck my life. If my life is wrecked, it will be my own fault. . . . You’re taking it too seriously. It’s nothing to get drunk. A kind of safety valve. I’ve been drunk plenty of times before. Won’t hurt me unless it gets me down, and it can’t do that; I’m too busy.”

“But it’s too dreadful for you,” she persisted; “a life without love.”

Dave wondered if this were not more for herself than for him. “Nothing to it,” he said with a wry grin. “Plenty of love in my life. I’m in love with you. I may fry for it, but I’ll never be empty. . . . The point is, can *you* stand it?”

“I feel safe here,” she murmured.

“Okay,” said Dave; “that’s all to the mustard. We got off to a bad start, but nothing is changed.”

Dave asked for another cup of coffee. “We can pull out in front if we’re plain with each other,” he went on. “What happened last night was my fault, because I had thought the thing through . . . but I forgot . . . I let myself forget. It won’t happen again. You must never ask me to come to you. It’s not a thing to be talked about. If you should ever want me in the way I want—I’m not counting on it—I’ll know it without your saying anything.”

Clare looked at him silently with dewy eyes. Dave forced a grin. “For God’s sake, don’t turn on the waterworks!”

“Mustn’t I say what’s in my mind?” she whispered.

“No!” said Dave. “I know what you’re thinking!”

“What?”

“You are thinking: I could kiss Dave for that!”

Clare was startled. “Well . . . mustn’t I?”

“Like a sister!” he said with the self-mocking grin. “No! cut out the kisses, sister! Be a real sister, and give me hell!” Her softened, beseeching, grateful face was like Tantalus’ cup held before him. It will be a long time before I get my fences mended, he thought.

Chapter 23

CHRISTMAS came and went and there was outward peace in the Tascott household. The doctor and his wife were kept fully occupied. Clare by degrees made herself a valuable assistant in his office, helping with minor operations, and becoming adept in applying first aid when Dave was out on his rounds. As Clare became busier, she became harder; a new Clare emerged. She added to her activities by joining the Rector's Aid. The other women were shy of her in the beginning, but upon finding that she was folks like themselves, they forgot her long sojourn in the city. Marriage in Travis County put a period to scandal.

Dave, who took a New York paper, had read among the dramatic notes that Lance Corder's show had opened in Chicago with considerable success, and was likely to remain there all winter. Lance's name was never mentioned between Dave and Clare; Clare, however, in the devious way of women, had contrived to let her husband know that she did not correspond with Lance. Dave wished she hadn't taken the trouble, but nevertheless was eased in mind.

Meanwhile, Dave was promoting his hospital with some subtlety. He never urged it openly. Since a hospital would work to his own advantage, he preferred to let somebody else start it. Whenever a suffering patient was forced to make the long trip to town, Dave would say: "Well, some day when we're rich and populous, maybe we'll have a hospital of our own in the county."

There was a county boy, Ezra Southam, who had become a famous surgeon in Baltimore. Travis was proud of him, and whenever a county man or woman had to undergo a serious operation it was to Dr. Southam that they went. On one of his visits to the home folks, Dr. Southam called to make the acquaintance of the new county doctor. In the privacy of his consulting-room, Dave unfolded his darling scheme, and asked the surgeon to father it. Dr. Southam accepted with enthusiasm.

Thereafter the leaven worked swiftly. Whenever a patient from Travis consulted him, Dr. Southam would say: "If you people had a hospital down

there, it would save you a lot of money at a time like this. I could come down at regular intervals and do a number of operations on the same day. Or, if it was an emergency, I could get there in two hours.”

Another week-end visit of Dr. Southam’s happened to coincide with a rally of the Travis County Democracy. The doctor, as a compliment, was invited to address the meeting, whereupon, coolly disregarding political issues, he called upon Democrats and Republicans alike to build a county hospital, and offered to head the subscription list with a donation of five hundred dollars. Old John K. Southam, Senior, the head of the clan, got up after him to propose a public meeting a week hence to consider the matter, and offered to give the hospital a piece of land on the Pope’s Point road. Dave, in the back of the hall, smiled happily.

Dave made out a proposed list of governors and sent it to Dr. Southam. The latter came down again for the public meeting, took the chair pro tem, and offered the list as his own. Naturally it was adopted. Each of the new governors felt in honor bound to contribute generously. In all, over two thousand dollars in pledges was collected at the meeting. The site offered by John K. Southam, Senior, only a furlong from the state road, was considered ideal. Dr. Southam volunteered to find the plans for the building. Mrs. Maddie Bason, as the widow of a doctor who had served the county for half a century, undertook to form a women’s auxiliary. Miss Maddie lent her name and Clare did the actual rounding up of the women.

The disagreeable Maryland winter passed with its snow, sleet and rain; its alternate frosts and thaws; its bitter Northwest gales searching out the joints in the armor of old houses, and its unwholesome warm spells. They had a few pinched roses for Christmas, and at intervals all winter the naked jasmine bloomed in Dr. Tascott’s yard. These were busy days for the Tascotts. Once the hospital scheme was launched by others, it seemed natural for them to come forward and work for it. The plans arrived for a simple wooden building with fifteen beds, wards in the basement for colored patients, and an operating-room. In April the ground was broken with appropriate ceremonies. The building was estimated to cost ten thousand dollars.

On a morning towards the end of April, Dave and Clare were at breakfast in the yellow-papered room. Clare had spaded up Miss Maddie’s old garden, adding many new plants. Looking over his wife’s shoulder and through the bay window, Dave could see pansies, hyacinths and jonquils blooming. Clare was giving half her attention to Dave’s plate and coffee

cup, the other half to a list she was making of provisions required for a card party to be given by the Women's Auxiliary in the town hall.

"Twenty-one tables have been taken," she said, "and there are sure to be people coming who haven't notified us. We are providing twenty-eight tables."

"Where will you get so many?" asked Dave.

"Oh, everybody has a card table or two."

"Can you get so many tables in the hall?"

"Yes. I have taken measurements. Four tables go on the stage. There are practically no expenses, because the use of the hall and all the food has been donated; and the storekeepers have given the prizes. We will have twenty prizes. We're also going to have a couple of raffles. If the weather is favorable, we hope to clear a hundred dollars."

Dave gazed at her. Clare was too busy with her list to be aware of it. After five months he had not yet become accustomed to sitting opposite her at the table. It was almost the only time they had together, both were so busy. He got as much pleasure as ever in looking at her. But now he saw with pain that her skin had a bleak look, as if she had been touched ever so slightly by frost. He thought: A deep-breasted woman is made to bear children. She is being cheated.

Clare said: "Don't you think that's good?"

"Sure," he said, rousing himself, "but it's an awful lot of work for a hundred dollars."

"It's worth it!" she said briskly. "A little at a time; that's all we women can do. Some of the women wanted to charge a dollar a head, but I stood out for seventy-five cents. It sounds so much less. Better a hundred at seventy-five than seventy-five at a dollar, I said; more publicity in it. If it's a success, word will spread around and we can give another before warm weather. And when the city people open their cottages at Bayside we'll give one up there."

Dave had not been sleeping well and his morning thoughts were dark. Looking at Clare, he thought: Everybody says how wonderfully she has taken hold. They don't know that it is only the shell of a woman. The warm, breathing Clare is shut up inside. Month by month the shell hardens. Naturally she has to protect herself. In the end, if it isn't broken, she will dry up and be all shell. It was a mistake from the beginning. A man and a woman shouldn't try to live together unless they're in love.

"Next month we'll have a series of strawberry festivals," Clare went on.

"You mustn't try to do too much," said Dave.

“I’ll have sub-committees in each district,” she explained. “And another up at St. James’ Church. The people in that part of Ann Aranel will use our hospital, and they ought to help build it. I’m asking Livia Eltonhead to head that committee. She’s a sort of link between the two counties.”

“Well!” said Dave, “charity makes strange bedfellows!”

“Livia’s nothing to me now,” said Clare. “I’m sorry for the woman, alone in that big house. Not a soul will go near it.”

“Such a busy woman as you have got to be,” said Dave; “I scarcely recognize you.”

“I have found myself,” said Clare, “. . . thanks to you.” No smile accompanied her words; she had just thought of another item to add to her list. Dave thought: She has almost forgotten how to smile naturally.

“At the end of the strawberry season we will have enough to pay for the artesian well,” Clare went on. “The way to make women work is to keep a definite and not too difficult objective before them. If our money was to be turned into the general fund, they’d lose interest, but the talk of ‘our well,’ ‘pure water for the sick’ and so on, keeps them on their toes. As soon as we’ve paid for the well, we’ll start putting by for a sterilizer.

“In July we’re going to give three benefit dances for the hospital; at Absalom’s, at King’s Green and at Bayside. In August all the Fridays are taken for tournaments, and of course we mustn’t interfere with the churches. But we have decided to hold a tournament on Absalom’s Island on the Saturday following the tournament at King’s Green. Charlie Brome will put up the knights and their horses at the hotel overnight at half price. There hasn’t been a tournament at Absalom’s for years. On week-ends in summer, the place is crowded with strangers who have never seen a tournament. It ought to make a hit.”

“Sure,” said Dave. . . . “July’s a bad month down here,” he suggested diffidently. “So damned hot. I was hoping that I could persuade you to go for a vacation in July.”

“Not this July,” said Clare. “Anyhow, where would I go? To sit on the porch of some summer hotel or boarding-house? I would be perfectly miserable.”

“How about New York to see the shows? They say New York is a grand summer resort.”

“I don’t like New York,” said Clare, briefly. “You’re the one that needs a vacation. You’ve been overworked for years.”

“Well, I’ve reached the point where I could take an assistant,” said Dave. “I’ve asked Dr. Southam to look over the promising young men at Hopkins.

If he finds one, couldn't we go away for a little while?"

Clare glanced at him almost with fear. "I don't believe in married couples vacationing together," she said quickly. "You go." Dave thought: She wants things to remain as they are. She dreads a closer relationship.

He said: "You have lost weight during the winter; you're too pale."

"I do wish you'd stop worrying about my health," Clare said with a look of exasperation. "I am perfectly well. Why can't you take me for granted? For the first time in my life I feel that I'm making myself useful. But you won't leave me alone!"

Nerves, thought Dave: I'm on her nerves. I've got to make an attempt to break down the wall between us. It gets higher all the time. He said: "Never mind the vacation. What's wrong with us, Clare?"

"Wrong?" she repeated, running up her eyebrows. "I thought everything was going all right. You have your work; I have mine; we help each other; we share our interests."

"Work is good," said Dave, "but it's not everything."

Clare laughed angrily. "Certainly you need a vacation!"

Dave thought: Now she is deliberately evading the issue. She has learned that she can always face me down. He said: "Somehow we used to come closer to an understanding before we were married."

Clare stood up suddenly; tears of anger sprang in her eyes. "I don't know what's got into you today. I thought everything was all right. I'm doing the best I can. But it seems I've failed somehow." She ran out of the room.

Dave let her go. Sitting glumly in his place, he thought: She expects me to run after her and soothe her down. I won't do it. She's refusing to face the situation. Almost immediately Clare ran back into the dining-room. "I'm a beast!" she cried stormily. "I'll tell you what's the matter. You're too damned irreproachable! It drives me wild! It brings out the worst there is in me! For God's sake, lose your temper! If you cursed me, if you beat me, that would be something I could understand!" She ran out again.

When he was ordered to lose his temper Dave could only grin mirthlessly. Pushing a piece of toast around his plate, he thought: She's starved, that's what's the matter. . . . I suppose I'm starved, too; that's why I hate her sometimes. . . . My meat is her poison. . . . A pair of dry sticks, the two of us, going through the motions of living. What the hell is there in it for either of us? . . . She has been accustomed to a feast, it comes harder on her. . . .

Chapter 24

ON SUNDAYS the routine in the Tascott household was unchanged. There could be no lying in bed for the doctor; since he had his office calls the same as on weekdays. The only thing that distinguished the morning was the earlier arrival of the bulky newspaper. Clare, having put the house in order, was skimming through the pages of the *Sun*-paper in the living-room. Dave was in his consulting-room on the other side of the wall. From old habit, Clare always turned first to the theatrical news. Among the announcements of amusements in Baltimore for the current week, she came on this:

“The Vagabonds, to inaugurate their spring season in the little playhouse on West Read Street, are producing a comedy called ‘The Sophisticated Lovers,’ by Lawrence Corder. It is the first performance of the play on any stage. Mr. Corder, a former member of the organization, is the son of Arthur Corder, the eminent artist, and is well-known in Baltimore. Now a professional actor, he has been appearing all season with great success in Alma Fentress’ play ‘Touch.’ He has been in Baltimore for a week directing the rehearsals of his own play.

“When asked to say something about his work, the young author replied: ‘It’s my first offense.’” (Clare could hear Lance’s voice!) “‘I wrote it last year and am very glad of this opportunity to stand it up and have a look at it. It is particularly fitting that the Vagabonds should do it, because it was as a Vagabond that I received my first training in the theater. As the oldest little theater organization in the country, the work of the Vagabonds is known everywhere. I am very grateful for the enthusiasm with which they have attacked my comedy. I can only say that at rehearsals it sounds like a regular play. In the profession Baltimore is considered the best judge of a new play of any city in the country, and I await its verdict with confidence. The title suggests the theme of my play. I would rather not say anything about the plot in

advance. Several New York managers have promised to come down to see it during the week.’ ”

Clare’s lips curled. Lance had not forgotten how to flatter! She heard the paper rattling in her hands, and quickly put it down. She was astonished at the pain that quivered through her. She had thought herself immune. What is it to you? she asked angrily. That chapter is closed. Forget it! Forget it!

Jumping up, she began to move the furniture around. She never had been satisfied with the arrangement of the living-room. It looked silly for the two sofas to be facing in the same direction. The big sofa ought to be turned around at the other side of the fire so it would be facing the little one in the embrasure of the bay window.

Dave, in the next room, hearing the rumbling, presently appeared in the doorway. “For God’s sake!” he said, laughing; “at it again!”

The sight of him exasperated Clare almost beyond bearing. “*Please*, Dave, leave me alone!”

“Let me help you!” he said.

The newspaper was lying where she had dropped it, and she was afraid that his eye might be caught by the item which had upset her. Dave was so quick, sometimes. She said: “I can call the girl if I need help.”

He insisted on taking hold of the sofa and moving it into the desired position. “Now go back to your patients,” she said.

“Let me help finish the room,” begged Dave; “won’t take but a minute or two.”

“Get out!” she said, stamping her foot. He lingered, smiling at her. His look said: If we were really married I would kiss you now, and go back to my work refreshed!

He went away. Clare clenched her hands in helpless exasperation. Why won’t he leave me alone! The thought of touching him makes me shiver! I can’t help it! Every minute of the day he is putting me in the wrong! He makes me hateful! He makes me hate myself! It is unbearable!

She put the newspaper out of sight. Thus if he wanted to look at it he would have to ask for it, and she would know whether or not he had read about Lance. She had noticed that Dave, as well as herself, always read the theatrical news. Sunday was his busiest day, however; and next morning the paper could be thrown out. Inside her a mocking voice whispered: You don’t want him to read the item because you are getting ready to lie to him. No! she insisted. I won’t let that old wound be re-opened! I won’t! I won’t! The voice replied: It has never closed!

Clare tried to concentrate on her house. She went through all the rooms, arranging this; changing that. They were beginning to look as she wished them to look. Dave had been able to pick up a number of antique pieces in the remoter parts of the county, and she had refinished them herself. Downstairs there was a generous hall through the middle like that at Genizir on a smaller scale. Dining-room and living-room extended to the left and right, each a long room ending in a capacious bay. Back of the dining-room were pantry and kitchen; back of the living-room Dave's consulting-room. Years before, a part of the back porch had been enclosed to make a waiting-room for the patients. Upstairs there were four immense bedrooms, and over the front hall an old-fashioned bathroom as big as another bedroom.

However she might rush around the house, Clare could not quiet the struggle that was tearing her apart. You know what you've got to do! Do it! It would be suicidal to go to Baltimore. All you've built up during the past six months would be destroyed. You'd only be preparing fresh miseries for yourself. What can you hope to gain? Do you think that Lance would remember you for six months? Impressible Lance! It would kill you to see that he had changed and was only pretending. . . .

I've *got* to see this play! It's my only link with the world of people who are doing things! And this is my one chance to see it! If I passed up the opportunity I would regret it all my life. If I stayed home every night when I knew it was being performed, I'd go crazy! I'm entitled to see it. There's something of me in it. It's the play I want to see, not Lance. Of course, if he takes a call on the stage, I would see him. If he has become cheap and common it would cure me, and I would not suffer so. Lance would never know that I was in the theater. . . .

Dave did not ask for the newspaper during the day. By evening Clare had become reckless and tight-lipped. The struggle was over. At the supper table she said casually to Dave: "I believe I'll drive up to Baltimore tomorrow. If you have no objection, I'll stay all night, and return Tuesday."

"Objection? Of course not!" said Dave.

There was no necessity for Clare to go on and lie about the reason for her trip; Dave would never have questioned her; but she was driven to do so. "I want to see if I can't persuade the big stores to donate prizes for our card parties. All the people down here have accounts with Hutzlers and Hochschilds, and the Bayside cottagers deal with the Washington stores. They ought to do something for us. We can repay them by advertising them as the donors."

"Good idea," said Dave. "When will you be home?"

“I’ll do Baltimore Monday, stay all night at the Cecil, and drive over to Washington early on Tuesday. I’ll start home as soon as I canvass the biggest stores.”

Clare now had her own trim convertible coupé. Starting off in it next morning, her heart was beating fast. She could not feel remorseful; the relief of getting away from Dave was too great. She thought: I am alive again! Anything is better than to feel dead inside! The road that she knew so well presented new beauties at every turn. The woods had not yet assumed the dense unbroken hue of summer, but showed a harlequin dress of all the greens, pale greens, yellow greens, rosy-budding greens. In every hollow a Judas tree, always solitary, flaunted its magenta blossoms, and everywhere dogwood held up its multitudes of little flat saucers to catch the sun.

Arriving in town, Clare did in fact go to work, and in the course of the afternoon succeeded in obtaining several donations from the department stores. Afterwards she visited a couple of hospitals to inspect their sterilizing plants. Thus she made sure of having plenty to tell when she got home.

She took a room at the Cecil. Getting ready for the evening, she kept telling herself there was not the slightest chance of meeting Lance. On the opening night he would have a hundred things to see to, and after an opening he had told her the Vagabonds always threw a party. Nevertheless, she dressed with anxious care. She had a black chiffon dinner dress with a full skirt that she had been saving for months—she could never have told why. Lance had loved her best in unrelieved black, because, he said, it made her little face so vivid. Studying her face in the mirror, she sadly acknowledged that it had lost a deal of vividness since Lance had gone out of her life. She added a touch of rouge to her pale cheeks. Every woman needs it at night, she told herself.

Proceeding to the little theater, she chose a seat towards the back, and in the middle of the row. If Lance comes out to take a call, she thought, I must be surrounded by faces so he can’t pick me out. But I’ll see him! . . . I’ll see him! I’ll know how things are with him. Waiting for the curtain to go up, her excitement became so intense she could scarcely bear it. The last six months were sponged out. She was one with Lance again. She was about to see and hear their play. She found herself dreading the outcome. These actors were only amateurs. Suppose they broke down in their parts?

The lights were lowered and silence fell on the house. Clare’s mouth was as dry as dust; she swallowed hard. When the curtain slowly rose, the stage seemed to be enveloped in a fog. Suddenly it cleared, and the mimic drawing-room with all its furniture facing the audience became more real than reality. A disappointment awaited her; the spell that had been laid on

her when Lance read the lines was not renewed. These commonplace actors were far from suggesting the brilliant personages she had imagined.

The play itself was changed. The story was the same, but it was developed differently; the speech was more staccato; commoner, she thought. It didn't sound like Lance. Surely he would not have allowed anybody else to touch his play. The actors appeared to know their lines, but they established no sympathy with the house. The people around Clare were staring dully at the stage. Lance's best lines provoked no response. It's not getting over! she thought with a sinking heart.

Between the acts such comment as reached her ears was discouraging. "Can you make head or tail of it, my dear?" . . . "No. It's just talky-talky." . . . "A young man trying to be clever." "I don't see why the Vagabonds have to do these new plays. They're never any good. Now, when a play comes from Broadway, we know we have something!" And so on. And so on. Fools! thought Clare. It's too original for their stupid minds!

However, at the end of the third act the applause was generous, and the curtain went up again, revealing the whole company in line on the stage to take their bows. The hand-clapping continued, and when the curtain went up once more, Clare's heart gave a great jump. There stood Lance in the middle of the line of actors, bowing and smiling. In the glare of the lights, and enframed within the proscenium, he looked like a work of art, not quite human. But it was Lance all right—a little changed. He looked handsomer; more of a man; there was a strengthened assurance in his glance. Clare perceived with a sting of jealousy that life had used him. There was an ironic twist to his smiling lips that made her feel weak.

The curtain fell for the last time, and Clare glanced around her guiltily to see if her emotion had been noticed. She found herself almost alone in her row of seats, and made haste to tag on to the departing spectators in the aisle. She was almost the last to leave the theater. Not more than five or six minutes could have elapsed since she had seen Lance on the stage, but when she got out in the lobby, there he stood on the sidewalk outside, anxiously searching the faces of the departing audience. Clare's heart contracted. She looked around in a panic, but there was no possible way of escape.

An instant later he had both her hands in his. "Clare!"

The street swung dizzily in front of her. "You saw me from the stage!" she said faintly.

"Of course I did! Your face stood out among all those others like a gold piece in a pile of pennies!"

"Someone will hear you!" she murmured in distress.

“Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?” he demanded.

“I thought you’d be too busy tonight!”

“Too busy! Oh, Clare! . . . Come on! Let’s go some place where we can talk!”

She hung back. “No! You belong to your friends, tonight.”

“Well, aren’t you my friend?”

“The Vagabonds are giving a party.”

“They’ll have a better time if I stay away. The occasion is hardly one for mutual congratulations.”

“Aren’t there New York people you have to see?”

“Not tonight. Come on!” Before Clare knew what was happening, she was being bundled into a taxicab. “Take us to the Stafford,” Lance said to the driver.

In the cab he drew her arm through his in the old way. With his free hand he turned her face around and kissed her. “You sweet!” he murmured.

Clare’s strength ran away like water. By assuming that nothing was changed, he deprived her of every prop. “You mustn’t!” she said faintly. He ignored it. His eyes dwelt on her as proudly and possessively as if she were still his. Clare thought: Well, I suppose I am!

In the Stafford they sat at a little table in the lounge with their backs against the wall. In the strong light Lance’s compelling glance fastened on her as if he would draw her very being into himself. “Don’t look at me like that!” she faltered.

“Why not? You used to like it!”

“I’m not so nice to look at now.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “You are not changed. Trained down a little too fine, that’s all. In a way, it’s an advantage; shows up your beautiful bones. Your face has the most beautiful bones in the world! Every time I look at it I wish I was a sculptor, so I could model it.” His expressive hands approached her face.

“Be careful!” she said, sharply. “There may be people here who know us!”

Clare ate and drank what was put before her without caring what it was. “What did you think of the play?” asked Lance carelessly.

“The people didn’t get it,” she said. “They made me angry.”

Lance shrugged. “What would you expect from a hick town? They never know what to think unless they’ve been told beforehand.”

“But, Lance, in the newspaper you said . . .”

“Eye-wash, darling. I didn’t put the play on for Baltimore’s benefit, but for my own. I learned a lot from the performance tonight, bad as it was.”

“You have changed it a lot,” said Clare.

“Sure. Do you like the changes?”

“Not altogether.” It took courage to say it.

Lance was not at all put about; six months earlier he would have been crushed. “What didn’t you like?” he asked.

“The dialogue seemed less eloquent; flatter, somehow.”

He laughed outright at that. “I might have known you’d say it. We loved the old lines, didn’t we? How I used to spout them!”

“They were beautiful!” Clare insisted.

“Too beautiful,” said Lance. “Every beginner writes in that lush style. It’s got to be unlearned before he gets anywhere. Don’t you see, nobody but a ham can speak such lines. For modern actors, dialogue has to be cut to the bone. That’s what I’ve learned from acting myself these past months.”

Clare thought: He’s too sure of himself. She said: “The present version wouldn’t read so well.”

“Plays are written to be acted, not read,” retorted Lance. . . . “Mind, you didn’t see any acting tonight. Those poor simps didn’t know what it was all about. They’re amateurs; they can’t project themselves. They only join the Vagabonds through vanity, and it’s impossible to get any teamwork out of them. Some day if I am lucky enough to get real actors for my play, and you see how they use their voices, their faces, their whole bodies to illustrate the meaning of my lines, you won’t feel that anything is lacking.”

Clare smiled stiffly. “You have become a thorough actor!”

Lance laughed. “Don’t be afraid, Lark, I’m not going to stay on the stage a moment longer than necessary. I would never make an actor. At first I thought I was good because I felt my part. That’s not enough. First you’ve got to feel it, then you’ve got to get it across. I would never be any good because I can’t see myself from the outside. An actor’s instrument is his own person.”

“I would like to see you write something better than mere vehicles for actors,” said Clare. “I mean plays that would live!”

“I’m not worrying about posterity,” said Lance. “If posterity doesn’t like me, I’ll never know it. I suspect, if the truth were known, none of the great old boys gave a hoot for posterity. They worked for their own day, just like

me, and were great in spite of it. Posterity pays no royalties; I intend to be a success in my own time!”

Clare thought: I have lost all my influence over him! She said: “I can’t argue with you, but I feel that you’re wrong.”

Lance dissolved in fresh laughter. “What is it now?” asked Clare stiffly.

“Nothing, darling, but you’re such a little darling when you sit up and talk like an earnest child! Your eyebrows arch so; your back is so straight; I could . . .”

Clare summoned her dignity. “*Please, Lance!*”

His voice deepened. “What does talk matter to you and me when we have shared Paradise?”

“Talk!” Clare said; “it gushes from you like water from a Roman fountain!”

Lance shouted with laughter. “Good! That was a nasty crack! . . . Sure, I love to talk, but I am not kidded by it!” He lowered his voice. “Talk doesn’t rate very high in the lovely land where you and I adventure.”

“That’s over,” murmured Clare.

He paid no attention. “You yourself are beyond words,” he said. “You’re a quality, an essence. I cannot realize you. Every time I see you is a first time.”

“That’s not good dialogue,” said Clare. “It’s flowery nonsense.”

Lance laughed and leaned closer. “Sure! What the hell.” He put his hand over hers. Clare drew her hand away. “Laugh with me, Lark, like you used to do,” he pleaded. “Remember when I first gave you that name and why?”

Clare felt her face crimsoning. “Lance, *please!*”

“It’s so sweet to make you blush,” he murmured. . . . “Laughter is the realest thing there is. You can bank on laughter! And it becomes you so! The corners of your lips are drooping tonight. That’s not right. Your laugh is like the sound of water when a man’s thirsty. Laugh, and be my lark again!”

She kept her head down. “I can’t. You feel nothing!”

“That’s not so,” he said quickly, “and you know it! I show it differently, that’s all. I laugh.”

She pushed the table out a little. “Pay the check,” she said; “I must go now.”

“No!” cried Lance in dismay. “It’s only midnight!”

“Just the same, I must go.”

“Where are you stopping?”

“At the Cecil.”

“For how long?”

“I go home tomorrow.”

His face lighted up. “Then you came up especially to see the play?”

“Oh, no,” said Clare; “I had business in town.”

“Ouch!” said Lance. “Another for me! I can’t let you go home tomorrow!”

“It doesn’t rest with you.”

“Another! I am bleeding from a dozen wounds, Lark!”

“Please, Lance! I have to go. I mean it!”

He suddenly stopped trying to persuade her; paid his check and stood up. She stole a look in his face. Was he angry? No, he was sucking his cheek in; he didn’t care. They got a cab at the door. He was quiet during the ride downtown; sat clasping her hand between both of his. Outside the door of the hotel he bade her good-night, simply. Why had he no more to say? It was not like him. She told herself she was grateful to him for not making it harder, but her heart sank sickeningly when he turned away. Not to try to kiss her, and nobody near! Where was he going now? Certainly not to bed! She made her way blindly to the elevator.

In her room she bustled senselessly to and fro; folding the dinner dress and shaking it out again; packing her bag; unpacking it; threading a needle to mend a microscopic rip in a seam. She telephoned down to the office for a magazine, only to be informed apologetically that the newsstand was closed. She drifted around the room. What she could not face was lying in bed in the dark.

She had been in her room for about half an hour when there was a knock at the door. Without opening it she asked: “Who is it?”

The answer came: “Lance.”

Clare’s heart stood still. “Go away!” she said faintly.

“Open the door,” he said; “I must speak to you.”

“Go away,” she repeated. “You can telephone.”

“I could,” he said, and she could hear the tremor of laughter; “but I’m here now. I must talk to you face to face.”

“Go away!”

“I’m not going until I have seen you!”

Clare was in a panic. Suppose he was heard? Suppose someone came through the corridor and saw him at her door? He would never go away; she

knew his obstinacy. To let him in would be the quickest way to get rid of him. She opened the door and instantly she was swept into his arms. "Lance, the door!"

He kicked it shut behind him. "Clare! Clare! Clare!"

Involuntarily her arms locked around his neck. "Oh, Lance!" Everything was simplified.

Presently she realized that he was wearing the dressing-gown she had made him. "What does this mean?" she asked.

"I went home and got my bag," he said, laughing. "I've taken a room here. It's on the same floor."

She struggled to release herself. "You can't stay here!"

"When you love me and I love you? What nonsense, Lark!"

"No! There are other things to be considered now."

He held her away a little. "Look at me!" he commanded with the directness that terrified and charmed her. "Do you sleep with Dave?"

"No."

"Have you ever?"

"No."

He drew her close again. "I knew it! I could see it in your face! . . . Well, if he doesn't want you, I do, by God!"

"No, Lance!"

"You were mine before he ever came into the picture," Lance insisted, "and he knew it! He took his chance!"

"He has done so much for me!"

"All right," said Lance. "We're not robbing him of anything. A man can't be robbed of what he never had!"

Clare drove home on the following afternoon with a quiet breast. It was so pleasant to idle along the road and remember. She felt no regret for what had happened. What was done was done, and it was foolish to try to whip up a conventional remorse. As Lance said, there were certain natural rights that could not be ignored. And anyway, they could not have gone on the way they were going. It wasn't doing Dave any good, and it was making her hateful.

She had been at the point of loathing Dave. All that was changed now. Her thoughts traveled ahead affectionately to her waiting husband. He was a dear, and she had been treating him very badly! She would make it up to him

now—but not so quickly that his sharp eyes would perceive any sudden change in her. She was taking him some smart neckties. He was so neglectful of his appearance. How pleased he would be when he opened the package. . . .

Chapter 25

MAY verged into June, June into July, July into August. Each card party, strawberry festival and dance added its quota to the fund of the Women's Auxiliary; the artesian well for the hospital was paid for, and a fund for the sterilizer begun. Meanwhile the foundations of the building were completed and the walls began to rise. Nearly every evening during the summer Dave and Clare drove up to the site to see what had been done during the day. The hospital was their child.

It lifted a weight from Dave's breast to see that Clare had turned a corner. Nothing appeared to tire her now; even the stifling days of July had not pulled her down. A little color returned to her thin cheeks and her laugh often chimed through the house. Whatever he was doing, Dave raised his head to listen to it. Their relations were improved all around. Once more they could exchange humorous accounts of the day's work or talk over Dave's professional problems. It's grand to have a wife you can talk to, Dave thought. We are slowly drawing together.

When the question of furniture for the hospital came up, Clare made it her business to persuade each of eight prominent families to furnish a private room in memory of someone they had lost. She designed little memorial plates for the doors of the rooms. She made frequent trips to Baltimore in search of bargains in linen, furniture, floor coverings and what not, and on these occasions Dave insisted that she should spend a night in town, because, he said, it was too fatiguing to drive home after a day spent in shopping.

The building was to be dedicated in September, and in August Dave began to look for his personnel. A resident physician was hardly required, but he wanted a head nurse, a housekeeper and two graduate nurses. When he announced that he had to go to town for this purpose, Clare demurred at accompanying him.

"With the Absalom's tournament coming on, I have too much to do," she said.

“I could put it off for a few days,” Dave said with a transparent casualness.

“No, it’s better for us to go singly,” said Clare. “One of us should remain within hearing of the telephone. The maid isn’t capable of taking important calls.” Dave swallowed his disappointment and prepared to go alone.

On Charles Street in Baltimore he ran into Lance Corder swinging along. Lance greeted him with a smile, but there was a doubt in his eyes as if he were not sure how it would be taken. “Hello, Dave!” he sang out, ready to pass on, but Dave stopped and held out his hand. Things were all right at home, and he harbored no rancor against Lance. He felt only pleasure at the meeting; Lance had all of the old extraordinary attraction for him.

They shook hands. “How about a spot of lunch?” asked Dave. “I was on my way to eat.”

Lance looked a little surprised; hesitated. “Glad to,” he said, “if you’ll let me pay.”

Dave said: “I thought of it first.”

“Nothing doing!”

“Very well, if you’re obstinate, let’s make it Dutch.”

“Okay!”

They walked along Saratoga Street towards the Rennert, talking idly. Dave thought it strange that Lance didn’t ask for Clare. Not so strange, perhaps. The boy was young; he hadn’t the assurance. “Clare’s well,” Dave said to break the ice.

“That’s fine!” said Lance, and went on talking about something else.

Dave kept glancing at him out of the corners of his eyes. The young man’s good looks were astonishing; the intensity of life in him; the reserves of vitality suggested in his lazy walk. He was as unconscious of self as a young animal. Dave thought: How wonderful it must feel to be so keen! In the lobby of the Rennert they passed a full-length mirror, and Dave, marking his own meager figure alongside the tall, swinging Lance, thought with a wry smile: What a contrast! There was no bitterness in it.

They sat beside a window looking out on Liberty Street. “This is an unexpected pleasure,” said Dave. “I thought you were—well, I didn’t know where you were, but doing whatever it is actors do in the summertime.”

“Please don’t look on me as an actor,” said Lance; “that was only a stop-gap. I’ve been living at home all summer, writing another play.” He caught himself up with an uneasy glance at Dave, and the latter thought: Was that a

slip? Shouldn't he have told me that he's been in Baltimore all summer? Then he must have seen Clare, and that's why he didn't enquire for her.

All Dave's warmth slowly congealed while they talked on. He hated the feelings that took possession of him. He wouldn't ask Lance if he had seen Clare. The question in itself would suggest that he didn't trust his wife. If the two of them had been together, he had already revealed himself as a deceived husband. It was a galling thought. He smiled. He knew he could trust his face not to betray him. Somehow he had to end the suspicion that made him feel hateful and furtive. A thing that you knew could be faced. He felt his way along.

"In town all summer? It's been damned hot."

"I haven't minded it," said Lance; "been too busy."

"Well, I suppose you have got out into the country frequently?"

Lance shook his head. "No further than the Lakewood pool on Charles Street. I've cut out all social affairs. You can't keep it up when you have serious work to do."

Dave said with a laugh: "It doesn't seem to have injured your health."

"Nothing hurts me," said Lance. Dave thought: No, damn you! you hurt others; nothing hurts you!

Dave tried one line and another. "What luck did you have with the first play you wrote? I don't remember the title of it."

"The Sophisticated Lovers," said Lance. "The Vagabonds tried it out. Didn't you see the notices in the paper?"

"No. Must have missed the papers at that time. When was it?"

"Week of May second," said Lance. "It was that that brought me back to Baltimore."

Dave did a little mental calculation. May second? How can I recall May second? . . . Young John Harper's funeral was on May fifth. It must have been on the third that he died. I felt bad about losing a young patient. Clare came home from Washington that afternoon. That is, she said she drove from Washington. It was the first time she had been away overnight. The change in her dated from that day. She was contented. She had been with Lance. Now I know!

Lance went on to tell Dave about the misadventures that had attended "The Sophisticated Lovers." Dave, while he made the suitable comments, was thinking: What a fool I was to imagine that she was turning to me! It was Lance who made her happy; so happy that she could spare me a little kindness. She was sorry for me. That night and all the nights that she has

spent in town since. How many? six, seven, eight. Where did they go? To the Cecil, of course, so that if I had called up I would have found her there. If I had called her when he was in the room, how they would have laughed afterwards! . . . No! The hatefulness is in yourself, not in them! For God's sake, be fair!

Lance talked and Dave listened with a friendly grin. He could scarcely breathe for the pain he felt, but at the same time the quiet inward voice was prompting: It's only because you have been living in a fool's paradise that you feel cheated. When will you learn to face the truth? Would you set up to compete for a woman's favor with Lance? Look at him! You yourself diagnosed Clare's condition long ago. Only Lance had the remedy that would cure her. Do you blame her for taking it? You gave her full freedom. You can't assume to play the wronged husband now!

He caught Lance glancing at him curiously, and realized that he was near the breaking-point. "What's the new play about?" he asked quickly.

"It's a cock-eyed farce," said Lance. "Clare . . ." He caught himself up.

"Clare what?" asked Dave, smiling.

"I was about to say that I was afraid Clare wouldn't like it," said Lance lamely. "She takes the drama so seriously." Dave laughed with him. He thought: What you were about to say was that Clare doesn't like it. She knows all about it.

"But it's damn funny if I do say so," Lance went on; "and after all, I'm at the proper age to write farces. The public is hungry for laughter."

"Sure," said Dave. "Tell me more about it."

"Well, it deals with a pious old bachelor whose submerged personality suddenly comes to the surface and plays hell with his life. Old stuff, of course, but I think I have given it a new slant."

"Will the Vagabonds try it out for you?"

"Over my dead body!" said Lance.

Dave's glance dwelt on Lance, fascinated. He was thinking: You can't blame him, either. He's only fulfilling his manhood. How glorious to ride on the crest of youth! To grab as much of life as you can without giving a damn. Morality is only a pretty name for cowardice. The thing is to live. Lance's terrible attraction is that he dares to let himself go! He's like a candle among a swarm of moths! Lance is the embodiment of other men's fantasies!

He said: "I take it you won't be rustivating here in Baltimore much longer?"

Lance said carelessly. "Oh, when the play is done I'll have to go to New York to peddle it."

"You'll break from your cell like the monk of Siberia, eh?" Dave said.

Lance said: "I can't afford to roister until I make a strike."

"The best fun doesn't cost anything in money," said Dave. "And New York offers wider opportunities than sober old Baltimore."

Lance was becoming uneasy. "You ought to know."

"Me?" said Dave. "I was a prisoner in Bellevue Hospital for six years. That's all I know about New York."

"I don't know much more about it," said Lance.

"Come off!" said Dave. "Don't expect me to believe that you live in New York like a hermit!"

Lance, without answering, cast an odd glance at Dave. Dave thought: He despises me because I am truckling to him. It seems morbid to him. It is morbid. Why can't I hate him? Why can't I act blindly like other men? If I could be headlong and unthinking like Lance, I would be a success with women, too. I can't hate him. I am under his spell. I wish I were he!

Before the meal was half-way through, Lance, who never troubled to conceal his feelings, showed that he wanted to get away. As soon as they had eaten the last mouthful, he said: "I must get back to the grind."

Dave's heart sank at the thought of losing him. "Not yet!" he said quickly. He wanted—what? . . . Let him go! Let him go! prompted the voice of reason. You are stultifying yourself! He would not listen. "It's so long since we've seen each other," he urged. "You haven't told me anything about yourself."

"Nothing to tell," grumbled Lance.

"That's not possible," said Dave. "You're at the age when interesting things are bound to happen. And you're the kind they happen to."

"News to me," said Lance with an uncomfortable smile.

"Have you ever read Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*?" asked Dave, tormented by an ugly curiosity.

"No," said Lance.

"Very remarkable book. I'll lend it to you if you like."

Again Lance's glance of surprise. "No, thanks. I don't like to read that sort of thing."

"You prefer to conduct your own experiments?" suggested Dave, slyly, while he hated himself for it.

“I didn’t say that, either,” Lance answered, frowning.

“Of course, one must be guided by one’s instincts,” Dave went on, “but there’s a lot to be learned from the experience of others.”

“Oh, sure,” said Lance. “But my instinct tells me not to dwell on the subject.”

“In my practice I meet with a lot of the results of ignorance,” said Dave.

“I dare say,” said Lance.

“Ellis’ case histories are especially interesting,” Dave continued. “The only trouble is, the author is so essentially clean-minded sometimes you can see where his subjects have put one over on him. One has to be a sinner to understand sex.”

Lance would not be drawn. “Let’s talk about something else,” he said, looking out of the window.

Dave got home in time for his evening office hours. Clare, cool and fresh as a flower at sunrise, was watching for him from the front porch. She ran through the house to meet him as he came up the back steps from his car. “Supper’s ready!” she said. Nowadays she offered him her cheek. Dave kissed it, marveling for the hundredth time at its softness. He followed her into the house, smiling as was expected of him, thinking: An admirable wife!

“We had a quiet day,” said Clare. “No new cases. Miss Utie Chynne was here after lunch.”

Dave said: “But I had told her I would be away all day.”

“Sure. That’s why she came. To take an observation of me.”

“What for? To see if you bear the marks of my beating?” This was their usual style of persiflage.

“I’m afraid they’ve given up hope of that,” said Clare. “No. It’s to watch my waist line. The great preoccupation of these women is pregnancy. They are always playing hide-and-seek with each other.”

Dave thought: Why does she have to flick that raw spot? “I see!” he said, laughing.

They sat down at the supper table. “What about your day?” asked Clare. “Tell me everything between mouthfuls.”

Dave thought: It would be silly for me to complicate the situation by lying, too. He said: “You could never guess whom I met on Charles Street.”

“Shan’t try,” said Clare, smiling. “Who was it?”

“Lance Corder.”

She continued to smile, but Dave saw her grow wary behind it. “Yes?” she said, waiting for a lead.

“We lunched together,” said Dave.

“That was nice. What did you talk about?”

“I was surprised to learn that he had been in Baltimore since May,” said Dave. Clare said nothing. “You have seen him?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered calmly, still waiting for her cue.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She was not disturbed by the question. “I didn’t want to distress you. I’m sorry I didn’t now.”

“It distresses me more to be kept out of your confidence,” said Dave.

“I’m sorry,” she said, with a frank, apologetic smile that was altogether charming. Dave thought: Good God! are there no limits to a woman’s power of dissimulation!

“It doesn’t signify much,” Clare went on smiling. “I am well-anchored now!” Dave smiled at her, feeling completely fatuous. He was thinking: For God’s sake, don’t lie to me! Why didn’t he shout the words? Don’t lie to me! Boast of your lover, flaunt him in my face, but don’t lower yourself by lying!

“What was Lance’s news?” asked Clare.

“He had none,” answered Dave. “Claimed to be sticking close at home and writing a play. It was a little hard to believe when you looked at him.”

“Why?”

“He appeared to be incandescent with vitality.”

“So much the better for his work.”

“Sure, if he puts it into his work.” Clare was silent. Dave thought: We are back at the old game of tormenting each other.

Chapter 26

EACH day Dave waited for Clare to announce her next trip to Baltimore. Outwardly their relations were unchanged, but all that remained unspoken made them horribly self-conscious in each other's company. Dave dreaded the announcement of the trip almost as much as the thing itself. He thought: She knows now that I know what she's going for. How will she be able to bring herself to tell me she's going? And when she does tell me, what kind of a face am I going to put on it?

Every time he came home for dinner he half expected to hear that Clare had gone to town without any preliminary announcement. That would be easier; on the other hand, how would they face each other when she came back?

Time passed and Clare made no move in the direction of Baltimore. She was working as hard as ever for the hospital; harder. There was a feverishness in her activity now. Day by day Dave had to watch the bleak look coming back into her face. All that they had built up together during the past three months had fallen to pieces. From one of his patients he learned that when it had become necessary for a member of the Women's Auxiliary to go to Baltimore to purchase crowns for the Absalom's tournament, Clare had persuaded Mrs. Lewger to go in her place.

It was Clare's custom to fetch the letters from the post-office before lunch every day. Once, on his way home, Dave happened to pass while the mail was being distributed. Clare had not yet appeared, and he went in and got what was in the Tascott box. There was a letter from Lance for her. Dave weighed it in his hand, imagining the impassioned pleas that it contained. When are you coming to me? Oh, make it soon! I want you so! Lance still wrote a schoolboy hand. The language of love was not so effective in these scrawly characters, thought Dave. Voice, eyes, personality were needed.

On entering the house he called upstairs to Clare that he had got the mail, and put her letters at her plate. When she came down and her eyes fell on them, the lines around her mouth tightened. Now she thinks I'm trying to spy on her, Dave thought. She did not open Lance's letter in his presence.

During the meal that followed Dave trod warily. The hospital had always been a safe subject, and he said: "I have persuaded the governors not to ask the County Commissioners for a grant."

"We won't get it if we don't ask for it," said Clare.

"Probably not."

"Then why not ask for it?"

"Because Amos Brome has written a violent letter to the county paper protesting against the added burden on the taxpayers. It'll be out tomorrow. Fred Bowen let me read it in proof."

"Amos Brome!" said Clare scornfully. "A professional trouble-maker! Always writing to the paper! Nobody pays any attention to what Amos Brome says!"

"You're quite right," said Dave. "But this is the first voice that has been raised in opposition to the hospital. There are plenty of the old shell-backs who hate the idea just because it's new, but they were afraid to say so. If I attempt to answer Amos Brome, it will crystallize the opposition. It would create an anti-hospital clique that would always be working against us in secret. It seems better to ignore the letter, and not apply for the grant at present."

"We need the money," said Clare.

"We'll get it in the end," said Dave. "The Commissioners will be shamed into appropriating it."

"You know perfectly well," said Clare, "that the County Commissioners never take action except under pressure!"

"You may be right," said Dave, "but if it got around that there was opposition to the hospital, it would injure us all along the line."

"Look at the way the women have worked," cried Clare; "how are they going to feel when they hear that you have taken a letter from Amos Brome—*Amos Brome*, lying down!"

"Lying down?" said Dave with an angry stare.

"You heard me," said Clare. "This turn-the-other-cheek attitude can be carried too far!"

Dave was intolerably stung. "Nobody ever accused me of turning the other cheek!" he said hotly. "I can fight when there's anything to be gained by it. In this case I've thought the thing out and decided on the most prudent course to take."

"Prudent!" sneered Clare. "That's what you would say. God! I'm sick of prudence! Any other man would fight."

“Since when has it been a weakness to have self-control!”

“Self-control! All depends on how much there is to control, doesn’t it?”

Dave flung down his napkin. “Good God! are you trying to madden me!”

In an instant they were reduced to the lowest plane of angry quarreling. Neither approached the real cause of the trouble. “I did!” . . . “You didn’t!” . . . “That’s not so!” . . . “It is so!” . . . “Don’t speak to me like that!” . . . “Are you the only one permitted to speak?” “Hold your tongue!” . . . “Suppose you try it!” And so on. And so on. Clare finally cried out: “As for me I will fight for what is dear to me!” and ran out of the room. Dave went into his consulting-room, slamming the door after him. He dropped in a chair, pressing his head between his hands. Where are we getting to? he asked himself.

Presently there was a knock on the door. It was Clare. Standing in the doorway, not looking at him, she said like a child repeating its lesson: “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken the way I did. I lost my temper. You were perfectly right, of course.”

Dave sprang up warmly. “Oh, Clare, I lost my temper, too. I’m sorry! Let’s try to make a fresh start, dear!” She closed the door before he reached it. Her face was hard against him. She had forced herself to come, but she was not really sorry. She hated him, and any whip would serve to flog him with.

What’s the use of going on like this? he asked himself. It would be better for me to wear horns in the sight of the whole county than for us to drag each other daily through such a hell. I have to toast anyhow; it doesn’t help to have Clare toasting alongside me. What do I care for the finger of scorn? I’m the master of my own actions.

His opportunity came on the following day. A truce had been established. Clare, though she wouldn’t admit it to Dave, was just as much ashamed as he of the scene the day before. They were at the dinner table again. After he had read his mail, Dave said: “One of the nurses I engaged up in town has let me down. Says she can’t come on account of family complications.”

“That’s too bad,” said Clare. “It means you’ll have to go up and look for another.”

“Damned awkward just now,” said Dave, rubbing his chin. “I have three critical cases. Couldn’t you go for me?”

Clare gave him an extraordinary look of incredulity and plain fright. He feigned not to see it. “I’m not capable of choosing a nurse,” she said

breathlessly.

“Why not?” asked Dave. “For her qualifications as nurse you’ll have to depend on testimonials, just as I would. As for her character, you can judge of that as well as I could—better; men are more easily taken in than women.”

“I couldn’t take so much responsibility,” said Clare. “Everything depends on getting good nurses.”

“You could if you would.”

“But, Dave, suppose she turned out badly?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t blame you any more than if I had engaged her. We could change her.”

“I am afraid of these professional women.”

“You hide it well. I never saw you afraid of anybody. Just keep it in mind that she’ll be more afraid of you.”

After much persuasion, Clare, still with the questioning look in her eyes, agreed to go. “I suppose it will have to be soon,” she said.

“I think you ought to go tomorrow, if you can,” said Dave. “The dedication is only two weeks off, and it may take some searching before we find the right woman. Perhaps you’ll have to go again.”

“It’s all the same to me,” said Clare. “I’ll go tomorrow. I’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“Don’t think of it,” said Dave. “It’s too much to attempt in one day.”

Clare suddenly discovered an errand in the kitchen and made for the door. Over her shoulder she said in an uncertain voice: “I’d rather come home the same day, even if I have to go back again.” When she returned to the room, her face was smooth. “I’ll leave early,” she said.

“You had better stay all night,” Dave persisted mildly. “A room at the hotel won’t cost any more than an extra trip back and forth in the car. Not to speak of the time lost, and the wear and tear on your nerves.”

“I’d rather come home,” she repeated.

He said: “Please, Clare, don’t be obstinate. I want you to stay all night.”

“You *want* me to stay!” she murmured incredulously.

“That’s what I said. It’s best from any point of view.”

“Not if I don’t want to stay.” Thus they fenced back and forth.

Clare held out against him so firmly that a doubt crept into Dave’s mind. Was he right to insist? However, he thought: You decided this by yourself in cold blood yesterday. Don’t let her confuse the issue now. He stuck to his

point and Clare became angry. Yet even in anger her eyes had an imploring look. Why? Was she secretly grateful to him for insisting? He did not know.

“Why can’t you let me decide for myself?” she cried.

“It is obviously the sensible thing to do,” said Dave.

Clare laughed oddly. “Sensible!” The secret almost escaped then. She went on quickly: “After I get there I’ll decide whether or not it’s necessary to stay.”

“No,” said Dave, “because then I wouldn’t know whether or not to expect you home. I’d be anxious. Go prepared to stay.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing!” cried Clare.

Dave looked at her steadily. “You’re wrong. I know what I’m doing.”

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Her anger was gone. It was as if they were exchanging a signal of understanding across a bottomless gulf. “All right, I’ll stay all night,” said Clare very low. She left the table quickly. Obviously she was at the point of tears. But why? Dave could not be sure. He sat slowly chewing his bitter bread. Well, anyhow, it was better than a hateful quarrel.

Chapter 27

CLARE took care to drive away from Apple House next morning at a moment when Dave was closeted with a patient. She was thinking: It will hurt him, but it's better so. How could we look each other in the face when I'm leaving to go to another man? Even if he's hurt, Dave will understand. Dave always understands.

Once she had driven through the gate, her spirits rose. She thought no more of Dave. A Northwest wind was blowing; the sky, swept clean of every wisp of vapor, was like an inverted turquoise bowl; the whole earth lay scrubbed and shining. A proper day to drive to meet one's lover. The sunshine was like a wash of gold on the green of the bordering trees. Lance was the sun; Lance was the Northwest wind.

She thought: In two hours I'll be in the same place that he is! He doesn't know I'm coming. I wish I could drive direct to his house to see his face when his eyes lighted on me, and hear his laugh. But there's his family to be considered. I suppose I ought to have let him know I was coming, but I couldn't telephone from the county. . . . Suppose he's not there!

This terrifying thought so preyed on her that as soon as she crossed the border of Ann Aranel County she stopped in a store to telephone him. She experienced a kind of agony of relief when she heard his cool voice over the wire. "Hello?"

"Lance, this is me!"

He fairly shouted in reply. "Clare! Thank God! I thought you had thrown me over! Clare, you blessed darling, where are you?"

"On the way to town," she said demurely. "Have you a date for this evening?"

"A date!" he said. "Don't try to be funny! I would break ten thousand dates to be with you! Why didn't you let me know?"

"I couldn't. Didn't know I could get away until after the mail had left yesterday."

"Where you going to stop?"

“At the Cecil, as usual.”

“Look, honey,” he said, “why don’t we drive on to Philadelphia? We could register together there. Wouldn’t that be nicer?”

Clare said: “Suppose we had a smash-up on the Philadelphia road? No. I’d rather go to the Cecil as before.”

“All right, honey. Telephone me the number of your room so I can get a room on the same floor. How soon can I see you?”

“At cocktail time.”

“Oh, God! must I wait all day?”

“I have to engage a nurse for our hospital. If I should get through earlier, I’ll phone you.”

“Okay, Lark.” He added a few words in the lingo they had invented for their private communications.

Clare trembled. “Please, darling, wait until we are together.”

His laughter vibrated over the wire. “Okay, Lark!”

“What’s the matter, Lark?”

“Nothing, darling. Why do you ask?”

“Twice I have felt your cheeks and found them wet.”

“That! That’s nothing. That’s only happiness running over. . . . Let me cry! It eases me.”

“Sure! As much as ever you like. Let your tears fall in my face. It is so strange to feel them. . . . You cling to me as if you expected somebody to tear you away!”

“Well . . . when you’re so very happy it makes you afraid.”

“That’s morbid, Lark. It’s everybody’s right to be happy.”

She shook her head. “No. I think we were made to be miserable. That’s why happiness is so sweet. When we are too happy we are defying God. And something falls!”

“But I have made you happy, Lark?”

“Oh, Lance! How can I say it? You have made me feel . . . as if I was set apart from other women. I don’t regret anything that has happened. I will never regret it!”

He put a hand over her mouth. “Don’t, Lark! Sounds as if you were trying to justify yourself.”

She insisted on finishing. “When I am an old woman on my death-bed I shall be hugging you in recollection. And if I wake up in hell I won’t whimper!”

“Little Lark! who’s going to put you in hell?”

“God. Because I have been too happy.”

“Don’t talk like that! Gives me the heebies! If there is a God he isn’t troubling himself about earthly lovers.”

“We have gone too far, Lance. We have infringed on Heaven.”

“Never mind Heaven. Tell me, what was the happiest moment?”

“When I first saw you. You came to the back door at night in the rain. You were hatless; your hair was in your eyes; your clothes clinging to your skin; you were smiling. . . .”

Lance chuckled. “It was more than rain. My canoe capsized in the river. I had to swim ashore pushing it. I lost all my stuff.”

“At first I thought you were a beggar,” she went on. “No white beggar had ever come to our door.”

“I was a beggar, Lark; begging love. And you were Lady Bountiful. Gosh! what a lovely handout!” They laughed together.

“Right away I knew what was going to happen,” she went on. “I felt that you had been sent to me . . .”

“God’s gift to little Clare!” he put in with a chuckle.

“Don’t make fun! . . . Ah, I came to you too soon! It was your smile!”

“Too soon! That’s the silliest thing I ever heard you say! Am I a Turk? Or an early Victorian? If you know anything about me you know that I respect love.”

“I know. I know! But I love to make you say it again! . . . Have I made you a little happy?” she asked beseechingly.

“A little happy? Oh, God, what poor words! You have created a new world for me! You have made a man of me!”

“Was I the first?” she whispered.

“You know it, darling! The first and the last!”

“Don’t say it!”

“So help me . . .”

“Don’t forswear yourself!”

“What a lucky chance it was that brought me to your door!”

“It wasn’t chance, darling.”

“When I see what happens to my friends, and hear their confidences, I thank God for you, Lark! I thank you. It’s the same thing. You are my heaven!”

“When will you come again, Lark?”

“Let’s leave it to circumstance and opportunity.”

“No! I must have something to look forward to!”

“I can’t come for a long time, darling.”

He scowled. “Are you saying that on purpose to plague me? It’s just as easy for you to come soon as late.”

“The hospital is to be dedicated week after next. There will be a thousand things to do before we get it running smoothly.”

“Now you’re stalling. There will be plenty of opportunities for you to come to town.” Clare was silent. “Well?” he asked.

She took a long breath. “Lance . . . Dave knows about us . . . these past weeks.”

“Who told him?”

“Nobody. He seems to have a kind of second sight where I’m concerned. Perhaps he guessed something from what you said.”

“That can’t be. I never mentioned your name!”

“From what you didn’t say, then.”

“Is he acting ugly?”

“Ugly? Oh, no, Lance. That’s what makes it so hard for me. He always insists that I am free.”

“What’s troubling you, then, honey?”

“Lance, think how he must suffer when you and I are together?”

“Nonsense, baby! Dave’s cold-blooded. I’ve told you that a hundred times.”

“Telling me doesn’t make it so. You’re wrong. He loves me.”

“Oh, I suppose he does in his mild way, but it’s not what I mean by love.”

“It is the same, Lance.”

“How do you know?”

“I can see it in his eyes.”

“That’s impossible!” cried Lance angrily. “If he loved you like a man he would shoot me! On the contrary he was effusively friendly when we met.

Showed a kind of fondness towards me. I could scarcely get away from him.”

“Don’t belittle him,” said Clare. “When you do that you are simply refusing to face things.”

“Sorry,” said Lance sorely. “I didn’t mean to belittle your paragon.”

“Ah, don’t sneer! I can’t bear it!”

“I don’t understand Dave,” said Lance. “Let it go at that.”

Clare said: “I don’t understand him either, but I can see that he is fine!
. . . Why, he sent me to you, Lance.”

“What!”

“I wasn’t coming any more, and Dave insisted on it.”

“Why, in God’s name?”

“Because he wanted me to be happy.”

Lance laughed angrily. “I’ll be damned! That’s not high-mindedness; it’s idiocy! If what you say is true, Dave is no man! He’s a morbid ’tween-sex creature without . . .”

“Stop it!” she cried. “This only reacts against you! Just because you can’t understand self-control and generosity is not to say they don’t exist!”

“So,” said Lance with an ugly smile, “you are turning against me!”

“Don’t say such things!” she implored him. “I want to love you always in my memory. We must not part quarreling!”

“Then why did you have to bring up Dave? Why throw Dave in my face?”

“I brought him up to explain why I can’t come any more.”

Lance stared at her blankly. “Can’t come any more?”

“Don’t look at me like that!” she begged. “Didn’t you know this was the last time? Haven’t you been feeling it every moment we were together?”

Lance’s face reddened with anger. “No!” he cried. “And it’s not the last time! I’m not going to give you up! And certainly not to a man without . . .” He caught himself up. “Have you stopped loving me?” he demanded.

“You don’t have to ask that,” she murmured.

“You’re right I don’t have to ask it. You love me. I have a thousand proofs of it. You will never love anybody as you love me. It would be a crime against nature for us to separate. I won’t give you up!”

“I’m not coming any more,” she said sadly.

“I’ll make you come! I can always make you!”

“Not this time, Lance.”

“Isn’t this moral awakening rather tardy?”

“Don’t sneer! It hurts me so! It’s not a moral awakening. It’s simply that when I look at Dave I can’t do this to him.”

“He gave you leave to come!”

“That’s why I can’t.”

Lance flung away from her. “That is just morbid!” he said. “You’ve caught it from him!”

There was a silence between them. Finally, Lance, scowling at her resentfully, said: “I understand it now, you’ve stopped loving me, that’s all. The rest is simply fine words.”

Clare couldn’t bear that. Her arms went swiftly around his neck. “Lance, darling, don’t speak to me like that! You know it’s not true! Ah, don’t make it so hard for me! I love you! I love you!”

He drew her arms away. Holding both her hands, he said: “What about me? Do you realize what you’d be doing to me? You’d be sending me right to the devil!”

Clare, suddenly chilled, freed her hands. “Isn’t that up to you?” she quietly asked, thinking of Dave.

“No!” cried Lance. “You know what a passionate nature I have. I didn’t make my own nature. The only thing that keeps me decent is love. You have accustomed me to love. If you take love from me I’ll go plumb to hell!”

Clare drew further away. She sat up, staring at him incredulously. “Is that a threat?” she murmured.

“No,” he said sullenly. “It’s a simple statement of fact.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it of you,” she murmured huskily.

“Now what’s the matter?” he demanded, scowling.

Clare faced him out, though her voice failed her. “That’s hitting below the belt. Even an infatuated woman can’t blind herself to it. . . . Don’t you realize that you are forcing me to draw comparisons?”

There was another silence. It was Lance’s eyes that trailed away. Suddenly Clare clapped her hands over her face. A low cry was torn from her. “Clare!” he cried in fright.

“Don’t touch me!” she said sharply. “You are destroying yourself! . . . Go! . . . Go quickly!”

Lance wavered, scowling—and broke. Dropping at Clare’s feet, embracing her knees, he cried like a child: “No! Don’t send me away! I love

you! You are all I have! You made me! Without you I am nothing! . . . I didn't mean what I said. I was only trying to break you down! Forget it. Let me love you!"

Clare melted. Drawing the bright head against her breast, she pressed her cheek in his hair, murmuring: "Surely, darling! Love me! We mustn't part quarreling. We must remember only this; loving each other! Always loving each other!"

"We're not going to part!" he cried in fright. "Say we're not!"

"All right," she murmured. "I guess we haven't the strength!"

"You're coming again, Clare!"

"All right, darling!"

"When?"

"Whenever you say!"

"Next week!"

"All right."

"And every week!"

"All right. . . . Kiss me!"

"DEAR LANCE:

"This is the fourth letter I have started to write to you. I covered innumerable pages and tore them up. What's the use? I'll make this one brief. I'm not going to see you again. I told you why. Perhaps you didn't take it in—but I can't go over the whole ground again. I lied to you because I couldn't bear to leave you in anger—or broken. I would have bled inwardly all my life. So I lied. Forgive me the lie because our last minutes together were so sweet.

"I suppose you are entitled to some sort of explanation. It's difficult. I may only make it worse. The truth is you have somehow got yourself involved with my worse nature. Understand, this is not due to any fault of yours, nor is it anything special in Dave which has brought me to look on him as my salvation. I am not in love with Dave. It is just what has come out of the tangle. I am the one to blame because I wanted to eat my cake and have it too. And so I have wronged you both. But it is very clear to me now that I could not keep on with you without losing my self-respect. You couldn't wish that on me. Having lost it for a while, I know what hell is.

"Yours,

“CLARE.”

Chapter 28

ON the afternoon of Labor Day, the Travis County Hospital, smelling pleasantly of fresh paint, linoleum and laundered linen, was thrown open for inspection. Members of the Women's Auxiliary proudly showed the visitors around, and the three nurses in starched uniforms and caps were on duty at strategic points. It was the nurses who made it look like a hospital. Whatever was not ready was discreetly passed over; the eight private rooms, operating-room, men's ward and wards for colored were on display. The chief attraction was the elevator, the first in Travis County. It worked very slowly, with an arrangement of ropes and pulleys, but it worked. No great shakes of a hospital, Dave thought, but a clear gain! The county people thought it was wonderful. Everybody who had contributed a dollar walked around with the air of a proprietor.

The women's ward, which occupied an open bay on the second floor over the entrance, provided the largest clear space, and here the exercises were held. Corridors to the right and left provided additional room; a small stand was erected at the head of the stairs, so that the speakers would be in sight of all. The Governor was present, besides all the aspirants to the gubernatorial chair in the forthcoming election. To avoid any appearance of favoritism, only the Governor was to speak, to be followed by State Senator Joel Coppage of the other political party, and Dr. Southam for the medical profession. John K. Southam, Senior, President of the Board of Governors, took the chair and introduced the other speakers.

Dr. Tascott had flatly declined to take part in the exercises. The committee had to submit, because otherwise he threatened to stay away. He sat comfortably hidden in the last row of spectators. Here he was forced to listen to the glowing tributes of every speaker from the Governor down. It was Doct' Tascott this, and Doct' Tascott that, and if it hadn't been for Doct' Tascott we wouldn't be gathered here today, Ladies and Gentlemen. Dave wondered why he couldn't feel more elated. Now that the thing he had worked for so hard was actually going, and clear of debt, he was a little depressed. Natural human perversity, he thought.

Before the speech-making began, Mr. Ed Shenton came along and clapped Dave on the back. "Let the politickers brag and wheedle," he said, "this is your day, Doc, and all know it. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," said Dave.

The old man dropped into the seat beside him. "I just looked in the operating-room," he said. "Gemmen! it's a far cry back to Doc Physic's day. I mind the time I he'p Physic operate on old man Billings. Night-time, 'twas, and I had sit out on the porch roof and hold the lamp to the window so the chloroform wouldn't explode."

Dave picked up snatches of talk here and there. In front of him sat two lean Travis farmers with deeply seamed necks rising from unaccustomed white collars. One said to the other: "Bill, how much they goin' charge for them private rooms, you reckon?"

"Twenty-five a week, I hear tell."

"Gemmen! they won't have many takers at that price! I don't have the han'lin' of that much cash in a month!"

"Oh, I don't know, Jim. When there's sickness, a man's got find it. A trained nurse in the house costs more. I'm for it."

Next to the farmers sat a pair of work-worn ladies of quality, with the high, boned collars, pompadours and jutting hats of forty years ago. One said: "'Deed, Kate, I know 'tis a sin to wish it, but how I would love to come here and be sick—not too sick. Wouldn't it be Heaven to lie in such a clean, pretty, new room with a sweet young nurse to wait on you, and ne'er a care on your mind!"

"Ain't it the truth, Milly? And always something going on. Plenty people to talk to. . . . But not for us, Milly. I calc'late to die with my boots on!"

While the speakers were saying all the things that were expected of them, Dave watched the audience. Women predominated. Women, he supposed, must ever be the doctor's chief support. There, in the front row of the side seats was little Miss Utie Chynne, plump as a partridge, one of his first and most constant sources of income. A dozen times he had told her there was nothing the matter with her, but she still came. Next to her, of course, sat her side-partner, Miss Aggie Darnall, a depressed-looking woman, eternally moaning softly, and agitating the point of her nose.

On the other side, facing these ladies, was planted the sturdy figure of Miss Tilly Southam, better known as Teewee. Her wise old eyes were crinkled with laughter; she wore her all-white uniform with an air of triumph. When Dave had nominated her for the position of housekeeper to the hospital, it had precipitated a row in the board of governors. The other

Southams said that Teewee was too old to work; high time she settled down and lived around with her brothers and sisters. Teewee thought otherwise; so did Dave. He knew a good thing when he saw it; consequently Teewee was housekeeper.

Nearby sat her friend and antithesis, the tall, attenuated Miss Maddie Babilon, dressed in a style of severe elegance that had long passed. She wore white ruching at her throat and wrists, a big cameo at her breast, and a little hat that looked like a bonnet minus its strings. For this occasion Miss Maddie had somewhat relaxed her grimness, but not altogether. She smiled.

During the speaking Clare came upstairs, and stood by the wall to listen. Dave forgot all the others. It was not often that he had a chance to gaze at his wife like this without any danger of her being aware of it. Where she stood she was in full view of everybody in the audience, but she could bear it. It pleased Dave to see how many women were trying to catch her eye, to win a nod from her. Clare had made good with them.

She was wearing a yellow linen costume and a small black hat; plain things became her best. Something had come back into her expression that Dave had seen in the beginning and had afterwards missed. For lack of a better word, he called it aristocratic. Behind her ease of manner and readiness to smile, there was a world of sadness, but that had always been there. She no longer looked hunted. He could never decide if she was beautiful in the strict sense, and he didn't care. A little too fine-drawn, perhaps; there was a suggestion that her sensitiveness levied too great a toll on the flesh. But Dave would not have changed her for all the lusciousness in creation; moreover, his intuition told him that a beauty like Clare's, tempered by fire, would never fade.

All the time he was wondering how it was with her. She had returned from Baltimore ten days before, looking white and done, but with that something new in her face. Her eyes had met his squarely; she had appeared to wish to let him know without saying anything, that she had won a foothold. But how? He couldn't guess. Apparently she was not planning further trips to Baltimore. Dave was awaiting the outcome. Meanwhile he was thankful that her nerves were steady. There was good feeling between them; no more quarrels.

While Dr. Southam was speaking, a bell rang in the entrance hall below, and Clare disappeared down the stairs to see what was wanted. She presently returned, biting her lip to control a smile. All attention was diverted from the speaker to her. She stood looking steadily at Dr. Southam until she caught his eye. Interrupting himself, he came to the edge of the

platform and bent over; Clare whispered in his ear. He burst out laughing, and the audience was all agog.

“My friends,” said Dr. Southam, “I shall leave my speech unfinished. The first call has come. Dr. Wallace of Ann Aranel County has brought a patient who requires an immediate appendectomy.”

A burst of hand-clapping came from the audience, mixed with hearty laughter. Earlier in the afternoon the treasurer had read his report, which revealed that Ann Aranel County had been somewhat slow with their contributions. Now it appeared they were not going to be slow in availing themselves of the facilities of the hospital. The irony was appreciated.

Dr. Southam addressed the nurses. “You ladies know what you have to do. Miss Carter and Miss Ireland will make all ready in the operating-room. Miss Forest will conduct the patient to room one, and prepare him. Dr. Tascott, may I count on you to assist me?”

The audience moved uneasily. “Don’t disturb yourselves, ladies and gentlemen,” said Dr. Southam. “This is what we are here for. We will just make a lane to carry the patient between these seats on my left, and the exercises will then continue.” He lifted his head and sniffed. “Judging by the delicious aroma that meets my nostrils, refreshments will shortly be in order. . . . Senator Coppage, I yield to you, Sir.”

Chapter 29

ON a day in November, when Dave got home a little late for dinner, he perceived upon entering the dining-room, that an emotional crisis was at hand. Clare sat white and tight-lipped; her eyes enormous. So far as he could judge, it was rage rather than grief which filled her. What have I done? he asked himself with a sinking heart.

Clare's attempt to make out that there was nothing amiss, the forced smiles, the rattle of talk, was distressing to witness. He played up to her, half despising himself for it. Every husband has to do it, he told himself. He had learned that to question her directly at such a time only made matters worse. He stoked his dinner and waited for the truth to come out.

"More trouble at the hospital," she said brightly. He guessed that her real thoughts were far from the hospital. "Teewee and the head nurse are constitutionally unable to agree. They both come to me with their complaints. Unblessed is the lot of the peacemaker!"

"What's the fuss about now?" asked Dave, smiling.

"It's Teewee's habit of visiting 'round among the patients in the evening. Miss Carter says their loud talk and laughter disturb the sick ones."

"Good Lord!" said Dave. "Teewee's grin and her naughty talk are a better tonic than any I could prescribe."

"Surely," said Clare. "The real trouble is that the patients don't love the efficient Carter, and she's jealous."

"Well, smooth Carter down as well as you can," said Dave. "If it gets any worse, refer her to me."

As soon as she could, Clare left the room. Dave dreaded those exits. "I've got to write some letters before the mail goes," she said brightly over her shoulder. "You'll find the *Sun*-paper on the sideboard." Dave sighed. There would be a bleakness in the house until she came out of it. He picked up the paper.

Among his office patients after dinner was Miss Utie Chynne. She was the type of woman patient with whom a doctor had to be on his guard.

Approaching the menopause. Worse; she had no humor. When she had described her latest symptoms, and Dave had put up some medicine for her, she said, with suspicious casualness: "Have you seen the day's paper, Doctor?"

"I read the headlines," said Dave. "It's about as far as I ever get."

"I see that Mr. Lawrence Corder is going to be married," said Miss Utie.

Dave, conscious that two gimlet eyes were boring into him, laughed lightly. "Well, that's a piece of news! I missed it."

"It's in the society news."

"That explains it. I never read the society column. . . . Who's he going to marry?"

"Nancy Howell."

"That means nothing to me."

"Nancy Howell is the daughter of Blackburn Howell, the head of the fertilizer family, one of the richest in Baltimore."

"Splendid!" said Dave. "Lance has real talent. It would be a kind of poetic justice to see it fertilized by the Howell millions."

Miss Utie looked disappointed. "Didn't Clare know it?" she asked with an innocent air.

Dave was aware that the question set a trap for him. "Not a word of it! She hasn't seen the paper yet. It was still unfolded when I picked it up."

"Funny," said Miss Utie. "Such a close friend. You'd think she would be the first he'd tell."

Dave silently cursed the woman. "Oh, well, young men are careless about such things," he said.

When he was rid of her he said to the other waiting patients: "I'll see the next one in a few minutes. I have a little telephoning to do." Then went in search of Clare. His feelings were mixed. There was a distinct shock in thus losing Lance. Lance had the effect of a meteor flashing across the sky. Domesticity was an anti-climax. Lance married was Lance dimmed. Dave was chiefly concerned, however, as to how Clare was taking it.

He found her in the living-room writing a letter at her desk. The pen was flying across the paper; the face she turned had a bright red spot in either cheek, eyes glittering with anger. It made him feel a little sick to see her beauty so marred. She drew a blank sheet over her letter. "Why aren't you with your patients?" she said sharply.

"There's a lull," said Dave.

“That can’t be. Three cars have gone around the house since I’ve been sitting here.”

“Well, I wanted to speak to you.”

“What is it?”

It was not easy. Dave finally blurted out: “I see that Lance is going to be married.”

“So it seems,” she said with an absurd affectation of indifference.

“Oh, Clare, don’t make pretenses!” he said impatiently.

The eyebrows ran up angrily. “Pretenses!”

He went on: “Surely, you and I have been through enough together to be open and honest with each other. Why do you try to make out that Lance’s marriage means nothing to you?”

Clare raised her shoulders. “It means less than nothing!” Dave flung up his hands helplessly.

Presently he asked: “Who are you writing to?”

“Well!” said Clare. “It’s something new to be questioned like this!”

“Is it to Lance?”

“Yes, if you must know. Naturally I’m writing to congratulate him. Do you want to see the letter?”

“No, for God’s sake!” said Dave, waving his hands. “Clare, I beg you not to send that letter!”

“For Heaven’s sake, why not?” she asked, making her eyes big with surprise.

“When anybody writes a letter in a rage, he always regrets it,” said Dave.

Clare jumped up with the letter folded in her hands.

“In a rage!” she cried. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Look in the mirror!” said Dave.

She would not look. “You burst in here and start shouting at me . . .” she stormed.

“I did not burst in, nor am I shouting!” said Dave.

She didn’t hear him. “You accuse me of being in a rage. That’s only a cover for your own rage. What a childish trick!”

“Clare! Clare!” he said, shaking his head.

She quieted somewhat. “Go back to your patients,” she said sullenly.

“Remember,” he warned her, “you are writing to an infatuated young man.”

“Infatuated!” she said scornfully. “Infatuated with papa’s money.”

“Very likely,” he said, “but infatuated just the same. The first thing he will do will be to show your letter to her.”

“He won’t show *this* to her!” said Clare with a secret smile.

“Do you know anything about the girl?” asked Dave.

“Only what everybody knows. She’s notorious. She came out before I left town. I used to see her. She’s loose!”

He tried again. “Write your letter,” he said, “but promise me you won’t send it today. Sleep on it first. Promise me you’ll read it over tomorrow before you send it.”

“Let me alone!” she said angrily. “This is my affair and I’ll deal with it as I see fit.”

There was nothing more he could say. He went back to his consulting-room.

While he was talking to a patient he heard Clare drive out of the yard, and since she returned within five minutes, he assumed that she had taken her letter to the post-office. The outgoing mail left at three o’clock. He hustled the patients through, so that he was able to close up and get to the post-office a few minutes before the hour.

The postmistress was Nellie Coppage, a coy spinster, sister to Giddy, the farmer, and Joel, the state senator. “My wife just brought a letter to the post,” said Dave. “As soon as she got home she recollected something important she wanted to add to it. Can I have it back?”

“Well, Doctor,” said Miss Nellie, simpering, “it’s a little irregular, but seeing it’s you . . . Who was the letter to?”

“Mr. Lawrence Corder,” said Dave with a wooden face. Miss Coppage hesitated. Dave fixed her with a commanding eye. She had not nerve enough to face him out. She silently laid the letter on the shelf and he pocketed it with heartfelt thankfulness. “Much obliged, Miss Nellie.”

That night at the supper table Clare was still nursing her rage. Dave ignored it, and they exchanged only the necessary words.

At breakfast likewise. Dave’s heart was very sore. How long is she going to keep this up? Studying her face when she was looking elsewhere, he saw that there was a change this morning. In spite of the parade of bitter anger, something piteous had come into her eyes. “Clare, can’t we be friends again?” he asked. She looked at him stormily without replying.

"I feel like cutting my throat when things go like this," he said with a wry grin.

"You've got nothing to reproach yourself with," she said scornfully.

"That's no comfort when you feel like hell." She began to cry and he went around the table. A touch would make it so easy now, he thought; but that's taboo. His arms ached for her but he could only stand like a dummy, looking down at her. "Clare, don't!" he begged.

"It's not what you think," she said in a strangled voice. "It's not your fault."

"Is it because you're sorry you sent that letter?" he asked. The downcast brown head nodded.

Dave relaxed. Taking the letter from his pocket he laid it on the table before her. Snatching it up, Clare stared in his face. "Where did you get it?"

"Out of the post-office."

Her face flamed. "This is intolerable!" she said.

"Well, you can send it now if you want," said Dave.

She tore the envelope in half. "Interfering with me like that! You had no right!" Dave could bear it because while she stormed, the letter was being torn to bits. "Nellie Coppage will tell!" she cried. "It will be all over the county. With additions!"

Dave was laughing. "Clare, what do we care what people say?"

"I can never forgive this!" she cried. She ran out of the room.

Dave went to his work.

At dinner her eyes were contrite. Yet if he had taken any notice of it, she would have flamed into anger again. He was beginning to learn how to deal with her.

"Collections are better than I expected this month," he said casually. "What do you need for the house?"

"Nothing," said Clare. "If there's any extra money, get that short-wave electrical machine that you've been talking about for the office."

"Well, if you approve, maybe I will," said Dave. "There are so many things it's good for. Fractures heal in half the time when treated with heat in that manner. You could give the treatments."

"Where could we put it?" said Clare. "The consulting-room is already so cluttered."

"It occurred to me we might put in a treatment room in the basement," said Dave. "Let's go down and take a look when we finish eating."

Peace brooded over the dining-room.

Chapter 30

ANOTHER winter came and passed. Chunk stoves were brought out and blacked, and storm doors hung. The time for killing hogs arrived, and for a while every family lived on spare-ribs and chine bone. Sausage was ground; meat salted and at Christmas smoke began to seep through the cracks of the meat houses. The farmers cleaned their ice ponds and closed the gates; and after the first hard frost the ice houses were filled. Out in the bitter winds on the river the oystermen worked their tongs all day. On shore wise men mended their fences while the foolish sat around the stoves in the country stores.

From one end of the slowly shifting tapestry of Travis County life the old people raveled out while the babies were woven in at the other end. Dave Tascott's job was to attend both processes. It was a hard winter; for six weeks the river was frozen across from shore to shore and oystering had to stop; much snow fell. Harder on the doctor than the frosts, were the thaws. The side roads went to pieces completely and when he was called to one of the forgotten, uncouth families in the woods, he had to abandon his car at the edge of the macadam, and struggle ahead on horseback fetlock deep in mud with his two big valises.

Finally, in March, the warm winds began to blow; the ditches ran musically and willow twigs turned green. Within the circular driveway in front of Apple House crocuses bloomed; were frosted; bloomed again. Bowls of scented violets appeared on the doctor's dining-table and the office patients applied for spring tonics.



Miss Aggie Darnall was distrustful of the spring. April went and May came; a million purple blossoms on the great wistaria vine in front of the hotel had faded, her tall Darwin tulips had dropped their petals, and the

whole county was fragrant with honeysuckle, before she ventured to put away the chunk stoves and set out the porch furniture.

Seeing her friend rocking on the porch, Miss Utie Chynne came over. She was less brisk than usual. "Well, Utie, what's new?" asked Miss Aggie.

"Nothing worth repeating, Aggie," said Miss Utie. "I don't take no interest in what people are saying."

"Why, Utie, you must need physicking," said Miss Aggie. "Have you gathered any pokeweed? Everybody should eat poke at this time of year."

"I hate poke!" said Miss Utie.

"What's this I hear about Doct' Tascott?" asked Miss Aggie.

Miss Utie turned wary. "What you hear about Doct' Tascott?" she parried.

"That he is carrying on with a young girl over Lewger's Island way. Don't tell me you ain't heard it, Utie."

"Yes, I heard it," said Miss Utie briefly.

"Then why wouldn't you tell a body? You been over here every day."

"Because it's a pack of lies!" said Miss Utie. "The way people gossip in this county is a crying shame, Aggie! They don't care what they say! And everybody add a little before passing it along. Not me! If there's one thing I hate it's malicious gossip! I have e'er set my face against it!"

"Sure you have, Utie," soothed Miss Aggie; meanwhile her nose wiggled sarcastically. "What are the rights of it? I knew I would get the rights of it from you."

"Ain't no rights to it!" snapped Miss Utie. "'Tis made out of the whole cloth!"

"I don't know, Utie, where's smoke there's fire. Though sometimes I have found that a little fire will cause a monstrous smoke."

"Nothing to it!" insisted Miss Utie.

"They say the girl is only twelve year old," suggested Miss Aggie slyly.

"Lie number one!" said Miss Utie quickly. "She is fifteen."

"Then there *is* a girl!"

"They got to name somebody."

"Who they naming?"

"Sue Chalkley; Pete Chalkley, the fisherman's daughter," said Miss Utie bitterly. "Trash of the trashiest!"

"Pretty?" queried Miss Aggie.

"If you want to call such trash pretty."

“Well, ripe, then?”

“Too ripe by half!”

Miss Aggie moaned and wiggled her nose. “I know the kind, Utie! The devil’s decoys!”

“Mind, I don’t say those Chalkleys ain’t tryin’ to get Doct’ Tascott in their toils,” Miss Utie went on. “That’s the kind of trash they are. Deliberately push that girl forward to catch his eye!”

“For why, Utie?”

“To get him to come over there without pay. The girl’s mother is sick.”

“What she got?”

“They call it spasms.”

Miss Aggie inquired softly: “Do spasms require Doctor’s attendance every day and in the evenings now it’s turned warm?”

“Who told you ’twas every day?” demanded Miss Utie.

“It’s all around, Utie. Verna Eltonhead for one. And Luke Lewger, he lives over thataway; he tell my Sadie’s George he see Doct’ Tascott’s blue coop standing in front of Pete Chalkley’s cabin most every time he pass by. Once he seen the pair of ’em santering hand in hand into a wood road while the car waited. That come pretty straight, Utie.”

“If you know so much, why you start pumping me?” demanded Miss Utie.

“I just want to see if your information check with mine,” said Miss Aggie calmly.

“It’s all lies!” cried Miss Utie.

“Well, now, Utie,” said Miss Aggie, “Doct’ Tascott is only a man like any other. If they deliberately set a trap for him, a well-grown girl of fifteen is a dainty morsel for a man, with spring in the air and all, and no danger of trouble since they willing he should have her. . . . And he a doctor. I don’t see as how you could blame him much, Utie.”

“It’s a pack of lies!” cried Miss Utie with tears standing in her eyes. “When they try to fasten their dirty lies on a good man like Doct’ Tascott it’s high time to call a halt!”

“And Verna Eltonhead,” pursued Miss Aggie; “she don’t mince words. She say Doct’ Tascott dressing the girl. She say Sue Chalkley come to church at Lewger’s Island Sunday dressed new from top to toe.”

“How does Verna know so much?” demanded Miss Utie.

“Some of her folks live over there,” said Miss Aggie. “She is taking a renewed interest in them since this come up. To hear Verna talk you’d think she caught Doct’ Tascott right in the act.”

“She’s a liar!” said Miss Utie. “Since when are you so friendly with Verna Eltonhead? After all you said about her!”

“If you won’t tell me nothing I got to get it elsewhere,” said Miss Aggie. “Sure, Verna’s a liar. She’s tryin’ to get back at Clare. That woman has got a poisoned mind!”

Miss Utie was a little mollified.

“But there must be something in it, Utie,” Miss Aggie presently resumed. “Apart from your natural feelings, why are you so sure it’s all lies?”

“Doct’ Tascott is not that kind of man!” said Miss Utie warmly.

“Sho, Utie! Far as that’s concerned there’s only one kind of man—so long as he have his health.”

“No, Aggie! All those low feelings were left out of my doctor. He’s a pure-minded man. You never see him look at a woman out of the corner of his eyes. ’Tain’t as if he didn’t have the handling of plenty women, neither. Women have no secrets for him! He looks at them scientifically. I ought to know! I tell you, Aggie, I can undress before Doct’ Tascott without feeling a mite of shame or fear!”

“Sho, Utie! You’re not fifteen year old!”



Dave drove homeward past fields and patches of woods green beyond bearing. Under the hot noonday sun honeysuckle mingled with the intoxicating scent of the wild grape flower. In the fields lambs waggled their heavy tails absurdly and heifers pranced in a manner quite unbecoming to cattle. Dave felt very much out of the picture. He had been up all night with a patient, and his eyelids were stiff and prickly. He saw a stout young gum tree which had been girdled preparatory to being felled. In all that richness of verdure, its branches and twigs were bare. That’s me, he thought; sapless in the spring!

He passed a red-faced young farmer, a grand physical specimen, turning his last furrow before going home to dinner. The youth waved a hand to Dave, showing a double row of gleaming teeth. He has no doubts, thought Dave. He saw a young girl in a print dress, digging around the roots of her

rose bushes. Her sleeves were rolled to the elbow, revealing peachy flesh already delicately browned by the sun. The sight sent a pang through Dave like that of a living stream imprisoned in ice.

When he drove into his own back yard he saw a mockingbird capering sideways back and forth across a rustic bar, flapping his wings in gay and drunken fashion. He and his mate nested nearby, and were looked upon as family friends. Clare's garden had gone blossoming mad. In the kitchen, Queenie, with the glistening face, was singing loudly and unmelodiously over the stove. All things praise the spring, thought Dave. He stopped in the back entry to wash his hands. Gazing disgustedly at his gray cheeks in the mirror, he thought: And you? You look like something grown in a cellar!

When he entered the dining-room his soup was steaming on the table, but there was none at Clare's place. He thumbed over the letters on the sideboard; nothing important. "Where's Miss Clare?" he asked Queenie.

"She in garden, Doct' Dave. Say not to wait for her."

Dave went to the bay window. Clare, in a blue dress matching the delphiniums, wearing gloves and armed with a pair of garden shears, was bending over the beds, snipping stalks that had finished blooming, pulling up weeds. Her shifting positions revealed all the lines of her lovely body and set up freshly the ache to which Dave had never become inured. Clare needed a great sculptor to immortalize her. Not as Venus but a delicate-limbed Diana. Dave perceived something in her profile that caused his breast to contract. Trouble again! "Hey, Clare! Dinner!" he called through the window.

She waved the shears at him without looking around. "Go ahead and eat," she said. "I can't stop just this minute." He was sure then that something was wrong. Dead stalks could be snipped at any time. Clare, aware that he was watching her, turned her back to the window. Dave gloomily sat down in his place. The office patients would be arriving directly and he had to be ready for them.

While he ate he cast back in his mind for what could have upset her. She had been all right at breakfast time. "Queenie," he asked, "anybody been to see Miss Clare this morning?"

"No, suh, Doct' Dave."

"Has she been talking over the telephone?"

"No, suh." He scowled in perplexity.

When he had swallowed sufficient food to keep him going, he glanced out of the window again. The garden shears were snipping viciously. His fears whispered: Better leave her alone. No! answered the harder part of

him! I'll never get anywhere with her by knuckling under. We've got to have it out.

He went out in the garden. She did not stop work nor look up when she heard him coming. "What's the matter, Clare?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered in the manner of an angry woman.

"Don't tell me that," he said, a little angry himself. "Don't you think I have eyes in my head?" She went on snipping. "What's the matter?" he asked again.

"You had better go to your consulting-room," she said in an uneven voice.

"I'm not going until you answer me. What is the matter?"

"I told you it was nothing," she said with extreme bitterness, keeping her head down. "Nothing, that is, but one of my fits of childishness. I ought to have accustomed you to it by this time. Don't force me to expose my silliness. Let me alone and I'll get over it."

"Clare, please!"

She looked up suddenly. "For God's sake, don't badger me!" she cried. "Let me alone! Let me alone!"

Dave was shocked by what he saw in her face. "Clare, dearest, what has happened?" he asked.

She obstinately shook her head. "Please leave me! I have no right to mind."

"No right to mind?" he repeated, scowling. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Go back to the house!" she said.

He saw that she had an opened letter tucked in her belt, and, remembering other incidents, asked at a venture: "Has that letter got anything to do with it?"

She suddenly decided to tell him, and jerked the letter out. "Yes," she said. "It just came. Read it."

He drew back. "I don't want to read your letters."

"Read it! Read it!" she insisted. "It concerns you."

Dave took the envelope and drew out its contents. A sheet of cheap paper written upon in pencil with misshapen letters and lines that wandered up and down. Somebody trying to imitate an ignorant, unpracticed hand. It was overdone. He read:

"DEAR CLARE:

“I hate to see a wife fooled. Everybody laughing at you behind you back. Ask the doctor why he call at Pete Chalkley’s house every day. Pete’s wife not as sick as all that. I guess it’s one for the wife and two for daughter Sue. Ask Dave what him and Sue go in the woods for. They been seen. She’s a sweet little piece for any man. Fifteen year old. The boys around Lewger’s Island say that Sue Chalkley is . . . Better watch your man!

“Yours,

“WELL-WISHER.”

Dave clenched his teeth, filled with a very sickness of anger. “Oh, God, how disgusting!” he muttered. “You always find this filth just under the surface! And you can’t do anything about it!”

The sight of Clare’s hurt, angry face suddenly changed the direction of his thoughts. He stared at her blankly; stared at the crooked, penciled lines; looked at Clare again. He began to laugh. He had a blessed feeling that the ice which bound him had suddenly melted. He laughed. He dropped on a bench facing the flowerbeds. Tears came into his eyes.

Clare faced him glaring, clenching her hands. “Stop it!” she commanded. “I could kill you when you laugh at me! You see how this hurts me and you laugh! What’s got into you!” The sight of the little clenched fists started Dave laughing all over. “You’re utterly heartless!” cried Clare. “I was mistaken in you! I hate you!”

“But, Clare,” he protested, struggling to command his voice, “what do you care?”

“I told you I had no right to care,” she stormed; “but I *do* care!”

“I should think you’d be glad to hear that I had found . . . well, a little comfort.”

“Comfort!” she cried, “with *that!* A fisherman’s brat! A girl that’s already been passed around by the fisherboys!”

“That’s not true,” said Dave. “That’s only poison pen stuff. However poor they may be, she’s decent. Besides, she’s fond of me.”

“So you think,” said Clare, with searing scorn. “And are you fond of her?”

“If you mean am I in love with her? No. This is just an appetite like hunger. . . . But not like hunger! God! how it can tear you! . . . Naturally a man would feel grateful.”

Clare’s face worked painfully. “Don’t you see what you’ve done to me? I *banked* on you! I looked on you as the one decent figure in a beastly world!

And you've let me down!"

Dave, lost in the marvelous discovery he had made, was not much impressed by her words. "I don't aim to be anybody's plaster saint. You've got to know it!"

"How could I have been so mistaken in you!" she cried. "You're no better than Tom Eltonhead! You're no better than . . . than . . ."

"Than any other man," Dave put in. "Certainly I'm not. I'm made of the same flesh!"

She turned to run to the house. He caught her wrist. "You mustn't run out on me now! We've got to see this through."

"Let go my wrist," she said haughtily. "I'll stay."

Dave released her. "Don't you know why I laughed?" he asked. She wouldn't answer. "It was because"—he laughed again—"because it was so damn sweet. . . . Oh, God! sweet as Heaven to see you fly into a rage because you thought another woman had got me!"

"I wasn't jealous!" flashed Clare.

"You were giving a darn good imitation!"

"I wasn't! I wasn't!" she cried passionately. "Oh, I hate you when you are so coarse! Must everything in my life turn to dirt? If you had any understanding you would see that it broke my heart to discover that you could make such an animal of yourself! You destroyed an ideal!"

"The heck with it!" said Dave. "I don't want to be your ideal, but your husband."

"That's impossible now," she said.

"Look," said Dave, "we can never make anything of our life together unless we face the bare truth of things. Believe me, the truth is more beautiful than any God's amount of ideals, as Mr. Ed would say. The truth never lets you down! . . . Man *is* an animal. Why blink it? With the functions and the secretions of an animal. Why deny me the right to function?" The grin began to spread again. "Suppression is dangerous."

"In that case," said Clare, holding herself stiffly, "I was here. I'm your wife. You should have come to me."

"No, thanks," said Dave. "We tried that once and almost wrecked the ship. God! the memory of that night sends a shiver down my spinal column!"

"If you could only have waited a little longer," said Clare very stiffly, "things were beginning to change. I . . . I . . ."

A fire leaped out of Dave's eyes. "You mean you were beginning to want me? Well, here I am. . .!"

She moved away. "Oh, that's all spoiled now."

"That's just a sentimental notion!"

She faced him angrily. "Do you think for a moment that I could take you from the arms of . . . of . . ."

Dave grinned. "Better not say it! . . . Why couldn't you?" he suddenly demanded. "I could take you from the arms of another man and thank God for you!"

Tears of anger sprang to Clare's eyes. "That's right! Insult me! I might have expected it!"

"Oh, for God's sake, be yourself!" said Dave. "You know you were not lowered in my eyes because you loved another man and gave yourself to him. I looked on it as just my bad luck."

"I loved Lance," Clare said with dignity. "That's just the difference."

"Well, because I am denied love, must I live like a cripple! must I atrophy?" demanded Dave. She refused to answer.

Dave went through a sharp struggle with himself. The sight of Clare with her head hanging exerted an awful pull, but he withstood it. "You were natural enough with Lance," he said. She looked at him startled. "How do I know it?" he asked. "It's a hunch. It was because he forced you to be natural. And that's why you loved him. Lance's laugh always cleared the air. Why couldn't you go on being natural after Lance was out of the picture?"

"By natural," said Clare scornfully, "I suppose you mean subservient to you. I'm sorry, but what you seem to find natural is only disgusting to me."

"Did you like me better yesterday than you do today?" asked Dave.

"Infinitely," said Clare.

Dave chuckled. "All right. Sit down for a moment longer." She obeyed somewhat suspiciously. "Can I hold your hand?" he asked. "I have a most ungodly yearning to hold your hand."

"Don't be facetious," said Clare withholding her hands.

"Do you know," he said, "it strikes me as a funny thing that you have not asked me the one vital question concerning this damned letter."

Clare was startled. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't asked me if it was true."

"But . . . but . . ." she stammered, "you have admitted it!"

"I have not. I have been putting a suppositious case to you."

“Isn’t it true?” she asked.

“No.” He looked across the flowerbeds to give it time to sink in.

Clare was angry. “Why didn’t you say so at once?”

“I was waiting for you to ask me,” said Dave.

“Do you mean you have never been with this girl?”

“Sure, I’ve been with her. Far too often. That much is true. It was a pleasure and a torment to be with her. So pretty, so fresh—like an opening flower! Made me feel like a bee! Full of ardent feelings, too, that she does not understand yet, and makes no attempt to conceal. Feeling for me. I took her walking in the woods, too, just as the letter says, once, but after all I couldn’t. She was too defenseless. And so I brought her out of the woods just the same as I took her in.”

“Can I believe this?” murmured Clare, searching his face.

He wouldn’t look at her. “That’s up to you. Take your choice between me and poison pen.”

“Swear to me that what you say is true!” she said.

“I will not,” said Dave. “Such oaths between married people are degrading. . . . Besides, it doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. The real question is something else again.”

“Not with me,” said Clare. “I couldn’t possibly . . . if I thought you were lying.”

Dave waited for her to make up her mind, but she could not. A wicked thought came to him and he bit his lip. “If you turn me down she will still be there,” he murmured.

Clare jumped as if she had been stung. “Oh . . . how can you be so hateful!” she murmured.

Dave’s conscience reproached him. “I’m sorry,” he said ruefully. But, feeling that this was the beginning of weakness, he immediately added: “No, I’m damned if I’m sorry. It’s true, and why shouldn’t I say it? She will be waiting. You and I have got to get on an honest basis even if I have to beat you!” Clare’s lip curled contemptuously. “You recommended once that I beat you,” he slyly reminded her.

Clare sprang up in a fresh rage. “This is impossible!”

Dave stood up. “If you smacked my face you’d feel better,” he suggested. Clare stared at him, seething. He stepped closer to her. “Go ahead! I dare you!” With flexed arm like a cat, she slapped him hard across the cheek. The sting of it brought the tears to his eyes, but he was grinning still. Immediately her arms went around his neck and she kissed the

reddening spot. Dave was so unprepared for it that his arms hung straight down. At the first beginning of a move from him, she sprang away, and started running for the house. He followed in a dream.

Chapter 31

DAVE opened his eyes, stirred, and was suffused with satisfaction. Clare was lying beside him; it was no wraith, no figment, no fantasy born of longing, but a very palpable woman; keeper of his heart; sharer of joy; fellow-parent; his—yet never-to-be his! This terror of her separateness sharpened freshly each day the sting of delight.

His second blissful thought was: It's Sunday morning! Only lately had he yielded to Clare's contention that he was sufficiently indispensable to take a more masterful tone with his patients. They would love it, she said, and she was right. Consequently he had announced that he would no longer keep morning office hours on Sunday, and a new sign was painted to hang at the gate.

Raising himself with care to avoid shaking the bed, he supported himself on an elbow. To look at Clare like this, sleeping in the morning, took the last bit of fight out of him; he hung suspended in an ocean of tenderness as unresisting as an aculeph. Thin cheeks and sensitive lips eased for a space of the burden of feeling; how childlike this mother of a child! something absurd, too, that made his diaphragm quiver. In deepest sleep there was a lively look about Clare's eyes, suggesting that they were at the point of popping open. He lowered his head to kiss her lips and stopped, trying to make up his mind whether he wanted most to wake her, or to gaze at her sleeping. While he hung a few inches from her face, undecided and dreamy, her eyes did pop open. She drew his head down, saying with a little groan:

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here!"

Dave said: "It's Sunday morning, sweetheart!"

"Blessed Sunday morning! . . . Now if the brat will only sleep for another half hour!"

"Won't hurt him to cry for a little."

"Love, we couldn't take pleasure while he was crying."

"Fetch him into our bed then. He likes that."

“But would it be right? Who knows what unconscious impression he might receive?”

“How could he receive a sweeter one?”

“He’s hardly ready for that yet.”

“Well, in the meantime lay him on the bed, and he’ll serve us for a pattern.”

“No. We want to change the style.” They dissolved in laughter.

Dave stirred and took a deep breath. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Is that all there is on your mind?”

“It’s a pleasant thought to have in the offing.”

“There’s broiled tailor, pulled from the Bay yesterday.”

“Oh, hell!”

“Why, you demanded tailor!”

“I know; but that means we’ve got to get up. Or that damned wench will broil it to death.”

“It is taken care of. She is not to put it on the fire until we come downstairs.”

“Good! What goes with the tailor?”

“Spoon bread and Lyonnaise potatoes; cantaloupe, of course.”

Dave groaned. “I’m sorry I asked now. I’m torn in two!”

“You can have it in bed if you like. I’ll go fix it.”

“Don’t you dare to move! Bed has no further attractions after you leave it.”

Clare was hovering above him, occasionally dropping her head to brush his lips with hers. She ran her hand over his head. “You have such pretty hair!”

“My God, Clare! it’s mouse-colored!”

“I don’t care. That sort of hair with no particular color is right for a man. Shows he has no need of ornament. It’s so nice to touch; crisp and close-curling. What gave you the idea of keeping it cut so short? It was an inspiration.”

“No aesthetic consideration, darling; hygienic.”

“It goes well with your lean jaw; it shows the good shape of your head. . . . There’s plenty inside,” she added, rapping his skull with a knuckle.

Dave said: “The babe is beginning to stir.”

Clare shrugged. “Let him go until he absolutely bawls. He must take his turn. I’m occupied with my husband now. . . . Do you know, it’s only lately that I’ve realized you’re handsome.”

“Handsome! For Cripes’ sake!”

“No, it’s true. Like all best things it doesn’t hit you smack in the eye; it steals on you. That mouth that can keep so much unsaid! I feel safe with such a mouth!”

“Skip it! Skip it! Which way am I supposed to look?”

Clare’s voice deepened. “Love, you don’t have to be shamefaced with me. You can chortle or brag or boast! You can be horrid if you want. Your horridnesses are as dear to me as my own!” Smiling, holding him close, she went on: “I’m not afraid of *you*.”

“Hm, that’s bad,” said Dave. “I’ll have to take harsher methods.”

“Fool! . . . It’s a fact, though, with everybody I’ve known I’ve been secretly afraid or anxious. That’s what used to make me act so crazily. Always afraid and putting on a show to cover it.”

“You were a good show-woman. Nobody could have guessed.”

“I don’t mean physically afraid, of course, but a fear in the mind.”

“I get you, dimly.”

Clare hugged him. “With you, blessed love, I don’t have to put on any show. I can let my silly tongue wag as it will. Between you and me there is more than words.”

They lay quiet, thinking over what had been said. “Even with Lance?” Dave presently asked.

She went back to the right place. “Oh, yes! That was like a fever. I don’t mean that Lance was to blame, either. I can see it now. Lance was only a strong boy, but there was something else . . . something that he didn’t know of . . . something . . .”

“Perhaps it was something that our own imaginations supplied,” suggested Dave. “I was crazy about him too.”

“I know . . . something that made one helpless! . . . something unreachable! . . . The lover! You wanted to *be* him, and I wanted to possess him. Neither was possible.”

“You’ve got it,” said Dave; “a flare-up in our quiet sky; a light to remember! We can be glad we knew him.”

“Lance was only a lover,” Clare said somberly. “Try to imagine the hourly anxiety of a woman who has a lover . . . and nothing more!”

“I can’t; but I’ll take your word for it.”

“I never knew a moment’s peace of mind with Lance until after I married you, and of course that part was downright wicked.”

“Well, we’ve been over all that. You can skip it.”

“Yet every woman ought to have had a lover like Lance. Do you mind my saying that?”

“No. I agree. Only there are not enough Lances to go around.”

“To have him . . . and let him go!” murmured Clare. “But a woman can’t let go. And if she clings too long . . . God! what a hell of misery is waiting! . . . That’s what you saved me from, love!”

After a while Clare said lazily: “I said handsome, and I stick to it. Of course I am seeing you to the best advantage. You look made over.”

“You have good medicine,” murmured Dave.

“If you go on and get fat now, I shall hate you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

“But I don’t think you’ll get fat. There’s too much ferment inside. . . . Lord! once I thought I knew you! I had a sort of patronizing attitude towards you in my mind. I expect I often said: ‘Dear Dave! I know him so well!’ . . . And Gemmen! how you surprised me! I never thought . . . Why fancy, I respected you once!”

“Have I lost it?”

“Absolutely! I stick out my tongue at you without compunction now! . . . Lord! what silly notions unmarried females have about men! I wish I could convey the news to girls that . . .”

“That what?”

“That quiet men make the best bedfellows.”

“Let me go now. I *must* pick up the baby. There is real grief coming into that cry!”

“All right. Fetch him in and sit him up on the bed between us, and we’ll be Adam and Eve and Abel.”

Chapter 32

DR. DAVID TASCOTT was visiting in New York for three days to attend the meetings of a medical congress, where he had been invited to read a paper on the subject of "The Country Doctor." Each day he went through the theatrical notes in the newspaper without ever finding the name he was in search of. On his last morning, having occasion to consult the telephone book, this name popped into his head; he turned the pages, and there it was: Lawrence Corder, 15 Minetta Street. There could hardly be two of that name. Dave reached for the telephone, and presently like a miracle the unforgettable, deep voice came winging over the wire: "Hello!" Unchanged after six years!

"Hello, Lance!" said Dave, a little breathless with astonishment and pleasure. "This is Dave Tascott."

After a brief pause, Lance's cool voice came back: "Dave! Well, I'll be damned! Where are you?"

"Speaking from the Hotel Prince George. Can I come and see you?"

Another slight pause. Dave thought, smiling: He's not exactly overjoyed. Lance said: "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Could you make it tomorrow?"

"Sorry, this is my last day in New York," said Dave.

"In that case, come along down."

"I never heard of Minetta Street," said Dave. "Where is it?"

"An alley in Greenwich Village. Better take a taxi and ask the driver. If he doesn't know, let him drive you to the corner of Sixth Avenue and West Third Street, and ask the way from there."

"You're sure it's all right for me to come now?"

"Sure! You'll find me in my dirt, but I don't mind if you're alone."

It was Dave's first visit to Greenwich Village. Minetta was a short street of ancient little brick houses more or less reconditioned, for artists and other

Bohemians. In the vestibule of number 15, he pushed a bell marked Corder. The door presently opened of itself and he stepped into a hall, uncertain which way to go. Through a door immediately on his left, came Lance's ringing voice: "Come in!" He opened the door and had a brief glimpse of a scantily dressed female figure. With a faint scream, she ran behind a screen at the back of the room. Dave started backing out with apologies, but Lance, laughing, seized his hand and drew him in.

"It's all right," he said, "we thought it was somebody else. You certainly must have stepped on it to get here so quick."

"I'll come back later," said Dave.

"Not at all! She's hidden. Take off your things and make yourself at home!"

An acid voice came from behind the screen: "Lance! bring me my waist and my skirt." Lance winked broadly at Dave and carried the desired articles back of the screen. The young woman gave him a piece of her mind in a low voice. Lance laughed.

The blushing Dave was secretly delighted with the set-up; it was all so perfectly in character. After Travis County he was breathing a more exotic air. The untidy room bore it out. There were good paintings hanging on the walls, and a roughly modeled terra-cotta figure on the window sill that to Dave's untutored eyes looked first-rate. Standing against the wall in the rear of the door was a wide couch that evidently served as a bed. A handsome piece of Persian embroidery had been drawn over it, but underneath the cover the tumbled bedclothes could be seen. Lance's clothes lay about. Dave could appreciate the incongruity of his own neat figure in this scene; the country doctor come to town!

Lance came back to him. His tall frame was enveloped in what had been an expensive brocaded dressing-gown; the blond hair was tousled, and when he approached the windows the light glinted against the stubble on his chin. But Dave did not feel that he had been let down. "Give us a good look at you!" said Lance. "By God! you've put on weight and got a country color! You look younger than you did six years ago!"

Dave smiled. "And you?"

"Me?" said Lance carelessly. "Oh, I lead a hard life. I expect it shows." Dave shook his head. Lance seemed magnificent to him. He had matured, hardened perhaps, but at twenty-nine he had reached the highest point in the arc of a man's vigor.

"What brought you to New York?" asked Lance.

Dave told him of the medical congress and his part in it. "I didn't contribute anything to the knowledge of medicine," he said, "but I made the doctors laugh." He went on to tell Lance a couple of the county anecdotes included in his paper, and Lance laughed, too.

"Good raw material for a play," he said.

Presently the young woman issued from behind the screen, fully dressed. Dave stood up. He was astonished at her beauty. Long-limbed and full-bosomed as a girl-goddess, she had a small head with glistening black braids wound around it and classic features cast in the mold of scorn. A perfect complement to Lance, Dave thought, with a feeling of artistic satisfaction. "This is Connie," Lance said carelessly; and to her: "This is Dave."

Connie scarcely deigned to glance at Dave. She was angry. She stood between the two men with her sparkling eyes fixed on Lance, waiting to attract his attention. Lance refused to look at her. "Have you got your pipe?" he said to Dave. "Smoke up. Do you still use Garrick mixture?"

The girl broke in on him rudely: "I want to speak to you."

"Another time," said Lance coolly. "Dave's an old friend. You wouldn't be interested in our reminiscences. Better run along now."

Dave caught his breath. What a tone to take to an angry beauty! However, there was no explosion. The girl transferred her angry stare to Dave. If looks could kill, that would have been the end of him. Leaving them, she snatched up a little hat from a table and her jacket from a chair, and went out, pulling the door after her with a resounding slam. "I'm afraid I came at a bad time," murmured Dave.

"Not at all," said Lance. "I was glad of the excuse to get rid of her." He glanced at his typewriter. "I've got work to do."

"I won't stay long," said Dave.

"That doesn't apply to you," said Lance. . . . "How is Clare?" he asked offhand.

Dave, suddenly warmed all over, answered smiling: "She's all right! Did you know that we had a couple of children?"

"No," said Lance, "only a couple? How modest!"

"Well, we hope to add to that before we stop," said Dave.

Lance glanced at him queerly, and laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Dave.

"Means nothing," said Lance. "It was the plural pronoun that set me off."

Dave thought: He looks on me as a negligible person. What do I care? He can't hurt me any more, and I can enjoy him to the full.

"Got a picture of the kids?" asked Lance.

Dave had a photograph in his wallet, but for some obscure reason he didn't want to produce it. "No," he said. "I'm glad to say they both favor Clare. The little girl promises to be a beauty."

"Is Clare happy?" Lance asked bluntly.

Dave, smiling, considered how to answer. "Is anybody happy?" he said. "I couldn't tell you. But I can say that she's contented."

Lance nodded. "Settled down," he said, with just the faintest suggestion of a sneer.

"If you mean changed or subdued or resigned or anything like that," said Dave, smiling still, "not in the least. Neither marriage nor motherhood could change Clare. She is more herself than ever. A kind of Aurora Borealis in our sky; unpredictable."

Lance glanced at him sharply. "I know Clare's quality," he said. For Dave his words had the flavor of a rare wine on the tongue. Fancy Lance being jealous of me!

It was not difficult to get Lance talking about himself. "I suppose this strikes you as a pretty rum outfit," he said to Dave with a sidelong glance. He indicated the room with a wave of his hand.

"On the contrary," said Dave, "I approve of it." Lance looked surprised. "Including Connie," Dave went on. "This is the other side of the coin. Funnier and more exciting than my side."

"It's all right if you don't let it kid you," said Lance. . . . "What would Clare say to it?" he presently asked.

"I don't think I'll tell her anything about it," said Dave slowly.

"Why not?" demanded Lance.

"Clare is changed in one respect," said Dave; "I mean, she is more able to be fair to what she doesn't approve of. But there's no sense in trying her too far. The pleasure I have in this is my own affair."

The two men exchanged a sudden grin of understanding. It was like their first meeting.

"Clare is marvelous!" murmured Lance.

"Are you telling me?" said Dave.

"This stew I live in," Lance went on, "is not due to poverty so much as heedlessness. I simply have not the time nor the patience to lead a conventional life. I like to feel unhampered."

“I can understand that,” said Dave.

“I’m not doing so badly,” Lance went on. “It’s true I haven’t yet succeeded in getting a Broadway production—what do you expect of the commercial theater? But I’m making headway. My plays are put on by independent theaters and other groups; I’m becoming known; one way or another I scratch a fair living. . . . Did you know that I was divorced after six months of married life?” he asked.

Dave nodded. “We read it in the paper.”

Lance grinned mockingly. “Do you always answer in the plural?”

“I reckon it’s natural to a married man,” said Dave.

“My wife was a desirable femme,” Lance continued. “On the physical side the marriage was all right. But a rich man’s daughter is a woman spoiled. The inflated notions she gets are unbelievable. The whole family acted as if they had bought me. And when my pretty, brainless wife undertook to shape me to *her* mold, we soon came to a deadlock. It was a good thing to get it finished up clean so soon.

“Marriage is not for me—not, at least, until I am able to make a good stake and thumb my nose at the world. Marriage with Clare would have been disastrous for both of us, for quite different reasons. I was too young. But don’t think I don’t appreciate her. Clare gave my life a pattern. Clare represents to me everything that I keep under hatches. I wish to God I had some assurance of meeting another Clare ten years from now. But I won’t. And so if I marry it will be some simple, bovine creature with good lacteal glands. You may laugh, but I’d like to father a couple of kids myself.” He broke off to ask with a keen glance: “Am I right to be telling you all this stuff?”

Dave met his eyes. “Sure! I didn’t look you up just to pass the time of day.”

“Okay. You’re a good scout, Dave. Though there have been times when I hated you.”

“Same here,” said Dave.

“You say this life attracts you,” Lance went on. “God! consider what a yen I have for your life! You have the cake and I have the icing. Icing’s too good a word to put to it. Life in Greenwich Village is a ghastly sham. Phony! Phony! Phony! Artistic froth on the top of the industrial kettle! The kids that flock here are engaged in an endless game of kidding themselves and each other. Phony art, phony love, phony freedom! They’re as ineffectual as a cloud of mayflies. They have no stings!”

“Why do you stay here?” asked Dave.

“Because I have to. My living is in the city. If I should ever become independent you won’t be able to see me leaving for my dust. . . . But independence is a far-off possibility. In a commercialized theater there isn’t much demand for honest writing. Though the people seem to like it. The difficulty is to get past the business men of the theater.”

“Anyhow,” said Dave, “you’ve kept your ideals as to what constitutes honest writing.”

“Ideals!” said Lance. “Don’t make me laugh! It’s not idealism but the instinct of self-preservation. . . . I’ve hardened myself since you knew me, Dave. How else can a man survive in such a world?”

“To be hard’s all right,” said Dave, “but don’t tell me that’s the whole story.”

“No,” said Lance, “I’m lucky because I have a strong animal nature, and I can always forget myself that way. I am capable of having a hell of a good time. And an animal life is not to be despised, either. But it’s not all; a man longs for something that lasts. . . . I only have one merit, Dave. I don’t kid myself—at least not much. I got that from you.”

“From me?” said Dave, surprised.

“Sure! All the time during those early talks we used to have, you held that before me: Don’t kid yourself! I’ve tried to live up to it. It’s the only line a man can hew to. Don’t kid yourself!”

“Well, I got something from you, too,” said Dave quietly.

Lance disregarded it. . . . “And you may also put on my tombstone,” he added, grinning, “that he never lied to women. But, of course, that’s no merit, because the truth mows them down like a two-edged sword. . . . It almost becomes monotonous. . . .”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *More Than Bread* by Hulbert Footner]