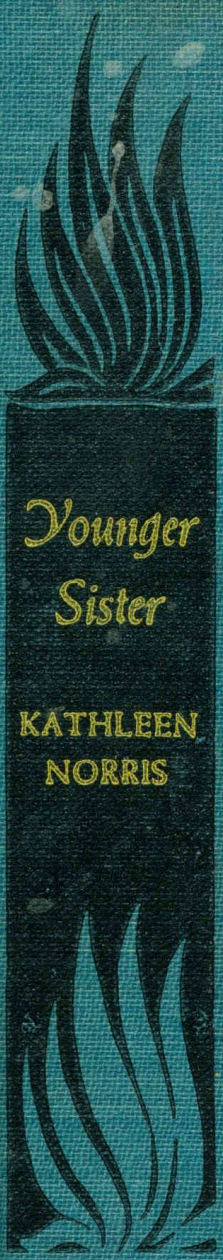

Younger Sister

KATHLEEN NORRIS

Blakiston

TRIANGLE BOOKS

Title: Younger Sister
Date of first publication: 1928
Author: Kathleen Norris (1880-1966)
Date first posted: Apr. 30, 2022
Date last updated: Apr. 30, 2022
Faded Page eBook #20220476

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

YOUNGER SISTER

By Kathleen Norris

THE BLAKISTON COMPANY
Philadelphia

TRIANGLE BOOKS EDITION PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 1944
By arrangement with Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.

TRIANGLE BOOKS is a series published by
The Blakiston Company, 1012 Walnut St., Philadelphia 5, Pa.

PRINTED AND BOUND IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE AMERICAN BOOK—STRATFORD PRESS, INC., N. Y. C.

Younger Sister

CHAPTER I

For a while she stood looking down at the box of flowers thoughtfully, an odd, a puzzled and quizzical and faintly frowning expression upon her serious face.

Under the silky, cool layers of pale green tissue paper there was an ink-smeared envelope, with a card inside. The girl—she was a tall girl, with a creamy skin and rich, dark red hair—stuck card, envelope, enclosing wire and all into her coat pocket, and went to get a vase.

She had come back, and was fanning and spreading the violets in a crystal bowl, when an older woman came into the room.

"Bee," said the newcomer, pleased, "I didn't hear you come in, dear!"

"I've just come in, Mother.—Don't do that!" Beatrice said, as the other woman lifted up her discarded hat and bag. "I'm going right upstairs. I'll take them!"

"I suppose," Mrs. St. John said patiently, in distaste, "I suppose that idiot, Roger Newberry, is wasting his good money on violets nowadays. All right—all right, if he wants to, and you don't mind. But in my opinion that young man had better be about his engineering business."

"These aren't from Roger," Beatrice said, in a rather troubled tone, in the pause.

She raised her eyes slowly, and their grave beauty met the alert glance of her mother.

"Aren't?" Mrs. St. John echoed, with relish.

There was another brief silence. Then, carrying the flowers to the mantel of the shabby, crowded little sitting room, Beatrice said, over her shoulder:

"Mr. Challoner sent them."

"Mr. Challoner!" the older woman echoed, with amazement giving place to awe, and awe to something almost approaching rapture, in her voice. "My *dear*!"

There was a long silence after that in the room, while the clock ticked, and the softly falling snow outside whispered against the windows, and the shouts of snow-balling children came in, softened and distant, from the street.

Beatrice did not turn to face her mother; she straightened books on the mantel, and came back to the table to crush the paper box and the green tissue and the string into a lump of rubbish. Without speaking again she bore these from the room.

When she saw her mother a few minutes later, Mrs. St. John was in Marcia's room; Marcia had a wretched cold, felt miserable, and had not gone to the office at all today.

"How are you, darling?" Beatrice asked, seating herself on the foot of the sufferer's bed.

"I'm better," Marcia said, drawing her feet up under the covers, to get them out of her sister's way. "Some flowers came for you—I took them in. Who from?" she asked animatedly.

Beatrice St. John was twenty years old; she had been in the employ of Houston Challoner for only five months. Marcia was twenty-nine; for nine years she had been his private secretary. She had known her employer's first wife well, had shared with him the sorrow of her untimely death; she had accompanied him through all the ups and downs of a voyage from simple beginnings to great success, and what she felt for him, if a secret from the world, was at least no secret from her sister.

So that Beatrice knew exactly what she did when she answered Marcia's question. She had felt this question coming, when she stood distressed and frowning beside the opened box of violets, a few minutes ago.

Yet answered it had to be.

"Mr. Challoner sent them to me—violets," she said, as lightly, as indifferently as she could, not meeting her sister's eyes. "Wasn't it sweet of him?"

"Houston Challoner!" Marcia ejaculated, her eyes widening, her face paling just a shade.

"And I consider it distinctly—well, significant," Mrs. St. John remarked in satisfaction, from her rocker. "Man that age—girl Bee's age——"

"Mama!" Beatrice entreated, in a voice of long-suffering.

“Well, I do!” the older woman asseverated, with a little laugh.

The eyes of the two girls met, somberly. “God could have spared me this,” Marcia’s tortured look said, desperately. “It isn’t my fault,” Beatrice’s proud, pitying, steady gaze answered. “How could I help it?”

“Are you going to a party tonight, that he might have thought you wanted to wear some flowers, Bee?” the older sister presently asked, in a constrained, careful voice.

“Probably,” Beatrice assented quickly. “I’m going to a movie with Roger,” she offered brightly. “He may have known it!”

“How does that happen?” Mrs. St. John, rousing from pleasant dreams and speculations, asked a little sharply.

“Saturday night, Mummy. Don’t we always?” Bee countered innocently.

“Well, I hope he’ll wash his hands ’fore he comes for you,” her mother said, with a sort of obvious childlike spite that made Beatrice laugh.

She was glad to laugh; she was glad of anything that gave her an excuse to look anywhere but at Marcia: that gave Marcia an opportunity to regain what composure she could.

“It isn’t my fault—he’s forty-eight years old—I never dreamed any man that age could fall in love with—anyone,” Beatrice’s thoughts ran confusedly and uncomfortably. “Anyway, I wouldn’t marry him if he was ten times as rich—anyway, he has a son older than I am—anyway, if Marcia wanted him, why hasn’t she gone after him?—she’s had four years—since Mrs. Challoner died! Oh, dear, she looks sick—she looks stricken—I suppose she thinks that I’ve been trying to get him—I wouldn’t have him ____”

“What’d the card say, lovey?” Mrs. St. John asked, suddenly.

The girl’s mother was a privileged person, a fussing, loving, ineffectual, loyal, exasperating little woman who had always been years younger than her older daughter in character, and who was now beginning to be mothered by the tall, quiet younger daughter as well. Between Marcia and her mother’s ages there were but seventeen years; Mrs. St. John still felt herself to be the bewildered, pretty, helpless creature who had been widowed at an infantile twenty-seven, with a capable little girl of ten, and a baby in arms, for whom to care.

“I’m just as much interested in your beaus as you girls are!” she observed now, defensively, almost coquettishly.

“Beaus! Mr. Challoner!” Bee said, scornfully.

“Well, a man that age sending a girl flowers means *something*, Bee,” her mother assured her seriously.

“Marcia, tell me about the cold,” the younger girl commanded abruptly.

“Oh, it’s much better!”

“Really?”

“Oh, really. How’d things go at the office?” Marcia asked.

“All right. Mr. Challoner went down to look at the Bay Street property at about noon—Mr. Flint’s wife has a little girl——”

“Another girl! Oh, too bad,” Marcia said interestedly. There were little bright spots of color in the cheeks that had been pale, now, and her eyes were unusually bright. She was acting.

“I suppose they were disappointed—he was very quiet about it. Marcia, have you had any lunch?”

“I slept until nearly eleven, and then Mummy brought me in some hot coffee. Is the snow holding up traffic?”

“Downtown it’s pretty bad. But out here all the youngsters are shoveling like mad.” Houston Challoner had brought Beatrice home in his car, but she did not mention that. She felt troubled about the whole situation. Marcia might as well know the truth, now as later, if it were the truth, after all. But what a waste it was! Why should Houston Challoner like her, like Beatrice St. John, who was not even thinking about him, and overlook completely darling old Marcia, who had worked so hard for him, who had loved his wife, and who was so pitifully ready to drop into his hand like a ripe fruit!

“I’ll get you girls anything you want for lunch,” Mrs. St. John offered without moving. Her eyes were still far away.

“You will not,” Beatrice said, lazily. “Marcia, would you have scrambled eggs—or tea, if I brought a tray in here?”

“I’d love some tea,” Marcia answered gratefully. “Any—any objection to letting me see the card, Bee?” she asked, suddenly, out of a silence, when Beatrice had carefully brought in the lunch tray, and their mother was out of the room.

“Now, what did I do with it?” Beatrice murmured, setting the tray down carefully, and looking about with an excellent simulation of uncertainty. “It

must be in the other room."

"What did it say?" Marcia asked, taking her napkin out of its ring.

It was in Beatrice's jacket pocket, still unread, still twisted in its envelope and wire loop. The jacket had been hung in the shallow bedroom closet; Beatrice felt as if Marcia could see it, could sense its presence through the door.

"Oh, just——" But Marcia might as well know the truth, she persisted courageously, if it were the truth! No use pretending that Mr. Challoner wasn't—wasn't—well, acting, anyway, as if he were——"It just said 'With kindest regard,' " Beatrice fabricated, uncomfortably.

" 'With kindest regard'!" Marcia echoed. "But isn't that funny! Why should he say 'With kindest regard' to you? It sounds so old-fashioned. It sounds as if——" Suddenly she smiled, and an odd light came into her eyes. "Bee," she said, animatedly, "there's just a chance that those flowers were for me, after all! Did you look at the card? I didn't. I thought the boy said 'Miss Beatrice St. John' when he brought them, because flowers almost always *are* for you, but it's, possible he said 'Miss St. John.' After all," Marcia went on, with that sweet, stupid eagerness of hers that somehow always wrung Bee's heart, and that wrung it more than ordinarily today —"After all, Bee, I went home from the office sick yesterday, and it's extremely likely—or at least it's possible——"

Bee's instinct leaped toward the offered loophole. But a second impulse restrained her, and she reminded herself again that Marcia might as well know the truth, if it were the truth. Houston Challoner knew Marcia well; theirs had been an affectionate and neighborly, as well as a business, intimacy for almost ten years. If he had ever been even slightly interested in Marcia, he would have had plenty of opportunities to indicate it. No use her deceiving herself; no kindness in deceiving her.

"No, they were for me," she said mildly.

"Well, of course I thought they were," Marcia agreed, subsiding. "Do you like him?" she asked suddenly, painfully, as Beatrice, established now at the center table, with her own teacup and plate, composedly continued her luncheon.

"Mr. Challoner?" the younger girl asked, thoughtfully.

"Oh, hear her! And see the blush!" It was Marcia being arch, pretending to know all about flirting and love affairs again, an attitude that always made Bee's blood run cold with a sort of shame and pity combined. She knew,

instinctively, that Marcia had no knowledge of these things, that it was all unconscious imitation and acting, that Marcia had never felt, and never would feel, the wild warm rush of conscious youth and power and instinct that had belonged to her, Beatrice, from her first happy, high-school summer.

"He's ever so old!" she said carelessly, buttering toast.

"Forty-eight," Marcia supplied quickly, jealously. "Couldn't you—couldn't you ever—like him, Bee?" the older sister pursued lightly.

It was part of Marcia's general, pathetic ineptness, where these so much more than delicate matters were concerned, that she could trample into them roughshod, could discuss love and emotion with all the bland assurance of the born outsider.

"Oh, *like* him!" Beatrice said, with an unhappy laugh. "A man sends me violets—— Why, Roger has sent me carloads, and you and Mummy don't get excited. . . ."

But this was equivocating, and she knew it. Houston Challoner, quiet, clever, rich, handsome, forty-eight, had just turned her whole world topsy-turvy by asking her, as he drove her home through the softly powdered snow—well, no, not exactly to marry him, but what she would say if he *did* ask her to marry him.

She had been conscious of heart pounding and cheeks blazing, of course. A mere clerk in the big architectural firm's employ; one of the "librarians" who hunted through old blueprints for details, or through files for letters, and was paid eighteen dollars a week for her labors, she had never thought of the big architect, himself, as being, by any possibility, aware of her existence at all. That Marcia, his trusted confidential secretary, cherished a hopeless, secret, uncomfortable feeling for Houston Challoner, Beatrice alone knew.

Sometimes she thought that even Marcia did not know it. Certainly it was not "love," Bee would reflect, with healthy distaste for her sister's humbly adoring, blindly jealous feeling toward their employer. Marcia had felt much the same feeling for Mrs. Challoner, in her lifetime, a passionate, almost angry conviction that whatever the Challoners did was perfection, that they were the most significant and important persons in the world. After all this, after all this it was not fair that he should fancy her, Beatrice, instead of Marcia!

In the apartment's tiny kitchen, a little later, she washed the lunch dishes, and could talk more freely to her mother.

"Marsh looks awfully run down, to me, Mummy."

"Marcia hasn't been well for a long time," Mrs. St. John agreed, without uneasiness.

"But what's the matter with her, Mummy?"

"Oh, she's just—run down," the older woman conceded, indifferently. Mrs. St. John was incurably romantic, and Beatrice's affairs, as far more romantic than Marcia's, interested her at the moment more deeply than the older daughter's. "What's this about an important man like Mr. Challoner sending you flowers, lovey?" she demanded.

"Violets," Beatrice said, simply, to retard, if not quash, the subject. She picked the teacups daintily from the warm dishwater by their handles, and held them under the hot-water faucet, rinsing them before she inverted them on the little drain.

She knew the kitchen by heart; the St. Johns had lived in this apartment for eight years. It was a decent, uninteresting, old-fashioned apartment, containing a small square parlor with two windows and a false mantel, a small square bedroom where Mrs. St. John and her older daughter slept, a small square dining room finished in cheap dark wood, with a strip of red papering above, where there was a sewing machine, and a couch for Beatrice, and this angle of crowded kitchen, whose single chair, and small garbage bucket, and drop-leaf pine table, and broom, were always bumping into whatever member of the family was operating at the four-burner gas stove, or at the sink, or at the wall cupboard where boxes of spices, and paper cartons of crackers, and single onions or oranges were mixed in among the humble showing of china and glass.

The cold-water faucet ran thinly; it had trickled for some five or six years. The hot-water faucet had a maddening way of suddenly running stone cold in the middle of dishwashing. The old white enameled kettle had a cork wedged firmly in the place where its cover knob had once been. The dish towels were squares cut from an old bed quilt, duly hemmed and washed and aired first, and now wearing into fringes and holes. There was a gray dishrag at the sink, and a slip of yellow soap; there was a thick jelly glass into which scraps of butter and fat were conserved, for cooking. On the top shelf of the cupboard were empty glasses and jars and pots that had once

held cheese or jam or pickles; Mrs. St. John belonged to the generation that never threw anything away.

Under the cupboard was a little cooler, with a tinned compartment for ice. In the winter the St. Johns never bought ice, and there was a dry, greasy, salty smell of food in the empty cooler. Today there was a saucer there, with a cold baked sweet potato on it, a bowl of stewed dried peaches, a small saucepan half filled with a rather watery mutton stew upon which disks of cold fat were floating, and a pint milk bottle half full of rather pale milk.

Other provisions in the kitchen comprised only a few potatoes in a box on the small outside landing, and the scanty supplies of sugar, coffee, and bread on the shelves.

Poverty had ruled the kitchen and the house for long years, poverty made difficult and ugly by the mother's entire ignorance of cooking, managing, and dietetics. Mrs. St. John rejoiced in her limitations; she felt that any woman who studied menus and cook books and budgets must necessarily be of an inferior type.

"Both my girls are clever at business," she would say complacently, "and I'm the old-fashioned mother who stays at home and takes care of them. I don't fuss about modern ways of doing things, because I believe the old ways are best. The less time spent in the kitchen the better, to my way of thinking!"

For many years both daughters had accepted this at their mother's valuation; Marcia accepted it still. But there were times now when Beatrice questioned the truth of her mother's assertion—times when she questioned many other aspects of her mother's point of view.

Poor as they were, their way of managing was never economical, Beatrice began to perceive. There was no beauty, no fitness, in the household. Marcia, pale and dyspeptic, needed soups and salads, rather than the eternal scrambled eggs and veal chops over whose cooking Mrs. St. John spent only grudging minutes. There was too much delicatessen pastry in the household, too much fresh white bread.

Bee had taken all this for granted a few years ago, and had raced joyously through high school anxious only to graduate and to be able to take a position somewhere, and help Mummy and Marsh.

But now she had been working three years; first in Miss Dayton's Private Kindergarten, as morning assistant, for thirty dollars a month, and

then under Marcia, in the distinguished offices of Challoner, Fairfax & Flint, architects.

Three years. And yet matters were not any better at home, nor did they seem particularly purposeful abroad. Miss Dayton, a vegetarian, prohibitionist, dietitian, and feminist, had duly drilled her theories into Beatrice, and Beatrice had adapted them, and expurgated them, for timid introduction at home. But Mummy and Marcia, even while listening interestedly, never seemed to take the thing at all to heart.

The poverty, the veal chops, the fresh bread, continued. Mummy grew a little grayer, Marcia a little more dyspeptic, and the apartment a little shabbier. Beatrice went on washing dishes, washing transparent silk stockings that snapped threads even while she tried to put them on, went on working hard—for what?

She filed letters and inspected blueprints and identified specifications faithfully. She managed to get close enough to her busy and important sister to ask, every morning about half-past eleven, "What time are you lunching, Marcia?" And sometimes Marcia went with her to "Ye Tulipe Potte," and sometimes Beatrice went with one of the other clerks to Canfield's Cafeteria.

But why? She was growing up, now, and wondering about life. The years had begun to move faster, and Beatrice had a feeling of responsibility that she had not known a few years ago—a beginning of fear.

Marcia probably wasn't going to marry; Marcia was twenty-nine. And Mummy wasn't going to grow any younger or more capable. Beatrice had believed firmly from her childhood that everything was going to turn out beautifully for the St. Johns, as soon as she was able to put her shoulder to the wheel. But the shoulder was there, now, and nothing appreciably the better for it.

Everything was worse, indeed, in at least one way. For Beatrice was sick at heart to discover, in her thoughts about herself, that she was not happy as a business woman. She hated offices, she hated downtown life, she had no ambition connected with her work or with any other work of which she could think.

Not that she wanted to stay at home. No, in her last school vacations, and in whatever other intervals of leisure her life had afforded, she had been cured of any dream of that. To be penniless, to finish the breakfast dishes, and make the beds, to walk downtown that carfare might be saved, to stop at

the library, and to send home from the grocery six eggs and a box of cornstarch—this was terrible. Marcia was paid forty dollars a week; a very handsome salary in her own and her family's eyes. But when Bee was idle that was all the three women had.

It irritated the younger girl to feel that they were all working, scrimping, worrying, merely to live. Marcia's health was going, her own youth was slipping by, and what had they to show for it? Struggling through this year, just so that they might win the privilege of struggling through next year. Mummy small and gray and nervously inefficient, and Marcia lean and pallid, enthusiastic about the company's business downtown, and tired and silent at home—and what was it all about?

Beatrice had plenty of admirers; she had not reached her twentieth year without more than one actual offer of marriage. Offers of marriage from Younger May, whose mother was keeping boarders so that she might send him to college, and from Harry Fontaine, who was in his second year of medical school. Offers from Roger, who was poorer than either. Also an offer from her dentist, kindly, simple, woolly-headed Fred Leach. Or no, that hadn't been a real offer, but Beatrice knew that it might easily have been developed into one.

None of these men had stirred her in the least; marriage with them would have solved none of her problems. Beatrice's pulses remained normal; she confided to an intimate friend or two that either there was no such thing as falling in love, or she herself was incapable of it.

She had begun in the past few months, while the long cold winter dragged itself away, to amuse and faintly disturb her mother and sister with wild suggestions of rebellion.

"Let's all get out! Let's—well, we could sell Mummy's black pearl for two or three hundred dollars, and go to—oh, Honolulu! Let's all go through the Canal to San Francisco, and then to Honolulu, and see what happens. Why shouldn't we all emigrate to some place we never heard of before—Lima, for instance? I don't know one thing about Lima, do you, Marsh? Nothing'll ever happen to us here in North Underhill. I'm sick of this place! It's just the wrong size—nobody could be excited over a city of eighty thousand people! Let's make a wild jump and go somewhere, and have adventures. Whatever happens, it won't be any worse than crossing the ocean in the *Mayflower*, or crossing the plains in a covered wagon."

Her mother and sister would regard her indulgently, amusedly, when she broke forth into these tirades. Beatrice came to see that they neither shared

nor understood her mood. Mrs. St. John's was not a constructive mind. She had drifted along for forty-six years without planning or thinking, and she was perfectly capable of drifting for another forty-six. First her father, then her husband, then a brother, and now her daughters had supported her; she felt that in mismanaging their respective households prettily and helplessly, and in occasionally making her famous orange cake, she requited them for their efforts.

Marcia's viewpoint was of course entirely biased by what she felt for Houston Challoner. She had toward him the office attitude; she felt that the firm was the most important firm, and that its head was naturally the most important person, in the world. She had begun as a humble clerk years ago, and had almost immediately been singled out for more responsible work, and for the friendship of the president and his wife.

Marcia, breathless and awed and grateful, had dined at their home, at twenty-three or twenty-four, and had brought home accounts of the silver and linen, and the food, too, to her mother and Beatrice. Marcia had praised the son of the house, a tall, gawky college boy then, and had spoken often of Bert, and Bert's father's plans for him. She had hung upon the reports from Mrs. Challoner's sick room with a passionate intensity that had vaguely shamed Beatrice, even five years ago. Why should Marcia ejaculate "Thank God!" so fervently, just because Alice Challoner had had a good night? What was it to plain, hard-working, obscure Marcia St. John?

Now, today, into the midst of the girl's vague fretting and uneasiness over the whole situation, had fallen this bombshell of a serious offer of marriage from Houston Challoner. Beatrice could hardly believe it, even now. But her memory of the few words he had said was perfectly clear, and there were the violets to prove it.

He was a rather tense, serious man, at best, and today he had shown a certain nervousness—almost a shyness—with this girl who might so easily have been his daughter.

"Will you ask that very lovely mother of yours something for me, Miss Beatrice?" he had said.

"Anything!" the girl had answered simply, smiling. But the color had rushed up into her face none the less, at his tone.

"Will you ask her if you may dine with me, any night next week, at the Underhill, and go to see *Robinson Crusoe*?" he had said.

Robinson Crusoe was the great musical spectacle, coming from New York for one week at North Underhill. There was not a girl in the office who was not scheming to see *Robinson Crusoe*. But Beatrice's heart had sunk strangely at the invitation, and under her shabby old fur-trimmed blue coat she had felt the muscles drawing back from the neighborhood of Houston Challoner's shoulder.

He—why, he was forty-eight, he was old. And if he took her to the theater—if he showed everyone what he thought of her . . .

Loyalty had sprung up within her, too; loyalty to dear Marcia, so unable to protect herself from the anguish this news would cause her! It wasn't right that a handsome man of forty-eight, with a beautiful, high-powered car, and money, and position, and power, should take nine years of Marcia's unremitting devotion and labor, and reward it by asking Marcia's younger sister to marry him!

. . . But then you couldn't mix business and sentiment. And it wasn't as if Beatrice would marry him, no, not if he were made of gold!

Thoughts surged confusedly back and forth in her mind, as the quiet snowy afternoon went by, and Marcia dozed, and waked, and dozed again, and Mrs. St. John rocked fitfully in her favorite chair, played solitaire fitfully, knitted fitfully for the old soldiers in the Home, and fitfully went to and fro between the bedroom and the kitchen, putting out milk bottles, refusing agents, talking to the laundryman.

"Well, look here—where were you with the wash yesterday? Friday, yes. . . . Well, of course. . . . Oh, I see. . . . Oh, that's too bad. . . . No, it didn't make the slightest difference, as it happens."

Beatrice washed her hair, and doubled herself over at the lighted gas logs in the false fireplace, drying it.

"Of course it doesn't make the slightest difference," she echoed her mother's words scornfully, deep in her soul. "Nothing makes the slightest difference to us. I wonder if anything will ever happen to this family?

"I always used to think," she reflected further, "that the girls in books were fools not to marry a rich man, if one came along. Why not? All men are pretty much alike, especially if you're not in love, and certainly Mr. Challoner is as nice as he can be. He's always been lovely to us; he came to see us last Christmas when Mummy was sick. But——"

She tossed her red mane back, and drew a great gasping breath.

“But good gracious, what an awful thing it is when you come right down to it!” she said.

“Don’t catch your hair on fire,” Mrs. St. John, who rarely said a necessary thing, warned her absent-mindedly.

Marcia, in the bed beyond the archway, awakened with a little moan.

“Bee—darling!”

Beatrice was arranging her thick, copper-colored crop. It was just long enough to be ruffled back in two curly heavy bands over her ears, and tucked under, with infinite spraying and rippling and rebellion, at the white nape of her neck.

“Bee, I feel rotten, dear.” Marcia looked flushed and dark, and there was an unhealthy glisten on her face.

“The tea wasn’t the right thing!” Bee exclaimed, at her bedside.

“No, it wasn’t that. But—I feel so horribly weak,” Marcia said thickly, heavily, “and my heart’s—beating so . . .”

CHAPTER II

So that was an end to personal dreams for that afternoon, although, as it turned out, there was nothing much the matter with Marcia. The doctor was entirely unalarmed, and talked comfortably enough of blood pressure and slight localized anemia, and underweight. Marcia was eleven pounds underweight, it appeared, and the first thing to do was to put on those pounds.

Marcia, laughing and relieved, and a little inclined to flirt with the doctor, took her diet list, and studied it interestedly, and promised to eat like a wolf. She was always hungry, anyway; there would be no trouble about *that*.

She was back at work on Monday—only drinking a pint of milk at eleven and at four. And Beatrice went back to work on Monday, and found an opportunity to say quickly and without punctuation, but quite distinctly, to Houston Challoner, "I didn't ask Mother what you told me, Mr. Challoner, because I never go out to dinner or theater except with the boys I've known all my life, but I do appreciate your asking me, and I know I would have had a lovely time if I had gone."

Houston Challoner looked at her very attentively while she said it, and answered kindly that he appreciated exactly how she felt, and he thanked her for being so honest with him, and that he hoped she would think of him as one of her realest, truest friends.

"If anything ever comes up in which I could be of service to you," he said, "I want to feel that you would turn to me."

Beatrice thanked him again, and went away feeling more uncomfortable than ever. Even while he spoke, she was thinking that he had never said that to Marcia, for all the loyal service Marcia had rendered him, and that it was not fair. How prickly it made her feel; how ecstatically it would have thrilled Marcia!

Beatrice had spoken to him at midday, when they both happened to be coming out of the Challoner Building, where the offices of the company were situated. She watched him go down the street to the snowy curb where his car was waiting; a well-made, slender, handsome man in a fur-collared coat, with just the right gloves and hat, just the right nod to his chauffeur as he got in beside him.

“I declare I think there’s something chemical in the way people make you feel!” Beatrice mused, turning into Canfield’s Cafeteria, and eyeing creamed carrots and fruit cup and macaroni salad with an absent eye. “Some persons are alive to you, and some are dead, and you can’t help it; it’s just that way. It’s no use for me to tell myself that he’s terribly nice, and that I’m an awful fool in a town this size, with the boys here what they are, to let him get away. He simply isn’t alive to me, and there you are!

“The worst of it is,” she mused, “that if I ever married anyone like that, I’d die, too—and serve me right! I’ll not think about it any more.”

She opened her book. But the living problem pushed the imaginary one out of her mind.

“Perhaps he’s lonely,” she thought. “Bert Challoner is in Paris, studying architecture—or that’s what he calls it. He’s no comfort for any parent! Oh, why—why—why,” she asked impatiently, staring off into space—“Why doesn’t he marry Marcia? That’s all she needs—someone to make a fuss about her, someone to love her. Marcia would bloom out like a new woman, if she had a chance. He’s only nineteen years older than Marsh; he’s twenty-eight years older than me. Poor old Marsh, she’s actually ill because she hasn’t got anything but business success. She’d be happier with a drunken husband and two sick kids—she’d have no time to get sick, then.”

Later, she turned her attention resolutely to Younger May and Harry Fontaine. Roger Newberry had gone away. Beatrice studied them as possible husbands. Of course neither one had a penny, but then that didn’t matter—or, at least, that shouldn’t matter, for after all, thousands of rich, successful men had started as poor boys.

Younger was a handsome creature, with a deep natural ripple in golden hair that went far toward atoning for his shallowness and stupidity. Harry Fontaine was over-serious; he read gloomy books of statistics about the extinction of the white race, famine in India and China, and the percentage of persons who died dependent.

Beatrice felt that Harry would not himself die dependent; he would become one of the enormously rich doctors to whose penniless youth the world points proudly. Harry would be a safe enough person to marry, if one loved him. But unfortunately she herself could not seem to feel even the faintest stir of emotion where he, or anyone else, was concerned.

It scared her a little, this remoteness. Night clubs and jazzing and house parties and awkward attempts upon the part of this boy or that to “pet” only

bored and annoyed her and made her feel awkward. She wondered sometimes if the hardship of her childhood, that poverty through which her own determination and ambition had cleaved like a knife, had inoculated her, where these often innocent amusements were concerned. They might seem unimportant, but was it possible that they were a sort of necessary footpath by which one reached real living?

"I never get anywhere with your red-headed, proud, tall type," one boy had told her once, quite frankly. "I like 'em loving!"

Beatrice had looked at Marcia, entirely respectable and fine and capable—and unwanted. And she had determined to unbend, to rub her smooth cool cheek against the next young male cheek in its neighborhood, to teach her hand the trick of clinging to another hand, to force her proud red head to rest affectionately against some big, rough shoulder.

But she never could do it. And meanwhile she was twenty. Beatrice could remember Marcia's twentieth birthday, and her own pride, at eleven, in the big sister who had gotten such a wonderful job with the finest architectural firm in the city. It seemed yesterday.

"Marsh, when you were down at Rossiter's Drug Store today, did you weigh?" she began to ask, every evening.

"I didn't have a penny, and neither did Miss Phelan."

And then, days later:

"Did you get weighed, Marsh?"

"Yes, I did. But those scales are crazy. The man said they were."

"But you *haven't* gained?"

"Oh, it isn't that. But he said they were crazy."

"But you *haven't* gained?"

"Not by them I haven't. But it doesn't worry me, because I know they aren't adjusted."

"It just seems ridiculous the fuss people make about weight nowadays," Mrs. St. John, playing a black ace, said dreamily. "I don't know as I ever weighed once, when I was young!"

Beatrice looked at her, levelly, patiently. She did not speak.

"You certainly eat enough," said the mother comfortably. "You eat more than Bee does!"

“I don’t eat any more than I used to,” Marcia presently observed, as if the point were unimportant. Beatrice looked at her in turn, thoughtfully. She knew this was untrue. Marcia was forcing herself to eat puddings and cream soups and cereals; she drank milk twice a day. And still the strange pallor continued, and the oily, damp, dark look to her skin. She tired easily, too; she often came home at about four o’clock and lay down.

Beatrice’s heart, as she watched her sister, on this untimely warm April evening when the windows were wide open to soft, scented airs, began to hammer in slow, thick, terrified strokes. Were they letting Marcia die by inches under their eyes?

“But what can I do—what can I do?” she asked herself in a panic. “I have no money. The doctor seems satisfied enough. Marcia doesn’t seem sick, exactly. Oh, why, why doesn’t somebody fall in love with her?—she’s so sweet, she’s so good, and she’d be so happy in her own life, with a husband and a car and kids and a garden. . . .”

Late in May she went alone to Marcia’s doctor, and blubbered helplessly, forlornly, like a child, when he began to talk to her.

“I’m sorry,” said Beatrice, mopping her eyes, struggling to regain her dignity, as the man looked at her in polite sympathy. “But we had no idea—my mother and I—that it was so bad!”

“Oh, yes—this sort of thing is always serious!” Dr. Duchesne said simply, regretfully.

“But you said—you said all Marcia would have to do is gain those eleven pounds——”

He shook his head faintly, polished his glasses with a fine handkerchief.

“Yes. But it is almost impossible to gain, in her condition. Run down, you know. . . .”

A silence. Then Beatrice wiped her eyes, gulped, and looked at him courageously through wet lashes.

“But then what are we to do, Dr. Duchesne?”

“Ah, there are plenty of things for us to do!” the doctor said, almost gayly.

She hated him. She hated the spring, coming so softly, so richly, so fluffily green to the trees in his horrid little side yard. She hated his tan net

window curtains, and his bronze elephant book-ends, she hated this orderly office, with the sunshine slanting into it, on this hideous Saturday afternoon.

And she hated poverty, humiliating, heartbreaking, inexorable. Why should she have come to ask this dapper, unconcerned little doctor if Marcia oughtn't to stop work, if Marcia oughtn't to take a long rest, in some hot, dry country? Of course he would say that Marcia ought to do exactly those things—and what of it? That wouldn't even pay him his five-dollar fee, so simply solicited by his secretary, as Beatrice, blind and agonized, walked past the neat little desk on her way out.

"I don't see how my sister can get away just now," Beatrice had stammered to him, wretchedly. And he had answered in the doctor's phrase, "I think it's hardly a question of can, Miss—ah, Miss St. John. I think it's a question of *must*, now. I told her months ago that rest might put that weight on and start her in the right direction again. It hasn't, unfortunately. Ask her to come to see me."

Beatrice walked home that afternoon blind and deaf to the glory that had fallen on the old town. In the empty lots near home, grass and buttercups were sprouting among the rubbish and tins and planks; here and there a fruit tree, not yet trampled down by the city, was a ball of pink or snowy bloom against a shabby doorway or a brick garden wall. The air was warm and languid and scented with lilac. Long bright shadows lay across the sidewalk, the shadows of tree trunks and of fences. In one place there was a buzzing level wall of flies; Beatrice walked through them and continued on her way.

Meat balls, fried potatoes, and chocolate custard for dinner; somehow it did not seem the right supper for a hot May night. Beatrice was so quiet, so preoccupied, that her mother asked her if she would like a can of asparagus opened, as a salad. The girl said "No," and Mrs. St. John offered kindly to telephone for some ice, and they could all have iced tea. But Beatrice, angry, helpless tears in her eyes, said "No" again, and then, more appreciatively:

"No, thanks, Mummy. You're awfully kind. But this is fine—this is all right. I guess I'm just not hungry."

"Don't you get sick!" Marcia said, with a faint, despairing laugh, and an accent on the pronoun, and Beatrice, pulling herself together, disclaiming sickness and fatigue and low spirits boldly, asked herself in a panic what families as poor as theirs did in circumstances like that. What *could* they do?

That night Mrs. St. John played cards as usual, and Beatrice sat at the table in the center of the parlor, pasting last summer's snapshots into her

photograph book, and lettering them carefully with white ink. She liked fussy, dainty work, and pressed and snipped carefully, absorbed in what she was doing.

There had been recent rains, but the night was warm and clear, and the twilight seemed to linger a long time. There were unwonted noises and voices in the shabby street, and the thick new leaves on a maple tree at the corner waved and moved restlessly, gently, in a soft wind. Marcia sat at the window, looking out, as twilight gave place to dusk, rocking a little now and then, hardly speaking.

Suddenly, to Beatrice's horror, Marcia burst into tears. She was struggling in their arms, her mother and sister both trying to hold her, for a few minutes, and then they were all in the bedroom, and Beatrice, the larger and stronger of the two, was embracing her, Marcia's head on her sister's shoulder, and Mrs. St. John was standing holding out a fresh new nightgown bewilderedly, as if Beatrice were the mother, and her mother, the child.

"It's just—" sobbed poor Marcia, gulping and plunging, and wiping her eyes upon anything she could reach, and beginning to laugh again even as she began again to cry—"it's just—that I know—oh, I know, you darlings! And I *do* want to live—I *do* want to live—I don't want to die before I've had my chance to live.

"I see it in your faces," she gasped, straightening up, and blowing her nose, and facing Beatrice with trembling, smiling lips and drenched eyes. "You can't hide it. And I think I'd been hoping—I think I'd been hoping —— I'm not putting on weight, Mummy, and I know it. I've seen it all! And in a few w-w-w-weeks," she faltered, "I believe I'll get used to it. But now —just sometimes . . ."

Beatrice found words. They were heartening, scolding words, and she did not spare them, as she helped Marcia's lean, chilly form in between the sheets, and ran about for pillows and hot-water bag.

An odd look was in the younger sister's green-gray eyes as she came and went. There was a sobered, sensible quality to it that contrasted itself oddly to Beatrice's favorite expression of dreaming and laughing through life. It had suddenly occurred to her that she was a fool. And in her prayers that night she put a new petition.

"O my God, I think I must be crazy. I've never fallen in love with any man—I've never wanted to, and consequently I've come to believe that something remarkable is waiting for me—that some Launcelot on a white

horse is going to come galloping into North Underhill and carry me off. Please—please—don't let it be too late for me to save Marcia if marrying Houston Challoner will save her!"

Some weeks later she dined with Houston Challoner at a little cafeteria that was just around the corner from the St. Johns' apartment house.

It came about quite naturally, after all. Mr. Challoner had called as he often did to ask for Marcia, and had brought roses. There were a few minutes of wild confusion and laughter in the apartment, and then he was conducted from the kitchen to the bedroom, and Marcia, looking suddenly quite lovely, with the flowers in her arms, had a few minutes in Paradise.

Mummy wasn't dressed, and didn't want anything but a cup of tea, but Beatrice, it appeared, was going to the cafeteria for her dinner. The caller quite simply and naturally offered to accompany her.

"It's a little Southern place—they have a colored cook—sometimes it's quite good," Beatrice said nervously, as they walked to the cafeteria.

"I like a cafeteria," Challoner said.

"I can't imagine you in a cafeteria," the girl said, amused. "I hope they will have cornbread—they have the best cornbread!" she exclaimed more than once.

He really did seem to know just what to do; he took his tray and the napkin-wrapped utensils quite readily, and he and Beatrice went along the track, admiring everything, and choosing here and there. There was cornbread tonight and—by fortunate chance!—apple pie, too, and bluefish.

The place was quiet, it was late for diners, and they could sit isolated and at peace in a window angle, with pots of flowers and blue checked curtains framing the pleasant vista of the warm, twilight street. Two candles embellished rather than lighted their meal, and Beatrice's strange green-gray eyes looked mysterious and starry by their light; her face was a little pale, and her manner oddly gentle and quiet; she seemed tired. Against the white lining of her old, shabby, dark blue straw hat her richly red hair sprayed in tendrils.

Houston Challoner helped her set forth her meal, and she lent him a hand with his; he went off to get two glasses of water, and came back carrying them steadily.

"It seems funny to see you in a cafeteria, Mr. Challoner."

“I’ve often been in them, though. This is a particularly nice one, small and dainty. I like the curtains and the blue china.”

“It’s a little more expensive than some,” Beatrice said. “They’ve got a real old mammy for a cook—what she cooks is delicious. We often come here, if it’s hot, because our kitchen sort of warms up the whole place.”

“I have never tasted bluefish any better than this,” the man said.

“It’s a specialty here. But whatever she cooks is good. She makes pop-overs every Friday night, between six and seven, and everyone comes here for them.”

“Colored, eh?”

“Oh, yes, she’s a regular old Southern mammy.”

“Well,” said the man pleasantly, easily, in a short silence, “did you get my letter?”

“Yes, I did,” she answered, quickly laughing and coloring.

“And what did you think of it, mademoiselle?”

“That you were one of the kindest persons alive,” she answered, readily, but deeply embarrassed just the same.

“Then it’s an understood thing?” he said.

“Oh, it can’t be, Mr. Challoner!” Beatrice protested, shaking her head. “I couldn’t let you do it!”

He was watching her, an expression of kindness and admiration in his face.

“Then what are we to do, Beatrice?” he asked simply. “About Marcia, I mean?”

Beatrice put her elbows on the table and linked her fingertips to form a rest for her round, firm chin, and looked at him steadily.

“I couldn’t let you put all that money in the bank for us,” she assured him. “It wouldn’t be right.”

Challoner was smoking; he looked at her quietly through a drift of blue smoke. Beatrice faced him, an odd, confused expression on her face.

“I wonder you have patience with me!” she exclaimed, irrelevantly and impulsively.

“Patience with you!” Challoner said. “To me you are the most—interesting—girl I ever knew! I am thinking of you always, whether I see you or not. Why shouldn’t I have patience with you?”

“You think too much of me,” Beatrice muttered, reddening and looking down.

“Possibly,” he conceded, smiling. But he was a little shaken, too.

“What I was thinking—” she began again after a while, with a little difficulty—“what I was thinking is that—that *nobody* could be kinder—could be more generous than you’ve been—about everything, and that nobody—” she was growing incoherent again—“nobody could appreciate it more than I do——” She stopped short.

Houston Challoner put down his cigarette and ground it out. He looked across the table at her seriously for a moment in silence before he spoke.

“You mean that you might be willing to try the experiment, Beatrice?” he asked, in a carefully leveled voice.

“I mean—would *you*?” she countered, flushed but brave, her bright eyes on his.

“Yes,” he said soberly, “I would. You would make me very proud and happy.”

He watched her; her eyes were lowered now, and her color was still high, but there was a smile tugging at the firm, fine line of her young mouth.

“Well, then——?” she asked, shrugging, looking up. And there was a long silence, while they smiled at each other.

Much later—days later—she told him that the world would say that she was marrying him for his money, and that it would be true.

“And yet money doesn’t mean much to you, Beatrice,” he said.

“Oh, yes, it does! Not for stockings and furs,” she explained, laughing. “But for Mummy and Marcia—and things like that.”

“But you wouldn’t be marrying a man you didn’t like, for all that, would you?”

“I wouldn’t be marrying a man I didn’t love,” she corrected it.

“Then you do love me?” He could not ask it often enough.

“Love you! What do you think I’m made of? You’re the kindest, most considerate and thoughtful person I’ve ever met. Why shouldn’t I love you? Of course I love you.”

She would laugh joyously, saying it, and rest the deep firm waves of her red hair against his cheek.

“But you haven’t a ‘case’ on me!”

“I don’t believe in ‘cases’ and ‘crushes’ and all that nonsense,” she answered superbly.

“But you *do* know something about marriage?” he pursued, a little uneasily. “Your mother’s such a gentle, old-fashioned little lady, and you’re only twenty, after all.”

An amused, maternal flash of the green-gray eyes answered him.

“I know enough to know that you are going to have a devoted wife,” the girl said, suddenly grave. “I know that you’re spoiling me, and that I’m going to do my best to spoil you!”

And for such a speech she was always rewarded by seeing a look of utter happiness and satisfaction come into his rather serious eyes, and by hearing something actually boyish in the happy ring of his voice.

They were married on a burning August morning, as quietly as was possible, which was not very quietly, after all. Houston’s mother was brought carefully to the church and wheeled to a front pew for the ceremony; Houston’s married sisters, Mrs. Randall White and Mrs. Tom Carey, with their husbands and children, handsome, well-dressed, confident folk, were all in evidence. Houston’s niece, little Marian Carey, preceded Marcia, as flower girl. And Houston’s cousin, a clergyman, performed the ceremony.

Marcia, in orchid organdy, was maid of honor, and looked so plain and weak and sick that Beatrice’s heart sank at the mere sight of her. Yet Marcia was happy. She had insisted upon filling this proud post, and had had her rather colorless hair elaborately waved for the occasion.

There were pews filled with Fairfaxes and Flints, the members of the firm and all their families, and many employees; Beatrice was too confused and excited to identify them, but her mother told her afterward that even the elevator boys from the building were there.

And finally, there were scores of old friends of the Challoners, the finest folk in town, and an amazing number of old friends on the St. John side, too,

many of whom had not remembered her existence until this brilliant marriage of the pretty red-headed St. John girl had brought her suddenly to mind again.

Beatrice had insisted upon simplicity; she would not wear bridal white and a veil, no matter how passionately Marcia and her mother urged it. Only twenty-four hours before the actual event she burst into angry tears, while they were talking to her, and protested that as Houston was paying for everything—flowers and breakfast, Marcia's gown and Mummy's and hers, paying for their actual rent and food and doctor's bill, all this while—the less display the better.

Marcia and Mrs. St. John, both wrapped in sentimental dreams, had been shocked and pained by this frankness, but in the end Beatrice had her own way, and wore a creamy organdy not any more elaborate than Marcia's, and a small white hat, with a little white feather wound tightly about the low crown. Her burning hair blazed against all the whiteness, but her face was unusually pale, and her voice quite inaudible in the responses.

Afterward, everyone in his own family teased Houston, in a dignified, characteristically Challoner fashion, for his own eager, audible answers to the clergyman's questions, and Beatrice—flushed and radiant at her wedding breakfast—laughed at him, too.

"You sounded perfectly sure of yourself, Hugh!" his mother said.

She called him Hugh, and Beatrice liked the abbreviation. Some of the other members of his family called him "Albert," which was really his given name, but the world of architecture knew him as "A. Houston Challoner," and that was the name upon Beatrice's new cards.

Her wedding day was a blur to her. She was conscious of feeling sorry for everybody—for Hugh, handsome and proud and pleased—and so inexorably forty-eight; for poor pallid, sentimental Marcia, entirely ineffectual in her organdy, with her pink roses; for Mummy, fussing and awe-struck, and too polite to all the Challoners; and finally for herself, feeling strangely young, lonely, tall, and bewildered somehow, in the creamy scalloped gown and the hat with the white feather around it.

She smiled at everyone; she was polite to everyone. The wedding was at ten o'clock, and Beatrice had been up and dressed for four hours by that time. Reporters had besieged the St. John apartment, Marcia had had hysterics, Mummy had jumbled tremulous advice and agitated compliments during the long trying process of the three women's dressing. At quarter-past

nine, Mummy had laid Beatrice's stiff scalloped creamy gown upon the bed, and a wet scrap of blue paper from the hat box had happened to be on the bed, so that Beatrice's last domestic act as a girl had been to wash the blue stain carefully from her wedding gown and press it with an iron.

Marcia, for weeks, had taken the position of martyr. She had agreed to go with Mummy to La Crescenta, and drink Jersey milk, and bask in California sunshine, and sleep under California stars, with the air of a heroic big sister who humors a spoiled little one. And just of late she had implied rather than said openly, but implied none the less, that she had given up Houston Challoner to Beatrice, that she could be happy without him, she could make the sacrifice; it was better, happier for them all, that it should be so.

"You must be very happy—for us both, Bee!" she whispered on the wedding morning, wistfully, emotionally. "I shall be far away—my life is over, dear. All my happiness I pour into you!"

Beatrice, harassed, tired, excited, with all and more than a bride's usual unsureness of herself and of what she was doing, had had an impulse to slap her sister in the face. She was willing to die for Marcia, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to live with her.

There was a beautiful little new watch ticking on her wrist; it said twenty minutes past one when she and Hugh came away from the decorously happy wedding group in the dining room of his big house up on Tory Hill and began saying good-byes in the hall. The open roadster was waiting in a blaze of sunshine at the side door, the servants were everywhere—useful, smiling, efficient. Somebody had put Beatrice's new suitcase into the car, and her new woolly white coat; a rough big champagne-colored Airedale had come up the side steps and sidled into the hall, and was nosing Hugh's hand.

"Come on, now, we must make this snappy!" Hugh was muttering, excited and nervous and happy. Beatrice noticed beyond him a little confusion at the front door: a late arrival.

"It's Mr. Bert, sir," a middle-aged maid said, submissively, eagerly.

"Mr. Bert!" Hugh exclaimed, amazed, looking about.

"Yes, sir. He just came up the drive in a taxi, sir. I thought you mightn't have seen him, sir," Nelly said, delightedly.

Beatrice heard Hugh say "Bert!" in an astounded tone, and she turned to see a tall, loosely built young man come rapidly through the scattered groups in the wide hall and stoop his high fair head to kiss his father simply.

“Hello, Dad!” Bert Challoner said in a youthful sort of voice with a laugh in it. “I had to come home to see you—— Hello, is this the mater? Greetings, Madame Beatrice!”

Everybody laughed delightedly as he took both her hands, and she swayed a little on her feet, like a tall creamy lily, perfumed and rosy and wide-eyed, in her organdy gown, with the little white feather wrapped tightly about her brilliant hair.

“From Paris!” she said, with her wide slow smile.

“From Paris. New York Tuesday. And I’m too late!”

“My dear boy, you should have wired,” said his father.

“I know it. I know it. Frog’s brains—that’s my trouble,” the boy said, not removing his eyes from Beatrice’s face. “But the truth is that I made up my mind to leave, early one morning, before I was half awake, and sailed that day,” he explained. His tone had become almost absent-minded; it was as if some absorbing problem had suddenly presented itself to him and would not be shaken away. “So! You’re Beatrice!” he said slowly. “Well,” he added, in an odd tone, looking straight into her eyes, “that’s that, isn’t it?”

Immediately he began to greet the other members of his family, and after that Beatrice and Hugh went away; the girl tucked her scalloped ruffles tightly about her, seating herself in the luxurious, low-slung open roadster, and Hugh took the wheel. It was a hot day; the leaves in the gardens of Tory Hill all hung motionless in the sunshine; even the shadows seemed to vibrate with heat, and the roads were almost empty.

The new country club was not opened yet, but one of the smaller cabins there was in order, and many of the servants were already at work. Hugh, as president of the club, had of course been able to arrange that he and Beatrice should have it all to themselves for ten days, except for the negligible presence of decorators and painters and gardeners. The girl had not seen it before; she was ecstatic about the little cottage, its open fireplaces and casement windows that gave upon golf greens and flower beds.

She and Hugh were there at four o’clock; there was plenty of time to freshen up and wander about the whole wonderful place, before Harrison, the steward, served them a delicious supper on their own cabin porch. They looked at the stables, and the lockers, and the plunge, and walked all over the golf course, and met McCandlish, the “pro,” who said that indeed he’d take Mrs. Challoner in hand.

There was a natural pond, where Hugh said a hundred dollars' worth of golf balls were lost every year. There were eighteen new greens being added to the course already finished, and much digging and sodding and watering going on in the lovely autumn sunset. There were some mild Alderneys grazing, and Hugh said that the clubhouse had its own milk and cream, and would have fruit and vegetables, too, some day.

Her lovely white wedding shoes got mud on them, but that didn't matter —they'd clean as good as new, Hugh told her.

"Sun bother you, dear?"

"No. My little hat just shades my eyes."

"It's adorable," Hugh said, in a voice that made her feel prickly and uncomfortable somehow.

"Weren't we lucky to get it?"

"Ah, if you're talking about *luck*——!"

She smiled at him, gallantly enough. But a queer little feeling that the advantage of the situation, for the rest of this day, lay very decidedly with him was making conversation rather hard for her. Beatrice wished that she had been married for a year.

It had all seemed natural and right enough, even as short a time past as yesterday. But now, walking over the grounds of the new Wawataysee Club talking pleasantly of unessential things with Mr. Houston Challoner, she felt strangely constrained and remote; as if he were—well, just Mr. Houston Challoner again, and she just the humblest of his office employees. It all seemed funny, that nice old Scotsman calling her "Mrs. Challoner," and the beauty and silence of the big, sweet countryside, and the loneliness of it, when the sun sank, now that the laborers had gone home.

For a third time—it was really more like a tenth, but she counted it as three—she remembered that big, laughing, deep-voiced boy. Her stepson. He had held her hands—so queerly, growing sober and puzzled, all at once. He had looked at her. And he had said, in a gentle, abstracted sort of tone, "Well, that's that, isn't it?"—"That's the little clerk who has managed to capture Dad," he meant.

"What brings him—your son—back?" she asked, at supper.

"Bert?"

"Yes. Has he finished his course—whatever it was—at the Beaux Arts?"

“Finished nothing. He finishes nothing, that lad. He’s a clever fellow, too —I want you to like him, Beatrice. No, he’s not finished. He just got tired and came home. He hadn’t time for many details, but he said his intentions were honorable,” said his father, smiling. “Probably he’ll take a little vacation, up at my mother’s place, and then go into the business.”

“Will he be any use to you, Hugh?”

“Not a particle,” the man said cheerfully.

“But why not send him back to Paris?” the girl asked. She wanted him to go back to Paris. He—he belonged in Paris.

“Oh, he’s had enough Paris!” his father said carelessly. And when he spoke again it was of themselves. He moved his chair close to Beatrice and dropped his hand over her hand, and they talked together in low tones, watching the last light die away toward the warm dusky west, and the first star come out. A clock inside the cottage struck nine, and half-past nine. Beatrice was not conscious of being tired, but the events of the long hot day came and went confusedly in her thoughts: her mother-in-law magnificent in gray, water-striped silk;—somebody handing her a glass cup with strawberry ice slipping about in it;—poor Marcia, pathetic in organdy, getting hysterical in the hot-smelling, food-smelling apartment because her handkerchief was “ridiculously” unmatched to her gown;—Hugh’s house all wide spaces and flowers, and books Beatrice would read some day, and windows out of which she would look, and servants who would be her servants when she got back.

When she got back. And meanwhile, there was this strange little bit of ground to get over, the transition between girlhood and womanhood. This nice-looking, attractive, entertaining man across the table from her was her husband, and this was his hour.

Suddenly she knew what she had felt, what she had resented, in young Bert Challoner’s masterful, strange look this morning. He had thought that she was marrying his father just for money—that without money no man Hugh’s age could win so young a wife. He had treated his father badly himself, trying to get money from Hugh, wasting his own time, and disappointing those who loved him. And he had thought—young Bert had thought: “Here’s another of us, working the old man!”

Beatrice told herself that she had read that in Bert’s first appraising look. Well, he had been entirely wrong. Not that what he thought or didn’t think signified in the least, as far as she was concerned.

She sighed, her slim young body resting against Hugh's shoulder. And Hugh bent his head down, in the soft, dusky summer darkness, and asked her if she was tired.

CHAPTER III

The days, under the circumstances, raced past Beatrice Challoner like leaves in an autumn wind. Everything was different from what her imagination had made it, and among all the changes and surprises and bewilderments of the new life she sometimes felt as if she had quite lost herself.

There was somebody in her place, truly—a fine, happy, busy, well-dressed woman named Beatrice Challoner—but she seemed to have little in common with Beatrice St. John.

This woman had no past, no relatives, no old home. There were occasional letters from a mother and sister in southern California, to be sure, but even these seemed unreal and entirely cut away from the old days and ways. As for the little apartment in a gritty, gray, commonplace block down toward Mill Street, Beatrice never saw it again after her wedding day—she saw the outside of the building once, by chance, when her car happened to pass it, but there were strange cheap curtains at the fourth-floor windows, a new apartment house had gone up on the lot next door, and nothing about it seemed familiar.

For the rest, she lived in a beautiful big comfortable somewhat old-fashioned mansion on Tory Hill. It was not old enough to be picturesque, and not new enough to be thrilling. Experienced old servants managed it perfectly, and saved her the trouble of hanging up her gowns or answering the telephone unnecessarily.

She wrote letters to her mother and Marcia, and called upon Hugh's sisters and aunts and cousins and mother, and drove herself downtown every afternoon at four o'clock to wait for him; pretty young Mrs. Challoner, whose story was so intensely romantic, bundled up in squirrel furs, with a cap of gray squirrel pulled down over her coppery hair, waiting for her husband.

Hugh, coming down to the street with his secretary beside him, would see her there, subsided behind the wheel, perhaps reading the latest novel, or idly watching the street that was softly brilliant in autumn sunshine, or gray under a threatening winter sky. She would look up—his beautiful, gentle, devoted young wife—and the wide mouth would smile and show a flash of

big, even white teeth, and Beatrice would bend out to kiss him, and wriggle to her own side of the car.

Sometimes they went to see his mother, and the younger Mrs. Challoner would sit on a wide leather hassock near the old lady's chair, looking more than ever like the child she so nearly was. Sometimes they went for a drive, Beatrice taking the wheel again, if Hugh felt jaded after the hours in a hot office. Sometimes there was some shopping to do, a rug to select, or a Christmas present to buy.

But almost always they went straight home, and Hugh got into comfortable clothes, slippers, and an old velvet coat. Then they shared a fire, a cozy dinner, books, magazines, music, the news of the day. Occasionally Bert joined them; more often he had a social engagement somewhere and merely put his head in at the door to wish them good-night, while they were at dinner.

Late in February Moon, the old chauffeur, was driving Hugh and Beatrice home over slippery snow that had frozen and thawed and frozen again many times, when they had a mild collision with another car. At the time it seemed as if no one were hurt, but afterward it developed that Beatrice had been badly shaken. She had a time of bitter disappointment to bear, and for six weeks was kept very quiet, on one floor.

Hugh appreciated, even his mother and sisters appreciated, that another woman might have made a great deal of this. But Beatrice bore it with her new dignity and made her illness even more touching and lovely than her health and spirits had been.

Every night when Hugh came home she was alone; he loved to send her violets and primroses, and there were always bowls of them about the big, white-paneled upstairs sitting room where she waited for him. A wood fire would be burning in the white-tiled fireplace behind the brass andirons, and Beatrice had half a dozen costumes with which to please him—the blue and orchid quilted silk robe that stood out, all about her, like the robe of an infant Spanish princess on a Velasquez canvas; the white one that was all ribbons and scented ruffles; the gray-and-green one whose collar lay like an Elizabethan ruff about her long, rounded white throat.

She would be scented with violets, or white roses, or lilac, her satiny red hair ruffled over her ears and tucked in in little spirals and curls at the back of her neck, her eyes frank and affectionate and wide awake, her mouth humorous and kind—he felt that he could sit contented forever, watching that mouth of hers. The round arms were soft and warm, her hands full and

square and fine, and her ankles fine, too, lying crossed on the big silk pillow that served as a hassock beside her chair.

When they two were shut into this upstairs room, with the fire burning lazily, and cold and dark and storm outside, Hugh would sometimes feel as if his heart would burst with sheer felicity. There was a mechanical piano in the shadows, and sometimes Beatrice would go to it, and he would sit back in his big leather chair, with his half-closed eyes fixed upon the slender figure in the gloom, under whose fingers the melodies were so softly creeping.

Then, fragrant, rounded, deliciously serious and young, she would come back to her chair, perhaps stopping to kiss the top of his head as she passed it, and in the tempered lamplight her green-gray eyes would find his, and she would question him about his day.

It was during these stormy March nights, when Beatrice's illness had made her even sweeter, gentler, more dependent than ever, that they first talked of the Kreutzmann Memorial.

Bert was with them. He had taken a sudden fancy to his own home of late, and while usually leaving his father and Beatrice to their tête-à-tête dinner, and for an hour or two of happy solitude afterward, he had formed the habit of joining them at about nine o'clock for an hour of talk before bedtime.

"Dad, going after that Kreutzmann thing?" the son asked. Beatrice looked hopefully at her husband from the luxurious couch where she was deep in pillows. Any subject or interest that those two could find in common she found herself seizing with fervor and hope in these days. Bert's attitude was distressing his father deeply; every day, every hour of his cheerful idling and wasting was exasperating to the older man, and until the boy established himself somewhere, doing something, his presence was always a possible source of friction, and consequently a cause of anxiety to Beatrice.

"The boys in the office will make a try for it," Hugh answered, lowering his book, glancing over at his son, from his deep red leather chair by the fire, and arresting his look on the way back for a smile at Beatrice.

"And you, too, Hugh!" she said, quickly and jealously.

He laughed at her tone.

"What would I want of fifty thousand dollars?" he asked mildly.

“Oh, it isn’t the money, Hugh!” Beatrice exclaimed, with her characteristic eager animation. “But the fun of winning! And then we’d have to go to California, wouldn’t we?”

“You can go to California any time that you want to, Bee,” he said.

“Yes, I know. But this would be such fun!”

“How much money did the old geezer leave, Dad?” Bert asked.

“Oh, millions. Twenty-two, twenty-three, I’ve forgotten. But the prize for the plans is fifty thousand. Old Philo Applewhite was telling me today that French and Austrian architects will compete—they expect two or three hundred plans. Applewhite’s on the board; he’s all wrought up over it.”

“Was Kreutzmann an architect, Hugh?”

“No, he was a miner first, and then in railroads and things. I used to see him walking downtown—fine old fellow. He owned this immense tract out in California, somewhere in the mountains north of Los Angeles, I gather, and he wanted to leave a permanent memorial there; the Kreutzmann Memorial College. Clara and Adolph Kreutzmann—those are the names.”

“Hugh, why don’t you try for it, individually?”

He smiled across at her, narrowing his eyes.

“Look at her, leading me on!”

“No,” said Beatrice, subsiding, “but it would be such fun to have you win it!”

“I’ll try for it,” Bert suggested, “and take you along if I win, Bee!”

“I wish you would—no, not take me along,” she said, laughing, “but really try for it.”

And she looked across at his father for sympathy. But Hugh was looking into the fire, with an odd expression on his face, and did not meet her eyes. There was affection enough, but there seemed to be little sympathy between father and son.

When Bert had gone to bed, she spoke of him, still connecting Hugh’s serious look with the boy, somewhat uncertainly.

“He *is* lazy, Hugh, and he doesn’t seem to have settled down yet. But his mother’s death, coming just—he was telling me yesterday—just when he was beginning to discover how much he loved her, and then those years in

Europe—demoralizing for any boy!—all have helped keep him—well, irresponsible."

"He's some years older than you are, remember," Hugh observed dryly, as if he spoke against his will.

"Oh, I know, but boys are always much younger! Besides," argued Beatrice, "I'm married. That makes a difference."

"Alice—his mother—had a brother who was just like Bert," Hugh said. "I keep seeing Carter Merritt in him."

"Carter Merritt!" Beatrice echoed animatedly. "I remember him! Oh, he was a heartbreaker. I remember, when I was about fourteen, thinking that Mr. Carter Merritt was perfectly wonderful."

"Where'd you ever see him?" Hugh asked, surprised, faintly frowning.

"I used to go to Miss Roberts' School; Mummy taught music there for years, and Marcia used to help with the lower grades, before she graduated. The riding academy was right next door, and I used to see Carter Merritt riding around the ring, and jumping. And then afterward, I'd see him in that bright yellow car——"

"He drank," Hugh contributed briefly, as she paused.

"Yes, I know he did." Beatrice felt puzzled and chilled. For some reason Hugh seemed displeased. "Was he—had he been drinking when he was killed?" she ventured.

"Coming home from the old Country Club," Hugh assented with a nod.

"Was he married, Hugh?"

"Married, and had two children. A perfectly irresponsible wife, of course."

"And who takes care of them?"

"I take care of the youngsters. Lorette—the wife—has married again."

Beatrice spoke forgivingly.

"But he *was* fascinating, Hugh. One of those men who make friends everywhere! He had the most wonderful smile, I remember—well, it was just Bert's smile."

"Yes, he was like Bert." Hugh said it shortly, unemotionally.

“And Bert makes friends everywhere, too,” Beatrice went on, enthusiastically. “After all, we oughtn’t to judge a nature like that, Hugh. Wherever he goes he’s spoiled and adored and made much of—your mother just worships him. Your sister, Minnie, was telling me yesterday that the governors of the Home Club are literally begging Bert to come in; they’re willing to waive initiation dues—or whatever it is. You mustn’t be too hard on him, Hugh. Persons like Bert do contribute tremendously to the joy of living. Everyone can’t be—sensible, you know!” Beatrice finished, her face glowing, and her eyes shining in the lamplight, as she looked across at him.

“Did he take you to the lecture this morning?” Hugh asked abruptly, after a while.

“Who, Bert?” Beatrice countered surprisedly. For from his absent expression, she had supposed his thoughts to have wandered far away from his son.

“Bert.”

“Oh, yes, didn’t I tell you at dinner? He drove me in the closed car, and I came straight back to bed, and he was just like a girl——” Beatrice broke off to laugh. “Just like a girl about helping me,” she resumed. “He hung up my coat and put my hat away, and when Nelly came in he was trying to fold up the big cover to my bed. I wasn’t one bit tired; I don’t know when I have ever laughed so much in my life. It was a silly sort of lecture, about Indian dialects, and Bert began to make up a dialect of his own, on the side, and of course, you know, when you *can’t* laugh——” Beatrice explained, with her ruffled satiny head dropped on one side, and her eyes full of laughter at the mere memory of it. “Of course it’s perfectly *terrible*!” she ended.

Youth, beauty, softness, gayety, sweetness. He looked across at them, all, embodied in the red-headed, white-skinned girl who was opposite him, deep in pillows, and smiled a constrained sort of smile that vaguely puzzled her, even though she smiled gallantly back. Did Hugh think that she was criticizing Bert? Hugh’s mother had told her more than once that his heart was wrapped up in the boy, that bitterer even than Alice’s death, to Hugh, was the constant disappointment and gall of his son’s irresponsibility and aimlessness.

“Hugh,” she said, resolutely changing the subject, or rather, reverting to a former one, “do you remember telling me that you’d like to build a whole Spanish village sometime? I don’t mean just detached Spanish houses, but a monastery and a church and a castle, and masses of quarters, all grouped together on a hillside——”

“I don’t remember saying that I thought I could do it,” he amended, as she paused. “But I think I said that it seemed to me surprising that nobody else does it—that some one of those Western architects doesn’t design the thing on a grand scale. Roofs, you know,” continued Hugh, warming to the subject as he went along, “roofs all massed together, on a hillside, above the sea, jagged little streets, eucalyptus trees—they grow like weeds——”

“Would it be horribly expensive, Hugh?”

“Oh, yes, it would be expensive. None of this five hundred down and sixty-seven fifty a month!” he said, with his pleasant smile.

“I was wondering how a college like that would be, Hugh?”

“A college, eh?” he asked, not following her.

“Well, yes. Like the Kreutzmann Memorial?”

“Oh, I see!” he said, widening his eyes as he looked at her, and returning his gaze to the fire. “I see,” he said musingly, fitting his fingertips together in a fashion that always indicated he was really thinking.

“What about your auditoriums and assembly rooms, Bee?” he asked presently. Beatrice roused herself from the idle turning of magazine pages, and laughed, and frowned in a businesslike manner as she concentrated.

“Oh, well. Oh, well—you’d have them like old village churches and big Spanish barns and all that,” she explained hopefully, timidly, after a moment’s thought. “It isn’t going to be a very large college, is it, Hugh?”

“No, as it happens it’s going to be a definitely restricted small college,” he said.

“Well, then——” she offered, with an eloquent shrug.

Hugh’s fingertips were together again; he was still considering it.

“It would be a freak experiment,” he mused aloud.

“But fun!” Beatrice urged.

“Oh, yes, fun. It would be lots of fun!” Hugh agreed.

“Could you do it in the office, Hugh?”

“No.” He had evidently thought of that already. “No, I’d do it here. I’d take that table, and keep the sketches——” His eyes traversed the room; Beatrice’s bright green-gray eyes followed their course.

“You mean work on it here, evenings?” she asked.

"If you didn't mind."

"Oh, mind! Oh, I'd love it. I'd help you," she said boldly.

"You help me? No, I'd be helping you. I'd be working out your suggestion, remember."

"Hugh Challoner! *You* were the one—months ago——" Beatrice began accusingly. But the delighted color was scarlet on her white cheeks, and her eyes shone.

"No, I thought of a village. I never should have remembered it again, or dreamed of applying it to this. If we did this, Bee," Hugh went on, with a most unusual animation in his dark, handsome face—"if we did this, dear, I'd insist upon your having your share of it. 'Plans by Beatrice and Houston Challoner, of the firm of Challoner, Fairfax & Flint, North Underhill'—that's the way it would read!"

"Oh, Hugh, no! I don't know one thing about drains and cross-sections of rear elevations and all the rest of it! I don't know even how doors ought to swing, on those little dotted fans you make!" she protested, radiantly.

"You don't have to. It's ideas—ideas that count. How to manage doorways and steps, and how many rooms to put into dormitories—all that," he said.

"And where to put little Delia Robbia Madonnas, Hugh, and grilles on little windows, and red tiles and balconies!" Beatrice chanted exultantly.

"Well, exactly."

"Oh, Hugh, but oughtn't you have someone better—like Joe Flint?"

"Let Joe Flint make his own try if he wants to."

He came over to her couch and knelt down and locked his arms about her slim waist in the thin white ruffled dressing gown.

"Do you know how I love you, Bee?"

"I hope you do," she answered, smiling at close range, and smoothing one of his eyebrows with a cool finger.

"No, but my dear—I'm so stupid, I'm so old and stiff and silent for my lovely, lovely girl! Do you know how happy you make me? Do you know that never in my life have I been so happy?"

"Oh, I hope so, Hugh."

“What can I do to make you happier, Bee?” he asked, suddenly. “It’s such a quiet life for a girl your age; my friends are almost all older persons —what do you miss—what would you like——?”

“Well, I miss having to put quarters into the gas meter,” she said whimsically, as he hesitated, looking at her with anxious eyes. “And of course I miss dishwashing. I miss going to the butcher for three chops, and finding that lamb had gone up, and standing there, with my old shoes wet, and my back aching from the office, and seventy-two cents in my purse, and wondering if Mummy and Marsh would stand for chopped meat again, or whether kidneys—or liver——”

“Don’t, dear!” he said, on a quick breath.

“I miss the anxiety and stupidity and heartaches of a year ago,” Bee went on, cheerfully. “I miss looking into shop windows, and wondering who the lucky girls were who could buy the flowers and the perfumes and the smart little hats, and the big round boxes of little chocolates from New York. And of course I miss *terribly* having no car,” she said, “and having to jam into the street cars, or take a crowded bus, every night!”

“Then you *are* happier, Bee?” the man asked wistfully, when her half-grave, half-teasing voice stopped, and she laid her cheek affectionately against his.

“Well, Hugh, use your senses! Mummy and Marcia growing absolutely gross at that La Crescenta place, wherever it is, and myself simply lapped in luxury—here. Everyone lovely to me, millions in the bank for me to draw checks against——”

“Only you don’t draw them, Bee.”

“Well, give me time, mister. Cars and servants and position and clothes ——”

“And me, dear,” he reminded her, as she paused, staring into space.

“You, of course, the beginning and end of everything.”

“Then you do love me, Bee?” he murmured.

“Hugh, don’t you know it?”

“I suppose I do. But it always seems so astonishing!”

“After all you have done—all you do—for me?”

“But that—” he said, looking up to shake his head slowly—“that wouldn’t make you love me.”

“Wouldn’t! Why, Hugh, what would I be made of, not to love you?”

“Perhaps somebody younger—nearer your own age——” he began, with uncertainty, watching her.

“Oh, what utter nonsense!” Beatrice commented easily. There was no constraint, no self-consciousness in her clear laugh. “What more could I have, in this world, than I have?” she demanded.

“Your baby, perhaps,” he said quickly, in a low voice. “If I only could have saved her for you! You seem such a little girl yourself to have to face that!”

Her face whitened suddenly, and the gray shadows deepened in her eyes, but she did not move her steady gaze from his.

“You’ve taken it so magnificently, Bee!” the man muttered.

“Hugh, can you imagine my distressing you about it? Can you imagine my making a fuss?” she asked quickly. “Isn’t it enough that you do all you can—so much more than you need—to make me happy? Some day that sorrow—that little, little sorrow that was just yours and mine——” Her voice thickened, and she stopped speaking, her eyes suffused, and her trembling lips pressed firmly together.

“Bee, if I could help you!”

She was herself again, smiling through wet lashes her own composed, tender smile.

“You do, Hugh. Who else? And what I was going to say was that some day—some day it’ll make it all the more wonderful—having them, I mean, having babies, to remember this hope of ours that—turned to sorrow.”

“Bee,” he said, “it seems to me that you are the most wonderful woman in the world.”

“Perhaps I am the happiest,” she answered soberly.

“Yes,” Hugh nodded, “it’s partly that. I *know* you’re happy. And it’s partly that you—that you are playing a part, like a little girl playing house.”

“Oh, Houston Challoner, how insulting! How belittling to the lady who fills the proud position of your wife!”

“You dress, and give your orders, and call for the car, and sit and talk with Mother, and come to meet me, exactly like a little girl——”

“ ‘With a tablecloth tied round her waist, strutting in the streets’ why don’t you say?” Beatrice asked in a mumbling sort of voice, rubbing her lips up and down against his ear as she spoke.

“Well, something like that!” Hugh said, laughing.

“Hugh, am I so stupid?”

“No. But the time may come when the little girl will find out it isn’t all a game, and what then?” he asked.

“But it is, and the nicest game I’ve ever played!” Beatrice persisted drowsily and affectionately, with her red head butting gently against his cheek. “If having a husband, and wanting a baby,” she went on, in a singsong voice, “and running a house, and calling on your mother-in-law, and going on boards of directors for one sister-in-law, and engaging nurses for the other, seems like a game, why, what is there to find out—what’s ‘pretend’ about that?” she demanded.

And immediately, hearing a noise in the hallway outside the door, she straightened up and called peremptorily, “Bert!”

The door had been left a crack ajar; now Bert put his handsome head into the room and said reprovingly, “For heaven’s sake, are you people going to sit up all night?”

“Bert, did you close the icebox? Nelly spoke to me about it,” Beatrice said.

“I did. I mashed my finger to hell, and that’s how I know.”

“Mashed it! Ought it be bandaged?”

“Oh, no, it only hurt for a minute. I raked out some pie and some cold kidney stew——”

“Loathsome!” Beatrice shuddered.

“Delicious! And I found some jammy stuff—sort of like pickled pineapple——”

“Oh, Bert, what a horrible mess at this time of night! How can you do it? And I suppose you drank a lot of rich, ice-cold milk on top of it? It would lay me out as cold as a wedge! Hugh, do reason with this idiot——”

Hugh had left her side, and was at the mantel, smiling at her. Bert smiled at her too; her radiant look went from one to the other of her two men; warm and beautiful and young and fragrant, she stretched her slender young body sleepily among her cushions, and pointed a finger at the clock that was striking midnight.

"Want me to carry you to bed?" Bert asked, yawning undisguisedly.

"Oh, no, no—Hugh'll fix me beautifully!" Beatrice answered. Her stepson bent down and kissed the ruffled red top of her head and went on his way.

"Nothing to find out, nothing to find out," Hugh said, in his soul. She had long forgotten their interrupted conversation and her last question; he knew she would not understand. After she was soundly, sweetly asleep, with her disheveled fragrant young head resting against his arm, the phrase went on and on in his mind: "Nothing to find out, little girl playing lady. Nothing to find out!"

CHAPTER IV

"Did the cat walk in here?" Beatrice asked, at Bert's door.

"Come in, come in!" the tall boy invited her cordially.

"Oh, a million, million pardons! You're dressing——" said Beatrice.

"I'm dressed. Except this—damn—collar," Bert gritted, at his mirror. "You've seen me in less than this," he reminded her.

"Your swimming suit, certainly," Beatrice conceded sedately. "Every time he dresses, your father does that," she commented, seated now on the edge of his desk, and watching him thoughtfully. "I wonder why men have gone on so many years wearing such uncomfortable things!"

Bert tore off a collar and dropped its tattered remains into his wastebasket.

"Hugh does that, too, every time we dine anywhere," Beatrice observed, unimpressed.

"Which means that he's done it twice since last August," Bert said disagreeably.

Her innocent eyes were fixed wonderingly on his face, through his mirror.

"We hate dinner parties," she admitted. "We don't make any bones about *that*."

"*He* does," Bert muttered, having better success with a second collar.

"And I hate them worse than he does," Beatrice added, puzzled.

"Well, because they're all given by old fogies like Aunt Min and Granny and their kind!" the boy said scornfully.

"And I suppose we would have a better time at the Belfry," Beatrice suggested amusedly.

"Ever been to the Belfry?" Bert asked, finishing his tie.

"No. But I've been places like it," Beatrice said, tipping her head sideways to study his handiwork critically. "Saxophones—dust—noise—perspiration—crowds—racket—tips—trays being rushed about everywhere—and twenty square feet for one hundred couples to dance in!"

“Say, listen—say, listen!” Bert protested, a little nettled in spite of himself. “How do you get that way? I’m four years older than you are, you know, and I’m crazy about the Belfry!”

“Well, that has nothing to do with it,” Beatrice assured him serenely.

Bert was stunning in his evening dress, she reflected idly. That deep ripple in his chestnut hair—hair so bright in color as to be almost yellow—and the clean-cut hard line of his freshly shaven cheeks, and the firm jaw—no wonder the girls liked Bert and telephoned shamelessly to him all day long. He was tall, too, and broad-shouldered, and slimly built; he was like a young Greek god.

He had a manner too—Bert. There was something definite and assured about the way he talked to one; an unsmiling sort of briskness that—well, yes, one could easily see what girls found thrilling in Bert. It was as if he knew all about them, knew more than they knew themselves, and as if they bored him a trifle with their airs and graces.

“I could take you to the Belfry, my dear young lady,” said Bert now, with a negligent side glance, as he carefully placed a monogrammed handkerchief in his breast pocket, “and you might decide that it wasn’t such a bad place after all. You dance, don’t you?”

“Of course I dance!”

“Then that’s all I need to know,” Bert remarked briefly.

“You might take me some night when you haven’t anything else to do,” Beatrice suggested, after a pause. “But I warn you in advance, I won’t like it!”

“No, I won’t take you, madam,” Bert told her, smoothly pushing back the drawers of his auto-valet, clasping the doors, straightening the disorder on top. He snapped open a cigarette case—a heavy, beautiful affair of enamel and gold, inspected its contents, slipped it into a pocket.

“Why not?” Beatrice asked, genuinely curious.

“Isn’t that enough reason, that you warn me in advance that you’d not enjoy it?” he asked in reply.

“Well—but I might, after all,” she confessed, with her artless smile.

“Then that would be worse!” Bert said, in that authoritative businesslike male manner that impressed her in spite of herself. Her color came up; she

appreciated suddenly that he was right. It would not do to form a habit of going to places like the Belfry with one's stepson.

"Bert, have you a girl?"

"Here, in North Underhill, d'you mean?"

"Well——" She laughed ingenuously. "Here or anywhere," she said. And a nod of her red head indicated a photograph on his dresser. "Is that your girl?"

"In a way—yes," he said, indifferently. "That's an English girl who was studying in Paris."

"Studying—architecture?"

"No, music. She had a delightful personality, and a fine figure, and no voice—poor kid. She was always getting herself photographed as Carmen, or Brünnhilde, or somebody, and telling us how she could sing it——"

"Did she like you, Bert?" Beatrice, with a faint accent on the pronouns, asked a little shyly, as he fell silent in mid-sentence.

"Oh, kinda. She really liked a man who died, a dirty, lousy Pole who wrote music——"

"Bert, what horrible words!"

"I assure you he was all of that, and then some." Bert crossed the room and took an oblong, loose-leafed black book from his desk, and put it into her hands. "That's Alekowski," he said.

"The woolly-looking one? And what a fascinating place!"

"That was Arthur Reyes' place—Reyes who does the etchings. You've never heard of him, I suppose?" Bert said, sitting on the arm of the chair in which Beatrice had established herself with the book, and looking over her shoulder.

"No, I never have."

"It's in a little place called the Rue Visconti."

"I never heard of that, either."

"You wouldn't have heard of that."

"On the Rive Gauche?" Beatrice asked, looking up with a knowing little laugh.

"Yep," he answered, pleased and surprised. "How'd you know that?"

“Everything Hugh ever did, when he was studying in Paris, seemed to happen on the Rive Gauche,” she explained.

“It’s a great place——” Bert said slowly, with an ache in his voice.

“Paris?”

“Paris.”

“Hugh’s going to take me there some day,” Beatrice said contentedly.

“To the Hotel Meurice, I have no doubt,” Bert supplied, lightly, “and to Versailles and Fontainebleau, and to the Opéra and Ciro’s and Cartier’s. Go in the spring, and drive in the Bois.”

“That’s what I thought!” she assented, eagerly looking up. But at the quality she found in his smile her own face changed; she flushed brilliantly and frowned.

“Were you making fun of me?” she asked quickly, sensitively.

“No, not of you.—Look, there’s the girl I really liked,” Bert said, touching with a well-groomed fingertip the figure of a woman in a summer photograph. “That was at the races one day. That’s Madge.”

“With the dog?”

“With Pom. Yes. The Honorable Madge Templeman. You can’t see her face well—she’s very pretty. Here——” He turned pages. “That’s a better one of her,” he said.

“Oh, Bert, she *is* pretty!”

“Isn’t she?”

“Is she there now?”

“No. She’s back in England, I believe. Or maybe they’re in China. Templeman was to go to China.”

“Her brother?”

“No, darling. Her husband.”

“Oh——?” Beatrice said slowly, flushing again, and meeting his look with her confused, youthful smile.

“Exactly.” Bert ruffled the pages, his arm touching Beatrice’s bare neck as he leaned across her. Suddenly conscious of herself, she said in a tone of compunction:

"Oughtn't you be going? It's just eight."

"I don't mind being late," Bert said, carelessly. "I did something for you today, *ma belle-mère*," he added, abruptly.

"For me?"

"Yes'm. I went over to the Atlantic Electric and applied for a job in their draughting room."

"You didn't, Bert!"

"I say I did."

"But why—why," she said eagerly, squaring about to half-face him, and still conscious that his arm rested on her shoulders—"why leave the firm?"

"Because I don't belong in the firm, and I know it, and Dad knows it. I'm a privileged character there—and it's not only that. It's not only that if I'm late, or make mistakes, I'm not called down for it like the rest, because I'm the old man's son," he explained, still with his lazy air of not caring much one way or the other. "But it's also that if I *do* have an inspiration—if I *do* do anything decent—I don't get the credit!"

"I don't quite get that, Bert. I should think they'd be only too glad to give you any advantage they fairly could."

"That's just it. They've given me such a break already that it only sounds like more graft; of course Mr. Bert's idea is the best, of course it was Mr. Bert who thought of that!"

"I see. I—see."

"So I'm to be over with the Atlantic people, in the blueprint room, and see what I can do on my own."

"Does your father know?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, I am glad of this!" Beatrice exclaimed. "It will delight him. For I think he's been afraid there would be criticism of this—this Crown Prince stuff.—Come in, Hugh!" she called, as there was a sound at the half-opened door. "Wasn't that your father?" she asked, turning to Bert.

"I didn't see. It might have been Marshall, to say that the Renfrews are waiting downstairs for me. They're to pick me up."

"That was what it was! Well, fly then."

“Say that I’m a good boy,” he said, when they were both standing, facing each other.

“You’re a good boy!”

“No, say it as if you meant it.”

“You’re a wonderful boy!”

“That’s better.—Did I tell you that your hair is exactly the color of Mrs. Templeman’s hair?”

“No.” She laughed, confused and reproachful and amused. “I don’t think you did. I daresay it’s important——”

“Supremely important,” Bert said solemnly. “Good-night, my dear old faithful mother.”

Unsmilingly, he kissed her on the forehead, and they both burst into laughter. Then Beatrice went to her own room, to await Hugh, who had had to take some business associates to dinner downtown and establish them safely at the theater, and Bert snatched up his hat and overcoat and ran downstairs to join his dinner party.

To her surprise, Beatrice found that Hugh was already at home, lying on the couch, and looking pale and ill. He had had a stupid headache all evening, it appeared, and had deserted the visiting architects at the first possible moment.

“But Hugh, I didn’t hear you come in! I was in Bert’s room, while he was finishing dressing. He was telling me about Paris, and he showed me some pictures. Hugh, I’m so sorry! Have you had aspirin? Would you like me to . . .”

She fussed about him, solicitous and sympathetic, softening lights, moving a great crystal bowl of sweet peas to a distance, so that their too powerful fragrance should not distress him, shaking up pillows. He had been chairman at the horrible dinner, and she suspected that he had eaten nothing.

Presently he opened his eyes to find her presiding at a low tray, ready to dispense tea and very thin hot toast when he was ready for them.

“How is it, Hugh?”

“How’s what?”

“Your head.”

“Oh, clear as a bell!”

“Not really!” she exclaimed, with such heartfelt joy that tears came into his eyes, and he stretched out a hand, and took hers and held it.

“The minute I’m home with you, my dear, and safe in this room, nothing worries me!” he said.

“But Hugh, what was worrying you?”

“Oh, thoughts—thoughts. I wondered what made you think that you loved me, Bee, and I looked at myself—a dry old codger among those other dry old codgers——”

“Hugh, you poor simpleton! You don’t deserve anything half so delicious as this—this is my best spider-leg, that old Chang Lo at the Consulate gave me,” Beatrice, both hands now busied with his cup, said reproachfully.

“Is it, dear?” he said appreciatively, meekly.

“It is. Now drink that. And eat that.—And here’s jam, too, Tiptree Scarlet—shall I spread it?”

Half-past eight o’clock, and yet it was only dusk now in the pleasant upstairs room, whose wide-open windows looked out tonight upon high tree branches sweet with damp new leaves. Moonlight was struggling with the half-light in the garden, trickling down through the trees, laying a timid shaft of silver across Beatrice’s upstairs porch, where she sometimes sang in the mornings, Hugh thought, while she fed her parrot and played with her kitten and dried her brilliant hair in the spring sunshine.

Her primroses everywhere, her photograph on the desk where Hugh was working on the Kreutzmann Memorial, her books comfortably piled beside her pillowy couch; the indications of her six weeks’ invalidism all about, and yet the evidence of her living, glowing vitality here, too; her books, her kitten, her writing desk with its black wax seals and little lamp, her tapestry a tangle of brown and green wools in a shallow basket.

And here she was herself, the goddess of the enchanted apartment where he had spent the happiest hours of a happy life, the tall, lean, eager red-headed girl who loved so to be useful, loved so to busy herself maternally with his toast and his tea.

She caught the black velvet kitten up from the floor, during one of the baby animal’s stealthy marches from the shelter of the tea table to the shelter of Hugh’s chair, and set him down, wobbling and confused, among the plates.

“There, lick that cream up, Plutarch!”

“Aren’t you having tea, Bee?”

“Well, no. Because like an idiot I had Nelly bring me a tray about seven.”

“Have it with Bert?”

“Oh, no. He’s dining with the Archibalds, or somewhere. No, I had it alone in here, in the company of the late dear Queen,” said Beatrice, glancing at her book. “It’s wonderful—it’s biting, but wonderful, isn’t it?” she asked innocently.

He was looking at her concentratedly; he did not hear her.

“Isn’t what, dear?”

“The book, Hugh!” she exclaimed, reprovingly.

Hugh smiled luxuriously.

“*You* are wonderful, I know that. Bee, I wonder if any man in the world ever had a place like this to come back to, and a woman like you to cure him of all the hurts and stupidities of life?”

Her green-gray eyes widened into a smile.

“Isn’t that—marriage, Hugh?”

“Ought to be.”

She was watching the kitten. She forced his small black head down, with a sudden gentle pressure, into the saucer of cream, and laughed at the licking and sneezing that followed.

“Bee——” Hugh began, and paused.

“Milord?”

“Bee, if you should ever stop caring for me, dear—no, don’t laugh, I’m serious,” Hugh said, catching her hand again. “If you should find—well, that you loved someone else more, or—or in a different way,” he went on quickly, almost incoherently, “you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

Without releasing her hand, she slid to her knees beside the couch and gathered both his hands against her breast.

“Why, what nonsense is this, Hugh?” she asked, in her maternal, half-laughing, half-chiding voice.

He studied her face gravely, anxiously for a few seconds. Then he laughed.

"It *is* nonsense!" he exclaimed, in relief.

"*Well——!*" she said in a brisk, sensible tone, withdrawing, and occupying herself with the tray once more. The kitten rocketed away to a distant lair under the bookcases, but neither Beatrice nor Hugh had eyes for him.

They had taken possession of the big drawing desk, and had littered it once more with T-squares, sheets of squared paper, and pencils. Beatrice had clipped from an architectural magazine half a dozen little photographs of arches, steps, grilles, doorways; she displayed them eagerly.

She toiled on busily, absorbedly, without interruption. While they worked sometimes her hand touched Hugh's hand, or her bright hair brushed for a moment against his face. And whenever that happened, he stopped short and looked at her for a moment, quietly, without speaking, without interrupting the labors of the sharp pencil, and the soft eraser, and the little silver ruler he had gotten her, of which she was so proud.

In late June they moved to the shingled cabin on Spy Lake that had been the Challoners' summer camp for twenty years. It was an airy, piny place, only three miles away from the fashionable resort of Sentinel Beach, near the new golf club, near the yacht club, and with its own lovely tennis court and old-fashioned garden.

Hugh's mother had the adjoining house, a square, white, colonial house, with green shutters, and Hugh's sisters, Mrs. White and Mrs. Carey, their own unpretentious places farther up the lake. All about, the summer homes of old friends and long-tested neighbors were scattered; the fish man and the milk man and the man who mended the boats and the man who brought the mail all knew the Challoners and welcomed into their ranks the new member of the family.

There was a needle-carpeted steep descent of ground through the woods, below the cabin, reaching to the ripples of the lake. A boathouse and a few tethered rowboats were there, and a hammock for warm afternoons. The hotel was out of sight, beyond a long wooded point of land, but the hotel yachts and launches often came into view, as well as the patient steamer that crossed the blue stretch of water twice a day. The air at the lake was sweet and aromatic and sleepy, and at sunset the hills turned a clear deep blue, and

fish plopped in the mirror of the water, and flies buzzed in columns in the sunshiny spaces in the woods.

Beatrice loved it all; she was ecstatically happy in the freer, simpler life, and in Hugh's presence, for he almost always spent a long week-end, from Friday afternoon until Monday noon, there, and sometimes made the thirty-mile run from town on a week-night as well.

She went swimming with the young Whites and Careys in the dreaming blue mornings, when dragon flies flitted and twinkled on the hot rocky shale of their own particular little bathing cove. The morning sun brought a clean resinous smell from the hemlocks and pines, squirrels flashed and chattered in the near-by woods, where the winter's fallen timber had been heaped into stacks incredibly picturesque, up and down the forest aisles.

Often old Mrs. Challoner was wheeled down to the pier, and she sat there basking under her great sun umbrella, with the dripping children and the murmuring elders at her feet. Harriet Challoner Carey had a daughter of Beatrice's age, and Minnie Challoner White one only three years younger, and the three girls chattered and laughed together, in and out of the satiny blue water, in and out of the open cabins, all day long.

"And how are the Memorial plans, Beatrice?"

"Oh, they are coming on *marvelously*. We're perfectly fascinated by them! We're getting all the details together, and Hugh is going to stay home all Friday, and Saturday, too, this week, and put both mornings in on them!"

"No swimming for you then, Bee!" little Mary White protested resentfully.

"Oh, yes, I'll swim—we won't work that hard! But really, I get as much fun out of it as Hugh does," Beatrice said.

"Lucky boy, Hugh Challoner," his mother's deep voice would say boomingly. And at that Beatrice always gave her happiest and most youthful laugh, in sheer content.

When Bert was at Spy Lake he always stayed with his grandmother, so that Beatrice felt no responsibility for him. He spent his Monday-to-Friday intervals in the city, but usually put in an appearance at the lake on Saturday afternoons, expectant of tennis.

Sometimes Hugh would play, and they would find two other men for a hard session of doubles. More often Beatrice played with her husband, with Bert and one of his young cousins for opponents. Young Tom Carey, Harriet

junior, and Mary and Pauline White all played well, and the other members of the family would gather as audience in the shaded chairs on the south side of the court.

Beatrice, who had made an early beginning with tennis in the long-ago days of Miss Roberts's primary school, when Mummy had taught music, and Marcia the lower grades, was enormously in demand as a partner. But it was not so much because she was a good player—they were all that—but because of some element she brought to the game, a fire and excitement and enthusiasm that gave it new life.

Her face grew red as she played, her hair wild; she fought desperately for every point, lost hard, and fairly danced with triumph when she won. "Oh, Hugh, Hugh—take it!" she would shriek, in a tone that brought tears of laughter even to dignified old Mrs. Challoner's eyes.

"She's a nice child, Beatrice," the old woman told her son, one morning.

"That's exactly what she is, a child, Mother."

"Well, all the better," his mother said. "Eh?" she added, a little sharply, twisting her head to see his face, as if something in his expression surprised her. "After all, she's only twenty, Hugh."

"Twenty-one. Yes. But many girls of twenty-one aren't as young as Bee," he offered, a little uncertainly.

"She's quite remarkable with her French, Harriet says," her mother-in-law defended her, "and she's a good manager, and very sensible with the girls—as far as that goes, she seems eight years instead of eight months older than little Harriet. And she's certainly been a help with your prize plans, Hugh."

"Oh, yes, all that, all that!" he conceded, almost impatiently. "But it's not natural to have her settle down here among all of us, who are so much older ____"

"All the children of Peter and Tom are younger than she," persisted the old lady, as he paused, on a discontented note.

"Yes, but she's not one of them; she's 'Mrs.' Challoner," he said. "There's a great difference. The tradespeople—the employees, down at the office—make much of her. It makes no impression—she's just a child. I've put money to her account, of course, but she doesn't spend it as most girls do—now and then she sends her mother or sister a present, that's all. A child about money, too. She isn't always after furs or hats or jewelry. I took her

into Cates' the other day, tried to find a ring or a chain she wanted. She liked them all—and didn't want any.

"Mother, it's the strangest thing," he went on seriously, as the old woman watched him with bright, serious eyes, and did not speak. "It's the strangest thing. I know men whose wives aren't anything like as lovely as Beatrice, or loved—" he laughed—"loved one half as much as I love her," he went on, steadily, "and they—well, they fail them in all sorts of ways. Nagging, and extravagance, and stupidity—and utter unsympathy with them ——

"Why, the homes of some men are hell!" Hugh finished. "And mine—when she's there——"

"Is heaven," his mother supplied, in a silence.

"Not much less!" he assented, with a little laugh.

"She loves you, Hugh," his mother offered, with a common-sense air.

"She *can't*!"

"Nonsense, dear! Why, when Pauline was a little girl, don't you remember the tremendous fancy she took to you——"

"She was about eight, Mother."

"Certainly she was! Oh," said his mother, in a slightly altered voice. "Oh—I see——"

"If it's going to happen, it's going to happen," Hugh said, presently, in a voice he tried to make philosophical. "And if I have to face it, I have to face it. But it seems to me that if anything—if anything ever takes—my little girl away from me——"

"It seems to me," said his wise old mother, in a silence, after a somewhat anxious glance at him—"it seems to me that Beatrice is the sort of woman who does whatever she does thoroughly—wholeheartedly. There's nothing petty about her. You're just—fortunate, Hugh, that's all. I gather she had a hard childhood, and was only waiting for a sympathetic atmosphere to bloom out as she has. You'll have to be very gentle and very generous to hold her, Hugh, but you'll hold her, even when she—grows up. And meanwhile——" She paused. "Meanwhile I wouldn't encourage interests that——"

"That what?" he asked, watching her intently, as she hesitated again.

“Well, that draw her away from you. That accentuate the discrepancy in your ages.”

“And friendships, too?”

“Well——” said his mother, with a significant shrug.

Hugh lighted a cigarette and smoked it in silence. It was a hot, airless Sunday morning, and Mrs. Challoner, the elder, had elected to spend it on her own airy, tree-shaded side porch, above the lake. There was an expansive, gracious beauty about her, even in her sixty-ninth year, with ropes of silver hair braided about her fine old head, and the Victorian ruffles of her dotted Swiss robe flowing around her chair. She had been reading her Bible, but had laid it aside for the joy of an intimate talk with her beloved eldest-born and only son.

“Now do you know, Mother,” he said, after a silence, “I differ with you, there.”

“I know. What I advised seemed like managing her—restricting her. But it would be only for her own happiness in the end, Hugh.”

“I think her own happiness,” Hugh suggested, “is to find her own feet, and to understand.”

“It might upset her most terribly, Hugh. She’s little girl enough still to want to be protected, to be afraid of life.”

“Yes, but it would have to be, Mother.”

“You mean—men admiring her?” his mother asked, looking thoughtfully at his face, and then abstracting her gaze again.

“Not that, perhaps. That’s bound to happen; that’s happening all the time. But if she——”

He stopped, his tone reluctant, as if it pained him to go on.

“If *she* fell in love,” she said. “You mean if *she* fell in love? That is, in the young sense—in the emotional sense—as girls do?”

“I suppose so.”

“Hugh,” his mother asked, after a silence, “what makes you think that she doesn’t love you, dear?”

“Oh, she does. She does. But there seems to be a different kind of love for every year of a woman’s life,” he said, wretchedly.

Old Mrs. Challoner watched him for a space without speaking.

"You never were jealous of Alice," she reminded him, mildly remonstratory, after a while. "And Alice—Alice liked to play with fire now and then, too," the old woman presently added, smiling.

"Yes, I know she did. But I never was jealous of Alice. I was young when I married Alice; I took life for granted. But now—now," he said, throwing away his cigarette, crossing his arms, and trying to smile—"now I take nothing for granted. There isn't an evening, when I go home to her, that the miracle of her—the sheer sweetness—doesn't strike me. When she comes down to the office, and opens the door of my room, and steps inside, and closes it behind her, and stands there, looking at me, from under her hat—why, I might never have seen her before! Just to have her on the seat of my car, beside me, makes me feel as if it were a party. It's——" He laughed, but there were tears in his eyes. "It's that way with me!" he said, simply.

"She isn't at all the type that pays any attention to other men," said his mother, after thought.

"If ever she does," Hugh assured her, "she shall have her head. I'll put nothing in her way—she'll go as far as she likes, she shall have anything—anything!—that means happiness for her."

"I hope there'll be a child!" old Mrs. Challoner said abruptly, after a silence in which she had looked irresolutely at her son, and away again, more than once.

"I hope so, too."

"Does she?"

"Hard to say. Her one feeling," Hugh said slowly, "about losing her baby seemed to be that she must save me, spare me. I think she felt my disappointment as much as—perhaps more than—her own."

"Extraordinarily sweet nature," his mother mused. And for a long space there was a silence on the porch.

Two robins hopped among the low branches of the pines; Beatrice's little black cat came mincing over the soft carpet of slippery needles that lay between the two houses; Beatrice's colored cook, returned from church, burst cheerfully into song, as she set a steaming saucepan on a porch outside her kitchen door to cool.

The blue surface of the lake, seen between sturdy pine trunks down the slope, lay like a sheet of pale satin; close to the shore the shadows were

deeply, softly green. A heron skimmed the water; a canoe, with a man and a girl in it shot out across the peaceful expanse, and the girl waved.

"It's young Harriet, with the Tait boy," said the oldest Harriet of them all, waving a stout, majestic old arm in answer. "Where's Beatrice?"

"Playing tennis."

"Why aren't you playing, Hugh?"

"I was. We had men's doubles, and she scored. But it appears she and Bert had some bet left over from yesterday, and they plunged right into a game when we finished."

Mrs. Challoner looked at him sharply, but he was staring off into space, a vague smile in his eyes, and did not meet her glance.

"Who else is down there, Hugh?"

"Oh, everyone. Min and the Herendeens, and Peter—unless he's gone for a shower; he played in our set."

"Seems awfully hot for tennis," the old woman said, in a faintly discontented tone. "If you swam, afterward," she added, "they must be 'most done."

Loud shrieks from the direction of the tennis court, coming faintly through the woods, confirmed her words, and two or three minutes later Beatrice, scarlet-faced and still gasping, with Bert, also breathless and flushed, and some of the other members of the family, came through the pines laughing and shouting, and settled down beside the old woman's winged, chintz-ruffled chair like a flock of birds.

"Oh, what a game!" Bert said, briefly, burying his tousled head in his hands, his broad shoulders heaving under the thin, perspiration-soaked white shirt.

"Bee got the first, six nothing," Minnie Challoner White said, maternally approving, "and Bert took the next, six-four."

"And Bert had to fight for the last, believe me," Beatrice said, speaking for the first time, and smiling into Hugh's eyes as she spoke. "Oh, how I love tennis! Hugh, will you swim? Come on, we've got an hour before lunch!"

"I'm just out," Hugh explained.

"Oh, did you swim? Oh, Hugh, why didn't you wait?"

“Because I was hot and filthy, and I wanted to see Mother——”

“And you went in all alone?”

“No, the kids and nurses were down there, and little Harriet and young Tait.”

“You understand that Bert gives me fifteen on every game?” Beatrice, her thoughts back on the game, explained seriously to Hugh’s mother. “I bet him a grand boss yesterday that I could beat him, with that handicap.”

“And I wanted her to bet that she could force me to a four-six or a deuce game, which, as it turns out, she did,” Bert said. “But she wouldn’t have it that way. So now I’ve got a grand boss on her!”

“Little did I dream,” old Mrs. Challoner said, “when my children started that nonsense about ‘bosses,’ that it would become a family institution.”

“I think bosses are the finest things in the world,” Beatrice said stoutly. “Hugh and I have them all the time, don’t we, Hugh? I got my foxskin on a grand boss.”

“You mean you lost the boss, and I forced you to get the fox,” Hugh said, glancing up from the refractory shoelace of his white buckskin oxford.

“Well, certainly!”

“It sounds the other way,” he said, laughing.

“I remember when I was little,” Minnie White said, her eyes absent, “it used to just break my heart when Hugh or Harriet would get a boss on me. We used to make each other do terrible things in those days. I remember once that Hugh made me go up and stick out my tongue at Aunt Sarah——”

“The less of that kind of talk, the better!” old Mrs. Challoner said reprovingly, as some of the children in the group burst into appreciative giggles.

“I remember that when we first used to come up here to the lake, Mother’d only bring Hannah, our old nurse.—Who did the cooking?” Hugh interrupted himself to ask, suddenly.

“I did—loved to,” said the old woman.

“Well, anyway, I had to bring in wood, and the girls had to set the table, I remember that,” Hugh went on. “And whenever they got a grand boss on me they’d make me set the table, which seemed to me the last humiliation!”

“Why is it always a grand boss—what does one do with a little boss? Ours always are grand,” Beatrice said.

“Oh, little bosses would be—well, like answering a telephone, or writing a note of excuse, or calling for something at the cleaner’s. The children used to use them to get the front seat in the car, on a short trip—things like that,” Mrs. White explained quite seriously.

“Here’s a funny thing, Mother. Never, in all our childhood, nor since, either, for that matter,” Hugh observed, “have I known one of us to go back on a boss!”

“Oh, that would have been the lowest treason—that would have been unforgivable!” exclaimed Minnie.

“We never have either, Mother,” a small daughter said, round-eyed and virtuous. “We *always* play fair with bosses.”

“I know you do! I suppose,” said Mrs. White, whose husband was a college professor, and who loved discussion—“I suppose that that’s only one more proof that the laws that children make for themselves are the only laws they’ll keep.”

“It’s funny to have Beatrice here talking about bosses,” her mother-in-law said.

“When Hugh first told me that he’d bet me a boss about something, it sounded crazy,” Beatrice contributed, looking up from the floor, where she sat propped against the railing, with a smile. “But now I think they are wonderful. Only—” she added, with a dark look at Bert—“only I hate to lose them, of course. Everyone does.”

“What are you going to make her do, Bert?” some small cousin demanded with relish.

“Oh, I haven’t thought yet. But, believe me, it’s going to be good,” Bert said mysteriously.

“Mother,” asked Minnie’s awkward, overgrown, ubiquitous twelve-year-old. “Mother, if Bert wanted Bee to kill Hugh, f’rinstance, then she wouldn’t have to do *that*, would she?”

There was time for several uneasy, if almost imperceptible, movements on the part of the circle, before Beatrice’s joyous laugh eased the situation. Mrs. Challoner sent a perfectly expressionless glance toward her son, Bert caught his breath on a short laugh, and Minnie White fixed her youngest-born with a hard, cryptic stare.

“Oh, no!” Beatrice said eagerly, innocently, appealing to them all for confirmation. “You wouldn’t have to do anything *wrong*, would you, Hugh? I mean that—that would spoil it all, wouldn’t it? I think bosses would be absolutely dangerous if you had to do that!” she finished, still laughing, but faintly puzzled by something a little constrained, something a little odd, in the expressions on their faces.

“Why don’t you use your boss to make her dive, Bert?” a child suggested.

“No fair!” Beatrice protested, childishly terrified.

“She’s going to dive today anyway,” Bert said. “Come on, if we’re going to swim, let’s swim!” he added, getting to his feet. They all scattered immediately to get into bathing suits, except Hugh, who sat on, with his mother.

The old lady looked peacefully about at the green pine trees, and at the blue, blue wall of lake water at the foot of the slope, and at the vista of Hugh’s cabin, a hundred yards away, beyond the pine-tree trunks.

Then she put on her gold-rimmed glasses and opened her Bible again. From the direction of the pier came fresh shouts, softened in the blue quiet air of midday. Hugh had a section of the Sunday paper held carelessly in his hand, but he was not reading it. He did not speak.

CHAPTER V

Beatrice wore a trim dark blue bathing suit with a paler blue band circling it like a belt, at her slim waist. Her sunburned slender legs and her round brown arms were bare; under her dark blue cap her hair curled up in little coppery spirals.

Crossing the sunbaked sandy shale between the bathhouses and the water, she stepped high with sheer animal vitality and glorious spirits; stepped "like a circus horse," Bert told her.

"I love it!" she said, unashamed, holding her palms up to the blue sky, like a sun worshiper. "I love the feel of these hot rocks under my bare feet."

"Are you going to dive, coward?"

"Skeered!" she answered, looking wary.

"Well, are you going to try for the raft?"

"Oh, the raft—that's *nothing*, now!" She had seated herself on the hot edge of the pier; the younger members of the family were already splashing about her like dolphins. Her bare feet dangled into the cool water.

"Stay near the rope, idiot!" Bert warned her, as suddenly she flung herself off and began to swim strongly toward the float.

"I don't need the rope!" Beatrice, wild with the joy of it, called back confidently. Bert swam beside her, watching her, and ready to extend the hand she did not need. In a few minutes she pulled herself triumphantly up to the shadowed float, gasping and laughing delightedly. "I love it!" she said superfluously.

"It seems farther out than usual this morning," Bert commented, amusing himself by shoving a fifteen-year-old cousin back into deep water every time the youth attempted to make a landing.

"Quit that, Bert!" said young Larry.

"Ah, let him up—he's all out of breath!" Beatrice pleaded.

She sat dripping, deliciously cold, getting her breath, staring appreciatively at the exquisite dreaming hot morning—the blue sky, the lake so blue in the sunshine, so softly green here in the shadows, the pine forests

stretching away on the sloping shores, and the occasional white dip of a sail down toward the southwest, where the hotel was.

"Here's where you go in, my boy!" young Larry Merritt exclaimed suddenly, treacherously approaching his cousin from the rear, and shoving him unceremoniously into the water. Bert shouted, and several of the other swimmers shot up, to join the splashing and ducking, gasping and general uproar that ensued.

Except for a vaguely sympathetic smile in their direction, Beatrice paid no attention to them. She felt thrilling, from head to toes, with glorious life. The morning had begun, as all their Sunday mornings began, with a dutiful visit to the little shingled church, down below the hotel, at Lakeside Post Office. Then had come a leisurely breakfast, just Hugh and herself and the black kitten sharing the fresh sweet summer morning, and then—just as all the Kreutzmann Memorial plans had been spread out for a really serious contemplation—Bert had sauntered in, to make Hugh and Beatrice laugh with his ridiculous suggestions, and to persuade his father to have a foursome of tennis before the day grew too warm.

After that tennis had come her own exciting match with Bert, and then the idle brief visit to Hugh's mother, and now this enchanting plunge into the cool, sweet lake, to precede what was the only formal social event of the whole lazy, happy week—Sunday lunch with old Mrs. Challoner at two o'clock. All the children would be in white, and damply neat as to hair, and correct as to fingernails and shoes, and the old servants would duly serve melons, or iced bouillon, fried chicken, soda biscuits and honey, and tomato salad with the mayonnaise melting yellow across it, like mayonnaise in an advertisement, and ice cream. Peach ice cream today, because it had been strawberry last Sunday, and Minnie had had maple mousse in the middle of the week.

Oh, what a heavenly, what a cloudless life! Beatrice, watching a wet dragon fly drag his tinsel wings across the dry, hot tarred floor of the float, reflected idly that she would wear her new silk chiffon frock, printed with the big crimson and green flowers, to luncheon, and the green hat with the white and crimson roses. A bee buzzed close to her ear, and she gave it a wet slap, and laughed to see Bert studying her with half-closed eyes.

"What complicates the whole situation——" Bert said, and paused.

"Is what?" Beatrice asked, in surprise, after a moment.

"Oh, nothing!" he said.

“Do you realize that you have had a very definite effect on my destiny?” the man began again presently, in an idle sort of voice.

“I’ll tell you what you look like, Bert! You look like one of those summer pictures of the men who are always with girls in bathing suits, on beaches, eating those nutty chocolates, or drinking Coco-Cola,” Beatrice suddenly exclaimed, in satisfaction. “I’ve been trying to think what it was!”

“They are always the handsomest of their sex,” Bert suggested.

“Well—sunburned, and with your sort of hair,” Beatrice admitted.

“Do men’s looks make any difference to you, Bee?”

She reflected.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking away, faintly frowning as she concentrated on the thought. “I love Hugh in his golf things, and I think his evening clothes are becoming,” she offered, thoughtfully.

And Bert burst into a not quite happy laugh.

“Didn’t you hear what I said to you, madam!” he added.

“No, I don’t believe I did. What was it? Why is it,” Beatrice went on, in an abstracted undertone, as she studied a scratch on her round brown arm —“why is it that when you cut yourself in the water it always bleeds so much? You’d think I’d punctured an artery.”

He was diverted again.

“One reason is that you have no hanky, and another is that the water keeps the wound open, maybe.”

“It ought to be good for it, anyway,” Beatrice said, holding the minute injury boldly out to the sun.

“I say you have had a real effect on my destiny, Bee,” Bert repeated patiently.

She was interested at last.

“Oh, how do you mean?” she asked, widening her eyes as they met his.

“You’ve made me——” Bert lowered his voice. He was lying on his elbow, his splendid young body stretched in the sun, the light bright on his sunshiny chestnut hair. He looked down, and moved his forefinger slowly on the dried painted canvas of the float, dragging a drop of water into circles

and lines.—"You've made me want to amount to something—and you've made me an American," he said, a little huskily.

Beatrice looked at him, faintly puzzled, entirely sympathetic.

"How do you mean, Bert?" she asked, again.

"Well, I'd lived away from America a little too long," he said.

"Do you mean that you really want to live here, now?"

"Yes. I want to live in North Underhill now," he said, looking up.

If there was any significance in his level tone she missed it.

"You're happy—with the Atlantic Electric?" she asked, in satisfaction.

"Not very," he answered disappointingly.

"Oh, Bert, why not?"

"Well—it's not so thrilling. Some day maybe I'll go back into the family business—Granny wants me to, anyway," he said.

Beatrice considered this, maternally.

"Keep at it, with the Atlantic, for a year or two," she suggested, "and then go back; all the more valuable."

"You little know what my allegiance to you costs me," Bert said dryly, as she continued to look away from him toward the blue distances of the lake, and said nothing more.

"To me? To your father, you mean," Beatrice answered absently. "You know, for a rich woman's son, Hugh is really quite extraordinary," she presently added, with animation. "He is so normal, Hugh. He went through college, he won the Drew scholarship in architecture, and turned it over to Flint, he told your mother that if she would give him one year in Paris he'd take care of himself the second year, he did everything exactly as he said he would!" she exulted innocently. "And now—well, of course, he's the firm!" she ended, spreading out her hands in her own characteristic gesture of explanation.

"Exactly."

"Well"—his tone disappointed her—"*isn't* he?" she asked.

"Of course he is." Bert's tone was profoundly bored, but she did not analyze it. "Aren't you curious to know what I'm going to do with my grand boss?" he asked.

“I’m in an agony of suspense!”

“Suppose it was——” He lowered his eyes to his own hand again, moving it over the drying drops of water—“Suppose I asked you to dine with me in town, some night when Dad isn’t coming out to the Lake, and go to a show?” he suggested.

Beatrice was surprised and not quite pleased by; his manner.

“Why, Bert, that would be idiotic! Why shouldn’t I? I certainly wouldn’t waste a grand boss on that!” she exclaimed, laughing. “It would be more sensible to dine at home, on the porch, and then leave Hugh to the Memorial, and you and I run into town to the show—I’d love that!” she said, after a pause.

“Oh, you think so?”

“Oh, yes. Because the dinners at the Underhill are so—I don’t know, pot-roasty. And the Club doesn’t compare to Ellimony’s dinners.”

“True,” Bert conceded, dispassionately. He rose. “We’ve got to get back, Bee. They’ve all gone in.”

“Oh, I hate to go back!” she lamented, rising slim and tall in her blue bathing suit, to stand beside him, with the hot sunshine blazing on her copper hair. “I’d love to go in again this afternoon!”

“Well, why not? Suppose I used that boss to suggest that we—you and I—go down to the Cove at about five. It’s lovely there then.”

“Oh, but Hugh’ll probably play golf if it isn’t too hot!”

“Yes, but I said ‘you and I.’ ”

“We could send all the kids down there ahead, with the suits and things,” she was planning. “I might ask Hugh not to play.”

“Why not let Dad do whatever he wants to do?”

“Oh, well, of course!” she agreed, laughing.

“And you and I do what we want to do,” Bert pursued, with delicate emphasis.

“Naturally I want to do whatever Hugh wants to do!” Beatrice reminded him, with a little air of hurt childish dignity.

“I see,” he said. And immediately he dove, to come up as smoothly as a seal, below her in the rippled water, with his mane flung back, and his

expectant eyes upon her.

"Going to dive?"

"Oh, I'm afraid." She hesitated a moment, hunching up her shoulders, hugging herself with her brown arms, and then sat down at the edge of the raft and put her legs into the water. A minute later she was swimming beside Bert to the shore.

"Plenty of wind?"

"Fine!"

"Take it easy."

"I am."

"You can put your feet down, here," he said presently, and Beatrice with a great gasp of pleasure and triumph dropped to a walking position and came out through the shallow water, dripping and happy.

Hugh was there; perhaps he had been watching her from the shade of the pines above the strand. He met her at the water's edge.

"Hugh, I am getting so that that swim is nothing! I thought I should have to ask Bert for his shoulder, and look at me! I'm not even out of breath!"

"It's divine today," Hugh said, in his pleasant, sympathetic voice. "I came mighty near going in a second time myself."

"Oh, why didn't you!" They were walking toward their own cabin now, and she dismissed Bert with a careless farewell over her shoulder. "See you later, Bert! Hugh, are you playing golf this afternoon?" Beatrice asked.

"I was thinking perhaps I wouldn't," he said. "We'll not be finished at Mother's until almost three, and that's the hottest hour of the day. I thought I might get Kreutzmann out, after lunch, and have another go at that, and then perhaps swim, around five."

"Oh, Hugh, that'll be so much more fun!" she said ardently. "Bert wanted to swim, around five, down at the Cove, and I said I thought you were going to play golf."

"But *you* could have gone swimming, Bee," he said, watching her glowing face as if he were testing her.

"Not if you were playing golf! Why, I always follow you round, Hugh," she reminded him reproachfully.

"I know. But you don't have to, dear."

They were in their own room, now, and Beatrice disappeared into the bathroom, whence sounds of splashing and toweling ensued. When she came back Hugh had changed his tie and brushed his thick dark hair, still presentable, if not as heavy as it had been twenty years ago.

"Hugh, where does Bert get his light hair? Wasn't Alice dark?"

"Yes. But her people—young Larry's father, and all of them, were all those blond, square-shouldered giants."

"Bert looks like the men in the clothing advertisements," Beatrice observed, at her dressing table now, brushing her bright hair straight off her face with great sweeps of the brush and backward jerks of her head.

She was wearing a brief satin slip that stopped well above her knees, and a loose, embroidered batiste jacket that slipped up and down on her smooth arms with the rapid movements of her hands. Her slim legs were encased in transparent flesh-colored silk, and her green kid slippers heeled in white. Still breathing hard, still glowing, she radiated the sweetness of youth and sunburn and salt water, fragrant soaps and powders and toilet waters, firm healthy skin and wind-tossed hair.

Fascinated, Hugh watched the swift combing of the curly red mass into order, and the knowing little twists of her fingers that tucked it securely into place at her neck. She powdered her straight white nose violently, she needed no rouge today.

"Did Alice like swimming, Hugh?" she asked suddenly.

"Sometimes. Not the way you do, no. Alice——" said Hugh, hesitating as he formulated his thought. "Alice liked everything—how shall I say this? She liked everything in the way other persons did—just a few persons, at that. She wanted to be correct."

"And she *was* correct!" Beatrice added, reaching for her gown, and studying its filmy shapelessness carefully before raising it above her head.

"Rather," Hugh conceded dryly. "She never omitted to do the right thing, Alice," he pursued, thoughtfully. "And she never—really did anything else!"

"It seems to me, if you did, you couldn't," Beatrice said, obscurely. "I mean," she elucidated, now surveying herself complacently in the mirror, as she pulled the soft flower-figured petals of her dress into place—"I mean that if you telephoned everyone you *ought* to telephone, made all the calls you ought to make, kept every dressmaker and French teacher appointment,

ran your house, gave dinners and teas and went to dinners and teas—you simply couldn't do anything else! Besides, there'd be Christmases and birthdays," she went on, half aloud, "and friends in the hospital, and flowers and baby presents to send, and her own clothes and Bert's to buy, and dentist and church to do—no, it simply couldn't be done!" she finished cheerfully, now glancing at her completed self over one shoulder, and obviously pleased by what she saw.

"It's perfect!" Hugh commented, of the new gown.

"Don't you really think it's lovely, Hugh?" she said eagerly.

"But then how will you manage all that, Bee?" he asked, as Beatrice took a small green hat from a box half filled with silky tissue paper, and began to press it carefully upon her head.

"You mean all that Alice did?" she asked, blankly. "Oh, I shall never try, Hugh! I'm not—that kind of a wife, at all," Beatrice reasoned, coming toward him and seating herself childishly on his knee. "Nobody expects me to do all those things—we don't give dinners, and I haven't got all the old friends that Alice had, to get sick and have babies——"

He laughed.

"But mightn't you like it if we did do all those things, Bee?"

"Oh, Hugh, no! Would *you* like it?" she asked, alarmed. "Wouldn't you rather be just ourselves, evenings, than have all those engagements and interruptions?"

Instead of answering, he looked into her face, half smiling, half thoughtful, his arms about her.

"Bee, haven't you a jealous bone in your body?" he asked, after a space. Beatrice twisted about a little, to bring her amazed eyes to his face.

"Jealous of what!" she exclaimed.

"Oh—anybody. Haven't you ever been jealous?"

She reflected.

"Yes, I think so. I remember a girl named Mary Patricia O'Connor, down in the office—she's married now. And she had seven brothers and sisters, and a wonderful sort of mother," Beatrice said, dreamily, wistfully. "And it used to give me a sort of heartache—" she pursued, "the fun they all had, when Mummy was so worried, and Marcia ill. I remember thinking that she

was lucky. And that—" she finished, gently bumping her forehead against his, her hands locked about his collar—"that's jealousy, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Not my sort," Hugh said.

"Your sort! As if you ever had to be jealous of anyone, Hugh!" Beatrice exclaimed, scornfully. "Why, who is ahead of you? Duval Fairfax, I suppose?" she asked ironically.

"No," Hugh answered, hesitantly. "Not exactly. But I suppose a man could be jealous—of a younger man?" he began.

"It would all depend upon what the younger man had that he wanted," Beatrice said carelessly, unimpressed.

"Or what he had that the young man wanted—might want," Hugh amended it, watching her.

"It seems to me," she theorized, "that an older person has something, and a younger person has something—nobody has everything. Young persons are usually discontented, aren't they?"

"Are you?" he asked, smiling.

"No, but I'm lucky, Hugh."

"Do you really think you are, Bee?"

"Think! I know I am. Now, Bert——" she began, and paused.

"What about Bert?" Hugh asked quickly, lightly. "What made you bring Bert in?"

"Well, I was thinking about him. Bert's not happy," Beatrice said.

"What——" Hugh cleared his throat.—"What makes you think so, dear?" he asked.

"Well, he's restless. He's not interested, exactly, in what he's doing. He says he's no engineer, that he's an artist."

"He wants to go back to Paris?" Hugh asked, after a pause, in a carefully leveled voice.

"No, he doesn't," she answered eagerly, delighted to reassure him. "He says he wants to stay right here—except he said that if you should win the Kreutzmann prize, he'd love to come to California, if we were out there for a year, and maybe get into scene-designing or something, in the movies."

“I think nothing in the world would give me as much satisfaction as to have him settled,” Bert’s father said slowly, out of a silence.

“Settled?” she echoed, interested and alert. “How do you mean, Hugh?”

“Doing work he wanted to do,” he said.

“You mean, making good with the firm?” Beatrice interpreted it, after a study of his face.

“That preferably, of course. But doing anything that kept him absorbed, that showed he was in earnest,” Hugh stipulated.

“Even if it wasn’t here in North Underhill?” Beatrice demanded, in surprise.

“Oh, yes, wherever—or whatever!—it chanced to be,” Hugh said.

“You don’t think he’s an architect, then, Hugh?” she asked, a little chilled.

“Yes, of course he is. He’s shown some brilliant promise. And yet—no, I don’t think he’s an architect; I don’t think he’s anything,” Hugh confessed, in a quiet, somewhat despondent voice.

“And it’s a disappointment to you?” she asked quickly, sensitively.

“Well, ambition is a good thing in a man, Bee.”

“You have it, haven’t you?” Beatrice said, affectionately.

“A little.”

“You’ve set your heart on the Kreutzmann thing, haven’t you, Hugh?” she pursued.

“No, I couldn’t exactly say that, dear. Of course I’d like to get it. It’s a lot of money, to begin with——”

“But you don’t need the money, Hugh!”

“No, that’s true. But it would be a feather in my cap.”

“As if,” said Beatrice fondly, proudly, “you needed feathers!”

“Anyone with a beautiful and extravagant wife needs feathers!”

“Not you. You’re perfect as you are!” Beatrice told him.

“We are late for luncheon,” she announced, twenty minutes later, to the family group, “because I was telling Hugh how smart he is!”

“Well, that’s a good excuse to offer his mother, anyway,” old Mrs. Challoner said, pleased, from the head of the table.

Beatrice looked up, smiling. Her look met Bert’s glance. His face was quite without significant expression; there was just a hint of elevation to his brows, just the faint suggestion of a smile about his mouth, an odd, intent, yet perfectly blank look in his eyes.

The hot color rushed into her face, she did not know why. She laughed a little shamefacedly and, as he serenely removed his gaze, hated herself for the little laugh. Nobody else seemed to see anything amiss, but the uncomfortable moment returned to Beatrice’s thoughts more than once during the long, hot afternoon.

“Hugh,” somebody said suddenly, during the luncheon, “Mrs. Kavanaugh’s back!”

“No!” Hugh smiled, looking up. “I didn’t hear that.”

“It was in Madame La Bavarde yesterday. Bee, why don’t you read the society notes?” Pauline White reproached her.

Beatrice laughed joyfully.

“Because Hugh and I are not in society, are we, Hugh?”

“Certainly you are!” her mother-in-law said firmly. She seemed displeased. “What’s that woman doing back here?” she asked.

“Mrs. Kavanaugh?” Hugh interrogated in turn, as the question seemed directed to him. “I haven’t the faintest idea. I met Mollie Hotchkiss downtown one day recently, taking a child to the dentist, and she said that Aileen would probably spend the whole summer in England, or Wales, or somewhere,” he said.

“She’s the one whose husband died?” Beatrice asked. Bert exploded into a senseless laugh, but nobody else laughed, and he subsided.

“She’s in town, I suppose?” old Mrs. Challoner muttered. “I hope she’ll stay there!”

“She’s probably down at the Hotchkiss place, right up the lake here,” Minnie White contributed thoughtfully. “Too hot for town! H’m!” She paused, pondering. “She’ll turn up this afternoon, if I know Aileen Kavanaugh,” she predicted.

Mrs. Challoner looked thoughtful, finally echoing her daughter’s doubtful “H’m!” Nobody else spoke for a minute, and then everyone began

at once, on totally unrelated topics.

It was sunset, after they had been swimming, and they were all lying about the Cove, “like flies,” Bert said unpoetically, when Mrs. Kavanaugh drove by, in a little open roadster neatly cased in brown canvas, stopped, and waved, before she came down and joined them on the shore and was introduced.

Beatrice had heard of her often: an old family friend, and a great friend of Alice; a widow, who had been abroad for almost a year. She had never met her before.

Aileen Kavanaugh was thin and dark, with beautiful black soft eyes, eager nervous hands, an eager nervous body, and a quick-moving, nervous mouth. Her skin was clear brunette, with red on the thin cheekbones; her hair, satin black, was swept smoothly back under the small black hat she wore.

Her clothing said “Paris,” even to Beatrice’s inexperienced eyes. The dress was frail, scanty, without ornament, the stockings transparent, black, and the firm buckled shoes black buckskin. A loose soft coat of some lusterless thin stuff completed the costume; it was without fur or trimming, though stitched into a sort of ruff about Aileen’s shoulders, and hung open.

An unsmiling woman; her brown face was alert and controlled, but not smiling. She sat down next to Hugh.

“It seems natural to have you back, Aileen,” Hugh said.

“It seems good to get back.”

“You’ve been abroad a long time, Mrs. Kavanaugh?”

“Seventeen months, Mrs. Challoner. Mr. Kavanaugh died in August, you know, and I wandered about for a while, not knowing exactly what to do with myself.”

“I remember hearing someone in the family—perhaps it was Hugh—speak of it.”

“Perhaps it was Hugh,” Mrs. Kavanaugh echoed impassively, glancing at him with her soft black eyes from under the narrow brim of her black hat.

“I sailed in August, and got home the day Dad and Bee were married,” Bert said, “and it was in the paper that day.” Beatrice noticed that he was watching them all with a rather odd expression.

“It was as close as that, was it?” the newcomer said, in a quiet, unhurried voice.

“As close as what?” Bert asked, glancing at his father.

“Your father’s marriage and Arthur Kavanaugh’s death, Bert,” the visitor answered reflectively. “He died on August twenty-seventh.”

“The day before!” Beatrice said, struck.

“Was it?” Mrs. Kavanaugh said dreamily.

Presently she and Hugh, and some of the others in the idling group, began to talk of persons Beatrice did not know, or knew so slightly that she felt no interest in them. She was accustomed to that; it never distressed her. The Whites went home, at about six o’clock, but still Mrs. Kavanaugh’s smart little roadster stood baking in the streaming western light on the dry cliff grass, beside Hugh’s car, and still she and Hugh chatted in low tones.

Young Larry Merritt, Harriet Carey, Bert and Beatrice meanwhile dug neat grooves in the wet sand just above the waves, and conducted a race of the sandy, hairy beach fleas that were hopping all about.

“Aw, Bert—aw, Bert,” Beatrice protested, “yours is a perfect monster—that’s no fair! You’ve got to get a smaller one——”

“Mine may be small,” said Larry, anxiously, “but wait until they get started, and watch that baby hop!”

“Now, listen, we’ve got to start even!” young Harriet said, in her odd bass voice. “That’s the least you can do, Bert, if you’re going to race that elephant! Bring him back now——”

“Haul him back!” Larry said, inflexibly.

“Come on, now, start over, Bert——”

“Oh, look at mine—look at mine—oh, he’s simply tearing!” Beatrice exulted. “Go on, boy, that’s the boy!”

“Hop, you idiot!” Harriet said, in deep rich tones, her head bent over the course.

“Mine is a paralytic—leave it to me to pick a cripple, out of all this mob!” Bert exclaimed disgustedly. Larry, whose favorite was progressing by leaps and bounds, gave a chuckle of satisfaction, and hunched himself along on the sand to keep pace with him. Beatrice, fairly breathing upon her own entry, as she urged him along, followed youthfully on all fours.

“Mine’s jumped out of the ditch! What do we do if they jump out?” Harriet demanded excitedly.

“He has to start over, doesn’t he, Bee? From the start!”

“Oh, move—or die, or do something! He’s digging his way home—he’s homesick!” Bert announced.

“How old is she?” Mrs. Kavanaugh asked, watching.

“Beatrice? Twenty-one.”

“She’s better than pretty,” the older woman said, slowly, after a space.

“She’s—gold,” Hugh Challoner stated, in deep satisfaction.

Aileen dug her heel into the sand, withdrew it, and looked at the little indentation on the smooth, water-washed shore.

“Where’d you meet her, Hugh?”

“Her sister has been my secretary for years. A fine girl.”

The woman pursed her lips slightly and glanced at him obliquely.

“And is she still?”

“No, her health broke down completely. She and the mother are in southern California. She’s very much improved—the thing was taken in time—Bee here is perfectly delighted with their letters.”

“Timely,” Aileen commented dryly, after thought.

He brought his unruffled gaze back from the racers, who were now a hundred feet away, still jerking themselves along beside the track.

“How timely?”

“Well,” she asked innocently, “isn’t it like a novel? The plain older sister gets ill, and the pretty younger sister marries her employer! Could anything be simpler?”

“You seem to suggest—you seem to imply—” he began, with all a man’s helplessness under this sort of fire—“that there was something—cooked up—about it?”

“Cooked up?” she echoed, wide-eyed and smiling.

“Well—funny, then.” He hesitated, trying for the right word.

“Not funny at all!” she answered swiftly, with a faint emphasis on the second word. “Not to me, at all events.

"Edith Younger told me," she went on presently, as the man neither glanced toward her nor spoke. "I loathe the woman, anyway. We were lunching at the Savoy, in London, and she came over to our table. My mother and Mollie were with me—I'll never forget it, a sticky autumn day, with a hot wind blowing. Edith was full of it! It was about two weeks after Arthur's death, and we were supposed to be sailing for home the following week." She paused. "I went back to Paris," she went on, in a flat, toneless voice. "Mollie came with me, and afterward we went to Egypt—and to Norway, in the spring. . . .

"You didn't write me," she said, in a silence.

"I didn't write anyone," he answered easily enough, but without looking at her. "It was a surprise to everyone—my mother, everyone. It was even," he said, laughing a little, "a surprise to me."

"If you had to marry," she said patiently, "why such a little girl?"

"I didn't *have* to marry!" he said smilingly, repeating her phrase, faintly annoyed, and refusing her sentimentality as if it had been a definite object she offered him.

"I didn't believe it, at first," Aileen said, irrelevantly.

"I don't know why not."

"Well, because—because you had always been my stand-by," she offered, a little hesitatingly. "I *depended* on you—more than you know. If it had been Cecily McLean, or Charlotte—yes. But you—*you*—fine as you are, different from everyone else—to choose a—a——"

"A what?" he said, almost harshly, as she paused.

"Well——" she began, and hesitated. "Don't—don't blame me, Hugh," she interrupted herself to say, in a lower tone. "It—was a shock. I may say that much, mayn't I? Everyone who came over last year, everyone I met, was as surprised as I. It——" Her dark eyes watered, and she brushed them with the back of her slim, nervous brown hand, and laughed through wet lashes.—"It didn't seem for your happiness, or for hers, my dear," she said, a little unsteadily, a little thickly.

Hugh looked at her with a resentment and impatience that were tempered by old affection. She had been Alice's bridesmaid, Aileen Kavanaugh,—Aileen Crawford then, and only seventeen at the time of that long-ago, blossomy, June wedding. She had caught the bride's bouquet, when Alice, in her going-away gown of *café-au-lait* satin, that trailed on the ground, and

her cartwheel of a feathered hat, Alice, with her dark hair pressed in great soft puffs over her rather cold, aristocratic brow, had paused on the landing, coming downstairs, to fling it.

After Alice's death, in the sudden accentuation of intimacy that their common grief had made natural, she had been confidential with him, and he sufficiently wrapped in his own sense of loss and change to accept without analysis the brotherly part for which she cast him.

A day had come when she told him exactly how she disliked Arthur Kavanaugh, how Arthur bored her. And this had vaguely offended Hugh; he had seen in it her frank offer of herself, and it had made him feel uncomfortable. He had never been the sort of man who understands women, and fifteen decorous, contented years with Alice had not much enlarged his knowledge of them. They ought—he felt nervously—they ought all be happy, and kind, and good, and beautifully treated, and deeply admired. Aileen's unhappiness worried him, the more so because he really liked Arthur; they had been in college together.

After that embarrassing hour, he had seen less of Aileen, had deliberately avoided her neighborhood. Kavanaugh's health was failing anyway, the man had worked too hard, and was anemic—he was to be sent away to rest, and play, and rebuild if that might be.

Hugh had felt a distinct relief when the Kavanaughs had left town, two years ago, although Aileen had given him no further reason to feel that she was unduly fond of him. And during the weeks of his engagement and marriage he had never once sent her a thought; somehow she had no real place in his scheme of life, agreeable as it was to have her reappear, on this heavenly summer Sunday, and meet his lovely wife, and gossip pleasantly of old times again.

As for her little touch of sentimental emotion over his marriage—well, that was just Aileen. She was always the actress, always extracting from every situation the elements that displayed her best—the aspect that was most becoming to her. Several other old friends—especially Alice's friends—had taken this attitude with him concerning his marriage; it nettled him a little, without seeming to be particularly significant in any way.

Suddenly she smiled brightly, her face cleared, and her voice, when she spoke, was brisk and final:

"But you *are* happy, Hugh?"

"Happier than I've ever been before," he answered simply.

Aileen flinched a trifle, as if he had threatened to strike her; smiled again, over the hurt.

"Ah, Hugh, I loved her—I loved Alice!" she whispered, quickly. And then, in the cheerful tone she had used before, she added, "Well, you're happy. And *she's* happy, isn't she? That's the main thing—the only thing, after all. And Bert—Bert likes her?"

"Adores her," the man said, contentedly.

Mrs. Kavanaugh pursed the fine red line of her lips thoughtfully, narrowed her eyes, looked at him speculatively as if she were going to speak, and checked herself.

"I see," she presently commented, vaguely. "When I last saw Bert he was frantic at the mere thought of living anywhere else than in Paris," she observed.

"Seems contented enough here now," his father said briefly, a faint uneasiness in his tone.

She marked it, and a strange light came into her dark bright eyes.

"Perhaps there's some girl at the bottom of it?" she suggested.

"No," he said, scowling a little. "I don't think so."

"He's mighty good-looking," the woman said, simply.

"Yes, he's attractive," his father conceded.

"Attractive! Bert? Why, he's a heartbreaker, Hugh," she protested. "The girls in Paris went crazy about him!"

"I suppose so," Hugh said, briefly.

He was looking toward the younger persons, who were returning to them. Mrs. Kavanaugh watched instead his own handsome, serious face.

"Hugh!" Beatrice said, breathlessly, dropping down on the sand opposite him, sitting childishly on her heels, and with no eyes but for him, "I have been winning *everything*!"

"She's evidently been out here, early mornings, racing sand fleas," the boy called Larry said darkly.

"Gosh, what luck you have!" Bert added bitterly.

Beatrice laughed again joyfully. Her young, firm breast under her bathing suit was heaving with the violence of her breathing, and Aileen

could see the fine prickles of perspiration on her flushed face; she seemed unconscious of the fact that she was unpowdered, unrouged, her beautiful crinkly red hair disheveled. She took off her bathing cap, with the white rubber daisies, and fanned herself.

"Oh, what fun!" she said rapturously, reminiscently, like a child. And like a child, again, she turned politely to the older woman. "Have you and Hugh begun to catch up?" she asked.

"Just made a beginning," Aileen said, with a slight smile.

"And has Hugh asked you if you'll share a very informal Sunday supper with us?" Beatrice, still like a well-trained child, pursued.

"He hasn't. But if you will, we'll ignore Hugh, Mrs. Challoner," Aileen answered, still almost unsmiling, studying Beatrice with steady, thoughtful eyes.

"Oh, but you mustn't call me Mrs. Challoner," Beatrice protested. And her heart gave a spring of joy. She had looked at Hugh, rather than Aileen, as she spoke, and she could see that Hugh was pleased that she and his old friend should begin their acquaintanceship thus cordially.

"That won't be hard," Aileen said, as they all rose.

She felt almost faint with hatred and anger. She had not known until this hour what Houston Challoner meant to her; she had not known how bitterly she resented the intrusion of this red-headed little nobody into the holy of holies of her rare affections. The announcement of Houston's most unexpected marriage had caused her anger and jealousy and hurt, too, but they were shadows compared to the living teeth that were tearing her now, with the actual presence of the usurper before her eyes.

With all the force of an extraordinarily tenacious and reserved nature she hated Houston's wife. Beatrice's mere neighborhood affronted her; Beatrice, young, slim, quick, and unself-conscious, with her frankly flushed, hot face, just like a child's face, and her simple hospitality. She, to ask Aileen Kavanaugh to the Challoner house! Her incessant adoring "Hugh" was another thorn, and her insolent suggestion of familiar names. That overture, that comfortable "Oh, but you mustn't call me Mrs. Challoner!" should have come, from Aileen, of course.

Exquisitely cultured, forty-nine-year-old Houston Challoner married to this commoner! Aileen, walking pleasantly between husband and wife toward the cars, felt her soul teeming with resentment, questions, plots.

When they reached the cottage Beatrice escorted her upstairs, doing the honors of the dusky, airy spare room happily, looking to towels, powder, and brushes, snapping up lights.

"We always forage free on Sunday nights," she explained, "so come down whenever you're ready. Hugh and I'll probably be in the big room—deep in Kreutzmann!"

"I remember the Sunday nights in this house," Aileen said deliberately, to hurt her. But Beatrice's bright face did not cloud.

"Of course you do!" she conceded cordially. "You'd remember our old Nelly, too?" she added, from the doorway.

"And Lewis," Aileen said coldly. "The driver they always had."

"Oh, he's dead, you know. He died of pneumonia, last Christmas," Beatrice explained. And Aileen hated her afresh, hated her for being in touch with even so insignificant a vein of Challoner history, as one of the family, while she herself was ignorant of it.

"And what is this Kreutzmann thing?" she asked.

"Why," Beatrice explained eagerly, "this old man named Kreutzmann died——"

"And Hugh is doing a million-dollar memorial?" Aileen asked, as if she knew all about it.

"Well, not exactly," Beatrice corrected, exasperating her afresh. "It's to be a college, out near Santa Barbara somewhere, in California. And Hugh's doing *the*—most—beautiful—plans!" she finished, her face brightening with every word.

"And what is there in that for him?" Aileen asked, unenthusiastically.

"There's a fifty-thousand-dollar prize, but of course it isn't that!" Beatrice explained. "It's really," she added, "that he had a sort of inspiration about it, and he's in it heart and soul. And whatever Hugh goes after," she concluded, with a little shy pride, "he seems to get!"

Arthur Kavanaugh had left his widow fairly comfortable—if good management and plenty of visiting were included in her arrangements. It was not entirely money; Aileen would have married Hugh gladly at any time that it had been possible during the last five years, and not for his money either.

But there was in Beatrice's attitude something so airy, something so cheerfully indifferent to the financial consideration, that it jarred upon Aileen's sensibilities like a pain. Naturally, she reflected bitterly, money was never going to be counted among young Mrs. Houston Challoner's anxieties, and this raw girl was indisputably Mrs. Houston Challoner.

Hugh's name on her cards—she thought, writhing inwardly. Shopkeepers respectfully writing it—servants saying it—all the world murmuring it, when that young red head went by. "Yes, Mrs. Challoner . . . certainly, Mrs. Challoner. . . . That is Mrs. Challoner. . . ." The old silver—the books—the cars—everything was hers.

Arthur Kavanaugh had lived a few weeks too long; they had been expensive weeks to the dark-eyed, thin woman who washed her face and brushed her black hair in the warm, summery pleasantness of the Challoners' guest room this Sunday night, and heard Beatrice Challoner's happy voice in conversation with her stepson, in the hall.

"Bert. Use the upstairs bathroom, will you?"

"Anything to oblige!" And then in a juvenile whine, "Ma, do I have to wash?"

"Yes, dear. You have to do what Mama tells you to do!" Beatrice's voice said maternally.

"My neck?" pleaded Bert.

"I think I would wash my little neck, darling. There's company tonight!"

Aileen heard them laugh, and then something from Bert was indistinct, and Beatrice answered:

"All mothers call their little boys 'darling.' "

There was more mumbling, and then their gay young laughter, and again Beatrice's unmistakable tones:

"I'll take it under consideration, and let you know!"

Hugh came to his door, evidently with some query, for Beatrice said eagerly:

"No, let me find them, Hugh. I can put my hand right on them!" and there was the sound of a closing door on either side of the hall, and a subdued murmur from Hugh's room.

Hugh's room! It had been Alice's, and then Hugh's alone for a while, and now it was Beatrice's room. Aileen remembered visiting here two or three times, after Alice's death, in her own husband's lifetime. She remembered one special visit, a week-end when Arthur had not been with her, and when Hugh had had young Bert, and Minnie, and two interesting Hungarian musicians, brothers, for his guests.

A memorable time, a time of dignified talk among the three of them who had been old friends, of affectionate references to poor dear Alice, and dutiful occasional mention of Arthur, of beautiful music, wonderful walks, and a moon that had quite frankly affected Aileen, pacing slowly up and down the terrace under the pine trees, on her host's arm.

"Like you too much, Hugh!" she had whispered in the hallway, a little later, when they were saying good-nights in a perfectly silent house. And smiling with his mouth, but with a sort of wistful sadness still in his eyes, he had quite simply kissed her good-night. "You know how I loved Alice!" she had breathed, senselessly.

"I know you did!" he had answered, a little incoherently.

This, she remembered now in hot scorn, and the solemn happiness she had felt that night—the triumph in winning even so much of a demonstration from the man she had always so deeply admired and respected. This had taken place in the actual hall where his son and Alice's successor were now exchanging their adolescent pleasantries!

It had seemed a distinction to her to have Houston Challoner's mere friendship. But evidently this girl had jumped cheerfully over all that, jumped right into the position of his wife, with no preliminaries and no misgivings.

During the meal she noted, with all the misery of the jealous, that Hugh's young wife poured his tea, and Bert's tea, without any question; she was very much at home at the head of the Challoner table. Hugh was going in to town in the morning; Beatrice thought she would drive in with him.

"I love that drive before breakfast, and before it gets hot!" she said. And then, youthfully, "Oh, and Hugh—I'll wear my white coat!"

After supper they bent over the plans for the memorial college; Aileen knew what questions to ask, was intelligent about Moorish doorways and Portuguese tiles.

"Hugh," she said, "it'll win, of course. It's simply beyond words!"

“I don’t know,” he said doubtfully, pleased with her praise.

“How nearly finished are you, Hugh?” She usually addressed herself directly to him.

“Well, these—and these—and these—are finished. They have to be mailed by mid-September,” he said, catching up the delicate transparent scrolls that curled in his fingers. “There’s just one I’m working on now—some details of windows, and of course the big gate, which will carry an inscription.”

“It’s incredibly interesting!” Aileen conceded.

“Oh, isn’t it?” Beatrice asked delightedly. “When you’ve watched it begin from nothing,” she said, “and gradually altered this and changed that—well, it’s wonderful!”

“You’ll insure them, Dad?” Bert asked.

“They’ll take care of all of that at the office, I imagine.”

At the bottom of the thin sheet of oiled paper, carefully lettered, were the names, “Beatrice and Houston Challoner, Architects, Challoner Building, North Underhill.”

Aileen was studying the scroll. She felt a sensation almost of physical sickness.

“I didn’t know your wife was an architect, too, Hugh?” she asked, tasting salt in her mouth.

“Oh, Bee’s been the moving spirit of the whole thing!” Hugh boasted, laughing. “It was her idea, to begin with, and she’s worked on it almost as much as I have, ever since.”

“Not really that!” Beatrice disclaimed eagerly.

“I see that I must follow the fashion and fall in love with Beatrice,” Aileen said, with as cold a look for her hostess as one woman ever smiled at another.

Beatrice, turning with her own quick smile, was chilled, and all but drew back physically, as well as in the spirit, from Aileen’s neighborhood.

Bert drove Aileen home at eleven o’clock. She would have preferred Hugh’s escort, but having this opportunity for a word alone with Bert, she did not disdain it.

“You know your darling mother and I were school chums, Bert.”

“I know you were, Aileen!”

“You used to call me ‘Aunt Yeen,’ years ago,” she reminded him fondly.

“I remember. But you were younger than Mother,” Bert said politely.

“Three years. She was twenty when she was married—and I had on my first long dress at her wedding. Dresses were long, then,” Mrs. Kavanaugh said. And then, wistfully, “I wish I could be your mother, tonight, Bert—for just five minutes.”

“If you mean because you want to kiss me good-night,” Bert suggested, with his usual winning impudence, “I mean to do it anyway.”

“No, it’s not that, you bad boy!” Aileen said. And with a touch of emotion, of softness, in her voice, she went on, rather low: “If I were your mother tonight, Bert, I think I’d say to you——” She paused. “Don’t go too far!” she said. “With Beatrice, I mean.”

There was a moment’s silence, as the motorcar ran smoothly along the dark, piny roadway, and then Bert said, with a little edge to his voice:

“Am I going too far?”

Aileen knew that she had blundered, hurt him. She had meant to cut deep. But she mustn’t anger him. She was smart enough to retreat with honors.

“It’s not you, it’s for her that I’m speaking. Don’t hurt her,” she elucidated quickly.

“How could I hurt her?” Bert asked gruffly, unsympathetically.

“I know you wouldn’t!” Aileen said loyally, in a satisfied voice, as if the subject were dismissed.

But Bert was not quite done.

“She has no use for *me*!” he said, forlornly and suddenly. The woman perceived instantly that he really was suffering—she had only suspected it before.

“Ah, Bert, don’t count on that!” she said. “I’m a woman—I can see what you can’t see. She’s riding for a fall—Beatrice.”

“I think you’re wrong,” he said coldly. “In fact,” Bert added, stopping the car, descending, and coming about to open the door on her side—“in fact, I know you’re wrong!”

“I’m not wrong, and you’re going to remember what I’ve just said, whether you want to or not!” Aileen prophesied triumphantly, amazed that she had brought blood so soon. But Bert made no answer, for these words were spoken only in Aileen’s mind, as she nodded good-night to him, without the promised kiss after all.

CHAPTER VI

A few days later Aileen saw Hugh and had an unexpected opportunity for a few words alone with him. Her anger, her resentful sense of having been cheated, had not cooled, and in the height of the lake season, she had had plenty of opportunity to discuss with old friends of his, and of Alice's, the weak spot in poor Hugh Challoner's armor, the obvious fact that that pretty wife of his—a mere unformed girl, after all—and young Bert, were evidently simply head over heels . . .

Today Hugh was playing golf, in smoky, hot, ominous, afternoon sunshine. There were thunder clouds in the south; the air was sticky and heavy. And for once young Mrs. Challoner, affectionately christened by Hugh his "pilot fish," was not hopping along beside him on the bright greens.

"What's that stunning Bert of ours going to do, Hugh?" Aileen said, driving first, waiting for him, and walking along beside him with that springy sense of well-being that, even on such a sultry afternoon as this, invariably accompanies the golfer who has made a good drive.

Hugh's face clouded a little.

"I don't know, Aileen," he admitted, doubtfully. "He was with us for a while—everyone likes him. But he's restless."

"Poor kid!" Aileen said lightly.

"Yes, it's hard for a boy like that, who can do anything, and yet can't seem to settle. I don't know what's the matter with him!" Hugh said, sighing.

It was her opening.

"Don't you really, Hugh?" she asked surprisedly, with an artless side glance.

He looked up, scowled in puzzlement.

"I? No, I don't!" he said briefly.

Aileen was silent. They walked along.

"Why, what's your idea, Aileen?" Hugh presently demanded, made uneasy by her manner.

“Well, it isn’t *mine*, Hugh,” she explained simply. “It’s just—I’m like a stranger here, now; I hear people talk, and perhaps I get a viewpoint that you —wouldn’t!”

“On Bert?” Hugh asked, sharply suspicious.

“Nothing serious, nothing that he won’t get over like measles!” Aileen assured him, laughing.

“I confess I’m in the dark,” Hugh said coldly.

“Bert’s a heartbreaker,” the woman stated thoughtfully.

“Bert——” his father repeated, on a thoughtful note.

“And she’s pretty, and not—*particularly*—wise,” Aileen pursued, still in a half-playful tone.

“She?” He stopped short and faced her.

“Well, my dear,” Aileen said, with an eloquent shrug, “it’s the most natural thing in the world of course, and I daresay that neither one of them is aware of it. But after all, he’s extraordinarily handsome, Hugh, and the girl is a girl—twenty-two, is it? He’s simply head over heels in love with Beatrice!”

“Bert?” Hugh said, quietly, almost absently, with no surprise in his tone. “I—I suppose so.”

“Not that there’s any *harm* in it,” Aileen began, with an indulgent half-laugh.

“No.” Hugh walked on. “Why should there be?” he said.

“Exactly!” Aileen agreed.

“She’s devoted to him, wonderfully sweet and kind with him, always,” the man resumed, as if he were merely thinking aloud. “Natural. Natural that the boy should—most natural thing in the world!”

“If only it doesn’t make them unhappy,” Aileen suggested delicately, with faint anxiety in her tone.

Hugh glanced at her sharply.

“No, no, no!” he said decisively. “It’s merely—— She herself, Bee, hasn’t the faintest notion of it!” he diverged to say hastily.

“Hugh, dear, that’s where I think you’re mistaken,” she said firmly, but gently and regretfully.

“Why, what did you think you noticed, Aileen?” he asked, patiently, kindly. She saw that she had not reached him.

“Ah, I wasn’t spying! How could I possibly answer that?” she protested.

“There’s no question that he has a boy’s fancy for her,” Hugh admitted, walking on, speaking unalarmedly. “I’ve seen that; I’m not surprised. I suppose the sensible thing would be to pack him back to Europe—he wants to go.”

“He *did* want to go,” Aileen said, nettled at the course the conversation was taking. “He doesn’t want to go now.”

“You think not?” Hugh asked, with a shrewd, disconcerted glance.

“He told me so. No, he doesn’t even want you to win that California college contest,” the woman added, losing her head a little. “He doesn’t want you and Beatrice to go away! I’m sorry, Hugh,” she broke off to say, with a little emotion. “I’m so sorry! Perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned it at all—I don’t know why I did. Except—I loved Alice,” Aileen ended, a little incoherently, looking away, and walking on, beside him, over the smoothly rolled green turf, between the big trees, in a sudden and significant silence.

“No, no, I’m very grateful. It’s just possible that we’ll be off in California this winter,” Hugh said presently. “And that will end the thing, for a while.”

“I’m as much taken aback as you are at the thing, Hugh!” Aileen hastened to say. “And I only felt——”

She paused. Hugh nodded toward the edge of the field behind her.

“I’m over there—in the stubble. You’re right there,” he said briefly.

The woman felt snubbed.

“Hugh, you’ll forgive me if I—out of my devotion to all you Challoners ——” she began impulsively.

“Oh, my dear girl, of course I understand!” he said, coldly and wearily. They separated, and when they met again Aileen was careful to open a totally different subject of conversation. Hugh looked tired, she thought, and rather pale. The weather, which really was insufferable, seemed to be oppressing him.

“How many firms are competing for this prize, Hugh?”

“Oh, a great many. Two or three hundred, probably—that’s a lot, in a contest like this. But I have a notion—had a notion——” He stopped speaking, and brushed his forehead fretfully, as a man might do who was pestered by gnats. “What does it matter?” he muttered, under his breath, not looking at his companion, or seeming aware of her presence. “I had an idea that I might win it,” he resumed. “My chances are especially good because the men Kreutzmann appointed as judges mostly live in California, as it happens—one is a retired architect who lives in a Spanish hacienda in Santa Barbara, and the others—well, I know most of them; they all favor that type of thing. One very good friend of mine, Philo Applewhite, is a fiendish enthusiast for Spanish architecture; all of them are big men in the profession—and I know most of them intimately.” He sighed impatiently, looked up, as if for air. He had the manner of a man suffocating. “Whew, what a day!” he said.

“Beatrice is not at all anxious to go. Why?” Aileen asked simply.

“Beatrice not anxious to go?” he asked, stopping again.

“Well, she said it wouldn’t make the slightest difference to her, either way,” Aileen corrected herself.

They did not speak again for some time. They had reached another green now, and Aileen had decided to leave him here, in any case, even before she saw Beatrice and Bert cutting across from the clubhouse to join Hugh; Beatrice and Bert, not hurrying, not apparently in the least self-conscious, as they came along. Evidently they were deep in talk, talk so absorbing that they stopped, now and then, to speak to each other face to face. Against the eastern sky hot clouds were massing slowly together: there was no wind.

Beatrice was in blue, broad stripes and angles of blue and darker blue and white, and wore a brimmed blue hat under which her hair smoldered like flames. The smooth cream of her cheeks was without color on this oppressive day; her gray eyes were blazing with some unexplained excitement.

She greeted Hugh with a glance and an upflung hand, but did not approach him; she paused beside Aileen instead.

“I didn’t know that you played, Mrs. Kavanaugh?”

“I play very badly,” Aileen assured her.

“Where have you been, dear?” Hugh asked, feeling suddenly old and tired and clumsy.

Her eyes danced. She looked at Bert, and bubbled with mysterious laughter.

"We've been—selecting your birthday present, Hugh!" she burst out, electrically.

"You're in time," he said, in his dry, quiet way. "My birthday's September twentieth!"

"I went shopping, and stopped at Bert's office," Beatrice said, "and he took me to have an ice, at the Underhill, and drove me out here. Do you realize that it's nearly six?"

"Two more and I'm done," Hugh explained. "I played the second nine first, because there were a bunch of women on this one, and I've about finished."

"We'll walk with you," she offered, nodding pleasantly at Aileen as she sauntered away at Hugh's side.

"Stay and gossip with me, Bert, until Frances Lennox comes up," Aileen said, boiling within, but outwardly waving a smiling farewell to Beatrice. Bert's fatuous gaze was upon the younger woman, now walking lightly, elastically, at his father's side, and turning her brimmed blue hat now and then to glance into Hugh's attentive, serious face.

Beatrice's brown wrist, emerging from the striped blue cuff—her doubled fist, pushed into the pocket of the blue gown—her silky red hair, curling like feathers about her shapely ears—the rise of her firm breasts under the frail fabric of her dress—these things affected Bert like a potent wine. The fumes of her were in his nostrils, dizzying him, and making him hardly conscious of what Aileen was saying.

Beatrice came running back. Her eyes were very blue, in the shadow of her hat.

"Bert, you have my house key!" she reminded him.

He could hardly answer; he laughed confusedly.

"But aren't you going to drive me back?" he asked, blankly.

"No, I'm going with Hugh!" she answered, surprised. Her firm warm fingers touched his as she took the key; she ran off again, with a nodded good-bye over her shoulder.

Aileen watched Bert, as a scientist might watch an insect impaled on a pin. She saw him look after the girl's figure, dazedly, and heard him give an

abrupt, mirthless laugh. Then suddenly he turned away and began to walk toward the clubhouse, slowly, without so much as a backward look for her, or a word of good-bye.

"Fireworks there, sooner or later," Aileen reflected, sitting on the little bench beside the sand box, and alternately glancing at the receding figures of father and son, the gap widening between them, and Beatrice's slim figure fluttering faithfully along beside the older man. "I wonder just—how—long—it will take him to get her?" she mused aloud.

The late sunshine illumined Bert's magnificent figure as he strode along; it glinted on his bared head. A few women, loitering across the greens, stopped him and spoke to him; Aileen saw one of the younger ones look after him as he went on his way.

"Now, if he'd married Beatrice," she thought, "how much more suitable! Mrs. Houston Challoner! Mrs. Houston Challoner! Poor Hugh, what else can he possibly suppose she married him for, if it wasn't just to be that—Mrs. Challoner. She's not awake yet. But she'll wake up, Hugh. They don't sleep forever, in this day and generation!"

"You and Bert have a nice time?" Hugh asked, with a little effort, as they walked along.

"Oh, wonderful!" Beatrice said, and laughed. "He really is a darling, Hugh," she said absently. A moment later, happening to glance at Hugh, she exclaimed concernedly, "Hugh, you look queer! Is your head—your head *is* aching again!"

"No—not a bit. Yes, it's splitting!" he said, incoherently.

"Oh, Hugh, *dear*! Mr. Challoner won't play any more," Beatrice said hurriedly, to the caddy. "Take all the clubs; we'll cut right to the car. Hugh, darling," Beatrice pleaded, her young hand firm under his elbow, as she guided him across the rising ground, "why didn't you tell me! How long has this been going on?"

Reaching the car, she sprang in, took the wheel; his door had barely slammed before they were off for home. Not a word was said while she helped him upstairs, established him on the couch, smoothed pillows under his tired head, and stooped to touch his closed eyes with her fresh, fragrant kiss.

"Tell me the first instant you feel better, dearest!"

Hot puffs of heavy air from the lake moved through the room and brought a sweet piny smell. In the garden below the windows, bees were shooting back and forth like bullets, and birds were sleepily calling from the woods.

"I'm—enormously—better now," Hugh said, feeling happy and guilty and broken and remade all at once.

"Oh, Hugh, not already!" she exclaimed, ecstatically.

"Already. This is what I needed," Hugh said, with a long, weary, contented sigh.

"But Hugh, *dear*," she scolded, settling her fragrant young body on a hassock beside him, and possessing herself of both his hands, "why do you play, when you feel so rotten?"

"I didn't, when I began," he said meekly. He opened his eyes and smiled in utter peace and felicity into the earnest, glowing face that was so near his own. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you, Bee," he said impulsively. "I've thought of it often before, and never have quite gotten up my courage——" He stopped, looking abashed and amused and a little shamefaced.

"It's whether or not I ever loved any other man?" Beatrice suggested, briskly, with an indulgent, motherly look. Hugh laughed.

"Then I *have* asked it?" he said.

"About two hundred times," Beatrice answered blithely. "And the answer is 'No.' "

"Oh, but I thought there was a man—some young fellow at the office ____"

She reflected, looking away, looking at him, looking away again, and shook her head.

"There may have been a youthful crush of some sort—oh, yes, I remember!" Beatrice said, brightening. "There was Roger Newberry. I had quite a crush on him," she confessed animatedly, "and a boy named Harry Fontaine, whose mother took boarders. And don't forget my proposal, Hugh," she added, with an impressive look. "Our dentist, Dr. Leach, and a woolly-headed little darling he was, too! He's married now, himself; I met him the other day!"

“Ah, well, those——” Hugh said smilingly. And for a few minutes he rested, with a satisfied face, his hands in hers.

Suddenly he opened his eyes again, and they were anxious.

“You never were really in love with any one of those, Bee?”

“No. I know that!” she conceded indifferently.

“How do you know it?” he asked, after a pause during which he had watched her dreaming face and far-away eyes.

“Oh, you do know, Hugh.”

He narrowed his eyes, attempted a light tone.

“This interests me. But how?”

“Oh, well—thrills, notes, tears, doubts—” she summarized it carelessly —“all that kind of bunk,” she finished.

“It isn’t bunk,” he said, turning the knife in his heart.

“To me it is,” she assured him serenely.

“Yes, but then—but then what did you feel when you married me, Bee?” he asked, quietly, but with a sinking heart.

“Hugh, you poor simp,” she answered affectionately, “how can you ask me that? I was nobody—working in your office, sick with worry about Marcia and Mummy and bills and everything else, no clothes, no friends, no nothing! And you saw me, and thought——” Her hands tightened on his; there were tears in her eyes, although she was smiling. “You thought, ‘Here is a girl who hasn’t had a chance,’ ” she said, unsteadily. “ ‘Here is a girl hungry for life, and love, and the sunshine. I have all these things; I don’t need her, but how that poor little red-headed, desperate thing needs me!’ ”

“Hush!” he said, really angry, and putting his hand over her mouth.

“I’ll bite you!” she said, kissing it. “How can you ask me whether or not I love you, knowing all that?” she asked.

“All that mightn’t be love,” he suggested diffidently.

“Hugh, how perverse you can be!”

He was silent awhile, watching her lazily, and then spoke suddenly again.

“Bee, there is something I want to ask you—often have wanted to ask you, but it sounds silly!” he said.

“I know this one, too,” Beatrice interrupted him, unimpressed.

“Oh, you do!” he said, amused and abashed by her prescience.

“Perfectly. This,” she said, “is whether, if I ever cared for somebody else, I’d come honestly and ask you to set me free? Am I right?”

“I had asked you that before, too?” he murmured.

“More than once.”

“And would you, Bee?”

She brought her thoughtful eyes back from far spaces.

“Would I what?”

“Would you tell me, if you really fell in love?”

He remembered that at previous times she had answered him promptly, casually. But today, for the first time, she hesitated, frowning faintly.

“I don’t know, Hugh,” she said unexpectedly, dubiously. “Would *you*?”

“Would I tell you if I wanted to be free?” he demanded.

“Yes. I was thinking about that the other day,” Beatrice said reflectively. “Would you?”

“Like a shot.”

“But—but what *good* would it do?” she asked. “We couldn’t—we wouldn’t leave each other, even then, would we? It wouldn’t accomplish anything, except making us unhappy.”

Hugh was a little pale, in the close hot duskiness of the room.

“But still I would want to know,” he said, almost sternly.

“Why make yourself miserable, Hugh?” Beatrice persisted, in surprise. “You couldn’t change it. Marriage is marriage, after all.”

“But I could change it,” he assured her, in a strangled voice.

“You don’t mean divorce, Hugh?” she asked, with wide-open eyes.

“Certainly I mean divorce!” he answered, almost violently. “There are plenty of places—in California, for instance, where you would be near Marcia and your mother——! I would prefer it infinitely,” he went on, rapidly and passionately—“I would prefer it *infinitely* to this idiotic—this imbecile idea some women have that anything is better than divorce—any amount of unhappiness—sneaking—lying——”

"Why, for goodness sake!" Beatrice exclaimed, amazed, in a pause.

"Well, I do!" he persisted. "Anything—anything rather than deceiving oneself—a laughing-stock for everyone——"

"I know," the girl said, wisely and calmly, as he paused, choking, "your head is worse!"

"It isn't my head!" Hugh almost shouted. He brought his feet to the floor; his light cover slipped away; he sat with his head in his hands. "Yes, it's my head!" he said, in a whisper. "My God, my God, I think I am going crazy!"

"I think you are going to see a doctor," said Beatrice; "you've been working too hard on this Kreutzmann thing, in this hot summer weather. I thank God that it'll be done in another day or two. Then you can rest, and you *will* rest—— Hugh, *please* be quiet!"

He lay down again, his face peaceful, his eyes shut.

"If we go to California we'll take it easy, little girl."

"You've been worrying about that, too," she said accusingly. "I don't know what's come over you. As far as I'm concerned, I don't care one scrap whether we go or not. Bert was saying today that nothing would drag him out there—it's so far away, Hugh. And we have everything here——"

"Bert said that?" His voice was controlled; his eyes were still closed.

"We were talking," she said, vaguely.

Hugh lay still, his face expressionless. After a while he said, on a great sigh:

"I wish you and I were the only persons alive in the world, Bee!"

"It would be fun," Beatrice agreed amiably.

After a few minutes he slept, and Beatrice could go noiselessly from the room. She went out to an upstairs porch and stood there for a while, drinking in the beauty of the day's last hour; she could hear the thunder regularly now, from the eastern mountains. Between the trunks of the pines, placed as regularly as the pillars of a cathedral, the water of the lake moved like a blue wall. There were little ripples where a boat rocked, at the shore.

The light of sunset streamed across the world and lay blood-red on the pine needles, and in stripes of red down the rough trunks. An exquisite and unearthly silence reigned, even though there was a faint sound of laughter

and voices from the direction of the kitchen, and now and then the distant honk of a motor horn. A little rabbit came fearfully from the brush and stood listening, his head raised; the sun's light shining through his ears turned them to glass.

Roses and phlox and burning marigolds stood transfixed in the clear ominous brilliance, as if caught in a pool of crystal, and in an open space, between the pines and the pier, a column of flies buzzed and circled, weaving in and out tirelessly in a shaft of hot sunshine.

Water, and pines, and sunset, and the pleasant odor of cooking fruit drifting out, from somewhere downstairs, and blending with the outdoor smells. Beatrice liked this hour, this soft and weary hour when it seemed good to be at home, with supper and books and her own straight white bed awaiting her.

Suddenly, as she stood there peacefully, her body crooked a little to rest against the porch door, her idle eyes drifting to and fro across the scene below her, her heart rose on a jump of fright. And instantly she saw that the man who was standing still, in the warm shade of the pines, the man whose presence had alarmed her, was no stranger, no intruder, but was Bert.

Their eyes met, Beatrice instinctively warning him, with a jerk of her head, and a finger at her lip, that Hugh was asleep, and Bert merely greeting her with a wave of the hand, before he turned and went noiselessly away through the wood.

Beatrice stood there, her heart beating fast, and the color draining from her face. Her knees felt weak, and she felt dazed and cold. For suddenly, and quite simply and convincingly, she knew.

She knew. And the palms of her hands went wet, against each other, and she pressed them against her heart.

"You poor fool, you never saw it!" she said, audibly. And then, after a silence, "That's it, is it? You poor fool——"

She went inside. Hugh was up, and at the window, looking out in the same direction her own look had taken, from the porch. Had he seen Bert? The first need for evasion and concealment that Beatrice's life had known made it natural for her to avoid his eye. She went about the room, straightening pillows, replacing books, humming.

"Was that Bert?" Hugh asked quietly. Beatrice looked up innocently. But her heart turned over.

“Bert?” she asked, swallowing.

Was there reason for the lie, or was there not? She could not think. It seemed safer not to have seen Bert, to know nothing about it.

“It looked like Bert, going off there,” Hugh said.

“I didn’t see him,” Beatrice answered easily, pulling her gown over her head.

“Is he coming to dinner?” Hugh asked.

“I don’t know, dear. I don’t think so,” Beatrice answered, with an air of candor.

She felt a little nervous and uncomfortable, but not guilty. Her whole thought was for Hugh; if it could be done he must be spared suspicions of her own amazing suspicion—no, it was more than that. It was certainty, now.

She was freshly tubbed and brushed, and in a cool gown, before he said anything of significance. Then he asked, carelessly:

“Weren’t you—weren’t you out on the porch, Bee?”

“Out on the porch?”

“Yes, just before we started dressing.”

“Yes, I was. Why?” Beatrice interrogated in her turn.

“It seems so odd,” he said, hesitatingly, “that you didn’t see Bert.”

An impulse to say casually, “Well, I did, darling, and what possessed me to deny it I don’t know,” smote her, and she was afraid that a certain wavering showed in her eyes. She began to screw on earrings fiercely, wondering—wondering how much he had seen through the mirror in her face.

He said nothing more, and they dressed and went downstairs to their summer dinner, with the candle flames moving about uneasily in warm night air, and the lake making angry little splashes on the shore, in the dark, and the distant thunder crackling and muttering.

“It’s suffocating, Hugh.”

“It’s going to storm.”

“What a relief when it does!” Beatrice said.

“You don’t feel that you are going to faint, dear?” he asked, punctiliously. “You wouldn’t like to lie down?”

“Oh, no! We’ll just have to wait until it breaks, that’s all.” She had never fainted; she had never wanted to lie down, just because of heat. His solicitude alarmed her, made her uneasy. “I think I’ll telephone your mother, after dinner,” she said, unnaturally. “She hates thunder storms.”

“I think Minnie’s there,” Hugh said, constrainedly.

“Oh, yes, I know she is!”

“And isn’t Bert?” he asked.

“I suppose so.” Beatrice felt as if she had prickly heat. She remembered that Bert always answered the telephone at his grandmother’s house. Hugh knew that, too, of course. Could he possibly think—was he thinking now—that she had had that in mind when she offered to telephone?

If she but dared to break out into the nervous laughter that was bottled up within her, to say easily and frankly, “Hugh, why are we talking this way—this isn’t like us! Bert *was* below my window, before dinner, and I lied about it because I didn’t understand it myself, and didn’t think you would!”

But she didn’t dare. For the first time in their relationship she felt the difference in their ages, felt that he was an important, middle-aged man, and that she was an extremely insignificant girl. She was shy and self-conscious; she was even a little afraid of him.

To underscore the situation with words would only make matters infinitely worse. The only thing to do was to proceed as if nothing at all had occurred.

The air grew closer and heavier; they cut their dinner short, and went into the sitting room, where Hugh’s work table was. The weight of the night was pressing down over the house like a great pillow now; Beatrice went to one of the open windows. It framed only blackness and the troubled breathing of the lake.

The telephone rang; her eyes jumped at the sound, were fixed on Hugh as he reached for the instrument and drew it toward him.

It was not Bert, but it made her think of Bert. And with the thought something strange and thrilling, and curiously weakening even while it exhilarated her, seemed to flow through her whole being, and she sat lost in a strange, sweet, troubled dream. Never in her life had she known this mood before, this insidious ecstasy that made merely breathing an adventure, that

turned the quiet sitting room of a country cabin into a magic apartment where anything might happen—where every book and flower and curve of rug or curtain was fraught with significance.

At about nine o'clock she heard Bert's step on the porch. He almost always came in to see his father in the evenings if he was free; he dined with Hugh at least twice a week. There was nothing odd in his coming tonight.

Beatrice's throat thickened, and she bent over the table with lowered eyelashes and hands that trembled.

He seemed rather quiet. He said, "Hello, Dad," in his friendly, cheerful young voice, and added, of the evening, "Gosh, isn't this a hummer?"

She raised her eyes for a sort of flicker of greeting, without being able to meet his look—if he looked. Her eyelids seemed weighted with lead. Immediately she saw his fine young hand, within her range of vision, lighting a cigarette.

"I never knew such a night—Rosie O'Grady is on her ear," Bert said to his father, easily. The pet name was his favorite for his dignified grandmother. Hugh, working with a small metal ruler and an incredibly sharp pencil, said abstractedly:

"Two packs of cards and solitaire for her until this storm breaks, of course?"

"She was hard at it when I left," Bert assented.

"Look out for your ashes there, boy!"

Beatrice moved suddenly, awakened from her trance.

"I'll get you an ashtray, Bert!"

She went to the adjoining room, a little room that was being used as office, study, den, book room, and returned with a copper tray. Bert and his father were in casual, undertoned conversation when she sat down again; there was no reason for her to make any effort, and she made none.

A violent wind smote the roof, trees swished and creaked, and doors and windows rattled. The sitting-room window curtains stood out straight and level, papers lifted and sailed in the air. Hugh and Bert leaped to make everything secure, and Beatrice gathered up the scattered plans; maids could be heard laughing excitedly as they ran upstairs to shut windows and doors.

"I think I'll cut home to Granny before it breaks!" Bert said. "It makes her nervous."

“I’ll go, too!” Hugh added. He glanced at Beatrice. “Want to come along?”

“Not if you don’t mind, Hugh? I was there for lunch. And I’m so sticky and dirty and tired——” Beatrice made a little appealing gesture of her hands. “I think I’ll take a long, luxurious tub, with all the windows wide open,” she said, “and get comfortable, and read for a while.”

“Do you mean that you don’t mind this?” Bert asked incredulously, indicating the increasing wind and storm.

“I love it!”

“I won’t be ten minutes,” Hugh promised. After all, his mother’s house was not two hundred yards away, through the pines. “I just want to be sure that everything’s all right.”

“Oh, Hugh, be as long as you like, dear!” Beatrice barely glanced at Bert for good-night. The house was still creaking and straining in a hot wind; a dead branch struck the open porch and coasted along it with a scraping sound. In any interval of thunder and wind they could hear the sullen splashing of the lake waters against the pier.

When Bert and Hugh let themselves out at the front door, she was ascending the stairs, books under her arm. They looked up at her, and she smiled back, the tempered light soft on her shining hair, and the curves of her slender body graciously outlined in her gown of black lace. It was a very special gown; Beatrice had had it for a long time, but she always regarded it as important, and spoke of it as “my robe de style.” It fell away from her white shoulders in a deep collar and was stiffened into a sort of delicate hoopskirt that ballooned about her ankles. The transparent lace showed her slim legs almost to the knee, and sprayed over her white arms, and retreated from the firm creamy texture of her breast.

If Hugh or Bert was impressed by the picture she made on the landing, neither spoke of it. Hugh said, “You’re sure you’re not frightened?” and Beatrice laughed scornfully, and they were gone.

She had her bath, in a bathroom suffocatingly hot because of closed windows, and afterward could open everything and let the delicious wet warm air stream through. The wind was still blowing hard, but the rain was falling in hot, slow, reluctant drops now, and every instant brought relief a little nearer.

She powdered, brushed, straightened her discarded garments, lowered lights, knelt in childhood’s fashion, beside her bed, to pray. And all the while

a thought lurked thrillingly in the back of her mind—she would not take it out, she would not look at it yet, but it was there, it would be ready when she needed it.

She heard Hugh come in and run upstairs, and her heart warmed. Dear old Hugh, it was always good to have him return from any absence, short or long. He was taking the stairs like a boy; he was probably drenched, even after that brief exposure to the storm.

But it was not Hugh. There was a quick knocking, and Bert's voice. Instantly she was out of bed, across the floor, and facing him anxiously through the opened door.

"It's nothing!" he said reassuringly. "It's only that Granny feels badly, and she rather wants Dad to stay over there tonight. So I came after you!"

"Oh!" she said, in relief. And then, on a long sigh, "Oh! I thought it was something the matter. Come in! Oh, no," Beatrice corrected herself, laughing, "don't come in. I forgot that I'm not dressed."

He had often been in his father's room before, he had been accustomed all his life to dawdle about in it comfortably, and—he reflected now—he must have seen Beatrice in her pale blue silk pajamas before, with her red hair ruffled in this innocent childish fashion, and her slim, young, vital person fragrant from bath and powders. But to them both this moment was new.

"My God, you are beautiful, Bee!" he said, in a whisper. He put his arms about her, and crushed her face against his own.

In a second she was free, panting, and with her eyes bright and hard. When she spoke it was in a fluttered yet definite voice.

"Don't do that, Bert! Wait for me downstairs, will you? I won't be a moment."

He stood for a little space looking at her; they were both breathing quickly.

"I scared you, didn't I?" Bert said.

"Then? No!" she answered scornfully. But she was shaking.

"Bee," he said quickly, impulsively, "are you sorry?"

"I'm not sorry, I'm not anything!" she responded impatiently. "Go—go downstairs, and wait for me!"

Still he hesitated, looking at her irresolutely.

"I'm—I'm not enjoying it, exactly," he said.

She had crossed to her dressing table, snapped up its brilliant lights. In the mirror wings he could see a trio of Beatrices, a dozen trios of her. He saw one vista after another of her tousled youthful head, the white stretch of her throat, the thin silk pajama jacket that her fast-moving, firm breasts moved up and down, her hands, nervously busy with her hairbrush, her smoldering, troubled blue eyes, finding him in the glass.

"I'm sorry!" he said, simply, eloquently, in the silence.

"Oh, *sorry*!" she burst out suddenly. She was sitting now; it was as if she were determined to dismiss him by resolutely beginning her toilet. She flung down her hairbrush and put her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands. "I could kill myself!" she stammered. "I don't know what to do!"

The world rocked for Bert; stood still. He could feel his heart race. His thoughts tumbled over one another; every other consideration was forgotten: he knew only that he must not kill this first sign of weakening on her part.

"It's not *our* fault!" he said.

Beatrice took down her hands, knotted her fingers before her, amid the jumbled rich furnishings of her dressing table, and stared somberly at herself, and through herself, into far spaces, in the mirror.

"You must go downstairs," she said, in a level, lifeless voice.

"I know it—I know it!" Bert answered, suddenly angry and petulant. He left the room, the door remaining open. Outside the house the wind was still worrying through the pines, if with lessened intensity, and the rain fell in sheets.

Beatrice sat motionless, as he had left her. His face had been wet when he pressed it against hers, and his hands had left wet places on her shoulders. Her mouth was still burning from the touch of his mouth.

She felt vague and dazed; her thoughts refused to be ordered.

"Mrs. Challoner is frightened of this storm," she said aloud, looking aimlessly about her. "Bert's waiting for me, downstairs. I must get dressed!"

Her telephone rang. Apathetically, she drew it towards her.

"Beatrice. This is Hugh!"

"Oh, yes, Hugh! Oh, Hugh——"

“I’m coming home, dear. Mother’s all right. Are you dressed?”

“Dressing as fast as I can,” she answered in a bright, natural voice. “Bert’s waiting for me, downstairs. How’s your mother?”

“Mother’s all right, and I’m coming straight home.”

“Oh, I’m so glad, dear!”

“She’s sending you her love, and says she’s terribly distressed that you should be disturbed. Had you gone to bed?”

“Yes, I was reading. It isn’t that, though. I was only afraid that she was having one of her nervous times.”

“Well, I think Minnie thought she might. But she’s fine now, and I’m coming right back!”

Beatrice hung up the telephone and went out into the hall. It was lighted, and Bert, looking up at her room intently, was standing halfway up the stairs.

“Hugh’s coming home, Bert,” she said briefly, and turned back to her room.

“I don’t blame him!” Bert said, in a hard voice.

Beatrice did not speak to him nor look at him again. When Hugh came home she heard the lower hall door slam as Bert departed, and busied herself in seeing that a thorough soaking should do Hugh no harm.

“Get every stitch of that wet clothing off, Hugh Challoner, and take a hot bath. It’s much cooler than it was. You’ll have your death, if you don’t look out,” scolded Beatrice, established once more in her pillows, with her opened book before her.

“Shame to give you such a scare! It was Minnie’s bright idea,” Hugh said, “that Mother was in for a bad night and would like to have us all under one roof.”

“I knew she wouldn’t like the storm. But then, when the rain began to pour down, and the wind went down——”

“Bert wake you up?”

“No, I was reading. He came up and knocked at my door, and for a minute I was paralyzed. I thought something had happened to you!”

“And you’d mind if something happened to me?” Hugh asked, stopping in the act of tying the tasseled strings of his dressing gown.

She looked at him levelly, temperately, across her book.

“No, I’d love it,” she said, placidly. “The thought of your body drifting about the lake, face down, is one that gives me real pleasure!”

He came to the side of the bed and sat down on it and took her hand.

“Bee, what a fool I am!” he said, repentantly.

“If you ask me, you’re hopeless!” Beatrice assured him.

CHAPTER VII

The next day but one was Sunday; they all went to the clubhouse to lunch, and afterward watched the tennis. Twenty-four hours of rain had freshened the air and revived the gardens and lawns, and despite the hot summer sunshine the world seemed to be made new.

Bert was playing in the finals of the tournament, and Hugh drove him over, early, and shared his extremely limited luncheon somewhere out of sight. Beatrice had luncheon with friends, and joined Minnie and some of the youngsters, and sauntered down to the courts at about half-past two o'clock.

"These are just preliminaries!" Mrs. Kavanaugh called across to Minnie. Beatrice and Minnie smiled at her and returned a "How do you do!" and Hugh came down among them, in his light flannels, with a panama hat pushed up on his hot forehead, and took an empty chair next to Beatrice.

"Did you see Mrs. Kavanaugh, dear?" said Beatrice, nodding and smiling at Aileen again.

"Oh, hello, Aileen!" Hugh said.

"Is he nervous?" Aileen called.

"Bert?"

"Yes. Is he nervous?" Aileen strolled over to them, and as there was another empty chair, she took it. It was very lovely down on the grassy edge of the courts; parterres of flowers were blazing on all sides, and the rounded tops of the trees and shrubs framed the clean, cropped turf on which the white nets were stretched. Over under the awnings of the grandstand there were fifty or sixty persons especially privileged in the matter of seats, but Beatrice thought it much pleasanter here in the natural green shade of the trees, with the rise of the hill behind them, and the sun already declining.

She loved to be seen with Hugh; she had not been married so long but that certain persons were pointing her out as young Mrs. Challoner, and she liked it. She had seemed actually nervous and unlike herself yesterday, and was still a little pale and serious today, but that only made the odd pallor of her skin more effective, and the bright blaze of her hair a more striking contrast. Her plain gown was tan silk, and her hat tan; her creamy stockings and smart little shoes, and the stretched taut silk of her parasol provided

another clear note of tan in the sunlight when she sauntered over to the grandstand beside Hugh, to speak to certain distinguished guests. The thin line of her loose leather belt was vivid blue.

Bert won, of course, but only after a hard fight, and came up after the game, breathless and red-faced and with his shirt sticking to his big shoulders, to be congratulated. They all circled about him; Beatrice was one of the last to speak to him.

"It was wonderful, Bert!" she said. The parasol threw a soft tan shadow on her rather pale face and her uncertain smile. Bert wheeled about as if he had been shot.

"I didn't know you were here!" he said under his breath. He took her hand and bent his tumbled head over it. "Why, Bee—Bee, I didn't know you were here!" he muttered again.

Aileen saw it, everyone saw it—even Hugh. They saw that the big fellow was completely confused. He laughed boyishly and spoke only incoherently and foolishly.

After a moment he put his hand under Beatrice's elbow—a proceeding that was the less conspicuous because the entire group was now beginning to drift toward the clubhouse—and guided her in that direction.

"I couldn't have hit a ball if I'd known you were there!" Bert said, bending close over her, smiling down into her eyes. "It's lovely, Bee—it's a delicious dress," he went on, entirely oblivious of watching eyes about them. "And is this the silly little parasol that goes along? Let me carry that."

"Oh, Bert!" she breathed, only too painfully conscious of their position. "*Please!*"

"I can't help it!" he stammered, laughing shakenly, as he hurried her along. "I thought I was never going to see you again! I didn't know—— I'm not asking for anything! I only want to see you now and then—that's all. I don't know what I'm saying and I don't care."

"Please—a little slower!" She was trying to retard their pace; she was scarlet-cheeked now, and beside herself with nervousness and distress.

"I've been in hell since Friday night," he said. "I thought my eyes would go blind without the sight of you! I've not been able to eat or to sleep.—Oh, Bee, if we could get away from these damn' people!"

"We can't!" she said guardedly. "Bert, for Hugh's sake—for my sake—I entreat you——"

“Bee, I’m so happy! You came to see me play—I never dreamed you would! Dad brought me over, and I didn’t even ask him——”

“And beautifully played, too!” she said, in a natural bright tone, for the sake of possible eavesdroppers.

“Oh, nonsense!” he said, laughing. “What does the game matter? You know it doesn’t matter! Bee, did you have my note?”

“Oh, yes—yes!” She was distracted. She turned resolutely back, and waited, in the chattering throngs, until Hugh and Aileen and some of the others came up. “I’ve turned his—his head completely,” Beatrice told them, a little unsteadily. “He’s fed up on praise!”

“That’s what you two have been talking so hard about?” Aileen said lightly, with a trace of deadly significance on the first word.

Bee did not answer. She slipped quietly into step beside Hugh; her heart was beating fast, and she felt confused, frightened for fear that she or Bert had betrayed something, nervously apprehensive of what Hugh’s mood might be, afraid that her manner was fluttered and strained.

Bert left them, turning off toward the shower rooms, and Beatrice and Hugh got into their own car. Hugh was so silent, and had so tense and stern an expression in his eyes, that Beatrice felt as if she were being driven home by an absolute stranger, and grew more and more uneasy with every one of the dozen half-miles.

“I’ve seen them both play better than that!” she presently ventured.

Hugh was silent.

“Hugh, you’re three times the player that Jewett is, why didn’t you go in for the trophy this year?” she demanded, bravely, ignoring the pause.

“Oh, no, I’m getting rusty!” he said, in a trembling imitation of his usual kindly tone.

“Rusty! Oh, Hugh, shame on you!” Beatrice was trying for animated reproach. “Why, you played marvelously on Saturday.”

“No, no, no—no more matches for me,” he said gently. Gently, but his tone definitely ended that line of conversation.

“Bert tells me that he has left the Atlantic people,” he said, mildly, after a space.

Beatrice was not quick enough to see a pitfall; she answered earnestly:

“Hugh, he wasn’t happy there!”

“You knew, then?” Hugh asked, unemotionally.

She felt her face burn and her throat thicken.

“Well, he said something about it yesterday—or was it Friday?” she stammered.

“I’m sorry,” Hugh commented briefly.

“Why don’t you—why don’t you send him back to Paris, Hugh?” Beatrice burst out. “That’s where he wants to be. He’s happy there; he has friends there. He doesn’t want to come to California—what could he do there, except hang about playing more tennis, or driving your cars—if we go ____”

“Is that the plan?” Hugh asked, in an inflexible voice.

“Is what, Hugh?”

“Is it the plan to ask me to send him back to Paris?”

“What plan?” Beatrice asked, hurt and bewildered by his manner.

“Yours and his,” Hugh said, incisively.

“We had no plan, exactly,” Beatrice answered slowly, in a dead voice.

There was a pause.

“I can’t very well make him an allowance indefinitely,” Hugh said, when they were walking to the house, a few minutes later. “I gave him a year in Paris, and he took care of himself for another year. He’s almost twenty-five. If he can’t support himself now he’ll never support himself. It isn’t the right method. I can’t do it!”

“Won’t he—inherit from your mother some day?” Beatrice asked, trying to get close to his tortured spirit, trying to show him that she was anxious to share, not merely to present, this problem.

Hugh gave her a swift glance.

“I suppose so. But my mother is well, and only sixty-nine, after all,” he said quietly. She heard the pain in his voice, and forgave him the words that, coming from Hugh, had shocked her almost as a blow would have done. She went on upstairs, but he turned away from her abruptly and went into the sitting room, and for a long time she was left alone, to wonder anxiously

what he was doing—what he was feeling—what he was thinking—downstairs.

A sense of desolation and fear came over her. "This is marriage, I suppose . . . it couldn't always be so simple, so happy. I've got to have character, I've got to face it, whatever it is. But if Hugh is angry at me—and he seems to be—and if Bert—Bert . . ."

She remembered the big, ardent man who had walked beside her, the firm fingers under her elbow, the perspiration-soaked shirt and glowing face and the tumbled fair hair, and, in a sudden misery of loneliness and doubt, put her fingers over her eyes. "I don't know what to do!" she whispered.

Hugh came upstairs a few minutes later, quite himself.

"We mustn't worry ourselves about Bert," he said, pleasantly, as he changed his clothes. "It's natural for the boy to vacillate awhile—most youngsters do."

"D-did you, Hugh?" Oh, the blessedness of having him talk to her normally again!

"You mean when I was a boy? I don't believe so. But then," Hugh said, selecting socks carefully, "then I was a very different type."

"Is Bert like Alice?" Beatrice ventured, timidly.

"No, he's not like his mother, either. Aileen says," Hugh went on, with a slight effort, "that she thinks he ought to go into the movies—seems to feel that the boy has tremendous magnetism—whatever it is!"

"I think Bert has charm, and he's terribly good-looking," Beatrice said in a matter-of-fact voice. "But it doesn't seem to me that he's a movie type. Besides that, I don't believe he'd like it."

"Aileen thinks the boy is one in a thousand," Hugh said.

Beatrice could seem to think of nothing to say. Much later, in the long, wakeful watches of a white night, she wondered why she had not been able to laugh and say cheerfully, "Well, the girls certainly seem to think so!"

But at the moment she had been stupidly, hopelessly silent, and had felt the unwelcome blood creeping up into her face, and had wondered how much quiet old Hugh had seen, for all that he had gone on so quietly with his dressing.

After a silence, they had both begun to talk busily of something else.

That was just before the mystery of the lost plans began. Beatrice was loitering about the garden, at twilight, a few days later, clipping asters and zinnias for tomorrow's vases, when she heard Hugh, who had arrived home an hour earlier, and was presumably changing and bathing, calling to Nelly.

Beatrice was walking toward the sound of their voices when she heard Nelly's reply.

"I never touched them, Mr. Challoner! They're right there where they was!"

"What is it, Hugh?" Beatrice called from the porch. "Let me find them!"

"It's nothing, dear!" he called back, in the new gentle tone he had used toward her for the last week. "It's just my plans. I thought Nelly might have moved them."

"I never even dusted them, the whole summer long," said Nelly, firmly. "I knew they was worth a lot of money to Mr. Challoner, and I wouldn't leave Emma——"

"Aren't they in the table drawer, Hugh?" Beatrice demanded, blankly, from the doorway.

His eloquent shrug answered her. The table drawer was wide open, and empty.

"I've never laid fingertip on them!" said Nelly, aghast.

"Did you take them upstairs, Bee, for any reason?"

"Why, no, Hugh. Why, no, Hugh," she said, slowly. She came to the table and tumbled the flowers from her arms to its surface without moving her eyes from her husband's. "They must be—they're right here, somewhere!" she stammered.

"Well, of course they are, dear! Don't get so white," Hugh said, laughing. "They're right here, somewhere. They couldn't walk off by themselves, you know, and they're no use to anyone but me. They'll turn up!"

"You couldn't lose a big bundle of stuff, right out of a table drawer!" Nelly, who looked frightened, protested.

"Of course you couldn't!" Hugh assured her stanchly. "Anyone come into this room today, Nelly?" he asked.

“Mr. Bert was here, and the maids, of course, and Mrs. Kavanaugh—that’s all I seen,” said Nelly, after thought.

“Mr. Bert was here?”

“Mr. Bert was here, yes, sir. Mrs. Clam give him a club sandwich and some merangyous,” said Nelly. She never spoke of the cook except as Mrs. Clam, and the colored cook returned her, courteously, the title of Mrs. Howdler.

“I didn’t know that,” Hugh commented, with an oblique glance for Beatrice.

“Neither did I!” she said quickly.

“No, sir, Mrs. Challoner was over to Mrs. Mclean’s,” said the accurate Nelly. “Mr. Bert come out about five minutes after she left. He said he wanted to see her about something, and that he wasn’t working now, and had been going to lunch with his grandmother, but they was all away—they’ve moved back to the city——”

“Hugh, you don’t think that Bert——” Beatrice interrupted the flood to ask, in a shocked, almost amused voice.

“No, certainly not!” he said, decidedly. “Nobody’s stolen them,” Hugh went on, faintly impatient. “They’re right here, somewhere, of course. We must make a search, that’s all.”

Nelly adored Bert; she had been his nurse.

“If Mrs. Kavanaugh took ’em, she couldn’t send ’em in in her own name, could she?” she demanded darkly, even while she turned cushions and fell upon her knees to peer under couches, as a commencement to the search.

Beatrice and Hugh both burst into laughter, and the atmosphere was made lighter.

“No, she didn’t steal them, Nelly,” Hugh said. “Here—they might be in here, in the book room.”

Nelly stood still, one palm supporting her elbow, the hard fingers of the free hand upholding her hard jaw.

“I’ll bet you they’re upstairs!” she said suddenly.

“Who’d take them upstairs?” Beatrice demanded.

“They don’t seem to be in the study, here,” Hugh admitted, in a puzzled tone.

“Could you of took ’em upstairs when you went upstairs last night, Mr. Hugh?”

“Well, I might,” Hugh answered, in his pleasant, friendly way, “but I don’t see for the life of me why I should! I’ve never moved them—they’ve always seemed perfectly safe down here, with the house locked every night, and no robbery ever reported at Spy Lake.”

Beatrice was busy with rows of books, tipping them gently forward in twos and threes, peering behind them along the cases.

“Who could possibly hide them there, Bee?”

“I know. But Mummy has a rule when you’ve looked where things *might* be, then you have to look where they mightn’t be!” Beatrice explained.

“Well, it’d be a bigger roll than would go in there,” Nelly observed. “They’d roll up as big as an umbrella!”

“Laid flat . . .” Hugh murmured, running his flattened hands in over the strings of the opened piano. He struck a chord, which sounded clear. “Not in there,” he said.

“Always the gentleman, and always on the dot,” Bert said, from the doorway. “I forgot they were moving Granny into town today, and came down to the lake, and I’ve been over at the club——” he began. “Hello, what’s up?” he asked, reading from their faces that something was amiss.

“Your father’s lost his plans, and five thousand dollars with them!” Nelly announced sensationally.

“Oh, cut it, you poor sap,” Bert said, shaking her about with an arm about her shoulders. “No, what has happened?” he asked again.

“Now I’ll tell you that I don’t trust that Mrs. Kavanaugh as far as you could throw a coal range!” Nelly said, warmly. “She’s one that would always make mischief, even in Miss Alice’s day. Didn’t she have her crying once fit to kill herself, and before this one here was born, too——”

“Honest, are they lost, Dad?” Bert asked, wide-eyed.

“Well, they certainly are mislaid!” Hugh confessed, with a puzzled laugh.

“You didn’t have ’em upstairs for anything last night, for instance?”

“Oh, no, no!” Hugh answered sharply, jerking open the empty table drawer for the tenth time. “No, I was working on them here—right in this

room, this morning!" he said.

"So you were, Hugh," Beatrice added, with a confirming nod. "You didn't leave the house until nearly eleven."

"Didn't take 'em down to insure 'em, Dad?"

"Now I tell you that she's one that would put her finger into the Gospels themselves if she wouldn't get hanged for it!" Nelly contributed, of the absent Aileen. "She was here in this room—waitin' for Mis' Challoner ——"

"Did you notice the plans when you were here at luncheon time, Bert?"

"I don't think I was in this room. Yes, I was, too! I waited in here for a telephone call. I called Granny," Bert said, with sudden animation, and a glance toward Beatrice. "I thought you——" he said, and stopped, catching himself up abruptly.—"I thought I'd talk to her," he finished lamely. "Come, come, my girl!" he said to Nelly, "you only incriminate yourself with these absurd suggestions. The sooner you produce the documents, the better for all concerned!"

"I'd produce 'em in a minute if I had 'em!" said Nelly, with an air of rectitude.

"Were you and Aileen looking at them, Bee?"

"Why, no, we weren't even in the house together, Hugh. I was in the garden when she came, and she followed me out there."

"She waited a good twenty minutes for you in here," Nelly said, inflexibly.

They all laughed.

"Nelly, you get Emma, and anyone else you can, and go over the upstairs rooms pretty thoroughly, will you?" Hugh suggested. "And meanwhile," he said to Beatrice, "I'll telephone Aileen and ask her if she happened to notice them on the table while she was waiting. I don't think they're stolen, and I think we'll have them within an hour," he added, "but it certainly is odd. This is—what? The tenth? We've only got five days to monkey round finding them," he said, looking from Beatrice's face to Bert's with a philosophical smile.

The others laughed with him, but anxiously.

"It's the darnedest thing I ever heard of!" Bert muttered. "Going to tell Granny?"

“I don’t see any particular reason for keeping it secret,” Hugh said, after a moment’s thought.

“Hugh, could you do it over again, in five days? You have your notes—there must be lots of the details down at the office, and in the town house!”

“I couldn’t put them together again in two solid months,” Hugh said, shaking his head. “Don’t look so stricken, Bee!” he smiled, as she widened her pathetic eyes to their biggest size. “No, it’s not the plans,” he said slowly, “but it’s the strangeness of it, the feeling that someone was in this house—someone is inimical——”

“Dad, Aileen couldn’t have borrowed them?”

“She might have borrowed one sheet, Bert. But hardly forty big sheets. Anyway, Bee saw her, didn’t you, Bee? Bee would have noticed her carrying a big roll,” Hugh said.

“It’s the darnedest thing I ever heard of!” Bert said again.

“There doesn’t seem to be any *reason* for it, Hugh!” Beatrice said, over and over again, bewilderedly.

“Well, we’ll find them. I mean,” said Hugh, “what else can possibly happen? They weren’t burned up——”

“They were not,” said Nelly, returning, “for to tell you the honest truth there hasn’t been a fire of any sort on the place today. Mrs. Clam uses the electric stove when it’s as hot as this, and I didn’t even have a rubbage fire, for you were all away yesterday, and there wasn’t hardly no picking up to do.”

“Do you suppose Mother or Min could have come by, and just taken them along? Mother might have felt that they weren’t safe here,” Hugh suggested, doubtfully.

“Oh, Hugh, Minnie would have telephoned immediately. Anyway, they were moving into town. They weren’t likely to burden themselves with anything as heavy as that!”

“Then there is nothing else to do but hunt!” Hugh said cheerfully.

“Mrs. Kavanaugh for you, on the foam,” Nelly, who had called Aileen’s number, announced at this point. Hugh went out to the hall, and Bert came over and stood close to Beatrice, looking down at her, but not touching her.

“You don’t have to keep giving me those imploring little looks, Bee,” he said. “I swear I don’t know any more about it than you do!”

“Bert, as if I could think you did!” she exclaimed, genuinely shocked.

“Well, I didn’t know what you thought,” he said.

Now that his first easy greetings and the natural animation and excitement that the discovery of the loss had caused him were over, she could see that he looked tired and serious and strained—looked oddly old, for Bert.

“Listen,” he said, urgently, quickly, yet with a sort of impatient consideration for her in his tone and manner. “Listen, Bee. I’m not going to make you unhappy any more—I want you to know that. You may not believe me—but you’ll see. Not by a look or a word—I promise you! I’m not going to die of this. Bee, does that make you feel any happier?”

“I suppose so, I suppose so,” she said anxiously and hurriedly. “But I can’t seem to think of anything but Hugh—he would be so angry, he would be so sick. He’s——” She glanced fearfully at the hall doorway. “I’m anxious about him now——” she breathed.

“It’s all right,” said Bert, “he’s gone upstairs.”

“Well, it’s this—you know he is very jealous, Bert,” Beatrice whispered nervously. “He says himself that he is—it’s not just my saying it! And it breaks my heart to have him so quiet—as if he suspected——”

Bert gathered her two cold hands together and held them tightly.

“What is there for him to suspect?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing—nothing! Except that I am so *miserable*!” she breathed, tears coming into her eyes.

“But that’s just what you mustn’t be, Bee.”

“But I can’t help it!”

“You’re miserable,” Bert said, “because I made you miserable—it’s all my fault. I made a fool of myself. But listen—it’s over. You’ll not see any more of that.”

“Bert, if he should think that we two—his wife and his son—— It would be too horrible to think about!” Bee whispered.

“Well, of course it would be, dear! And he never will think about it,” Bert said eagerly, “because—I tell you!—I’m not going to make you unhappy, and myself unhappy, any more. It just came over me, a few weeks ago—and knocked me sort of flat, do you see?—and I’ve been getting my

breath. Why, Bee, there's no reason I shouldn't love you—there's no sin in that," he rushed on. "It's only that I didn't realize it—didn't know what was the matter with me, until that night when I came and stood under your window here, and thought about it. And it's going to make me happy, and you too, you'll see if it doesn't! I'm not going to let it get you anxious and nervous, because it's all *over*—and long before it gets bad again I'll take myself off, and you'll never know it! I had to say this to you, you poor darling, you've been looking so scared and guilty about it. And it's not your fault at all, and not mine—nothing's happened, except that you know now how much I—how much I think of you, and that you've done the one thing in the world my father really wanted—I mean made me wake up and want to stand on my own feet!"

"But Bert—Bert, how could we let it happen—we shouldn't even say this much, even think about it!" she said, distressedly. "If he should ever question me—if he ever suspected it—what could I say? If he should ask me if you liked me, and if you had ever said so—it would kill him!" Beatrice said, beginning to get excited, "for I couldn't deny it——"

"Bee, listen," Bert interrupted soothingly. "There's no need for you to work yourself up this way. Nothing's happened, except, as I say, that I've made a fool of myself. It's all *right*, and Dad's all right, and you can bet he's a good deal more upset right now over his plans than about anything we're doing. Why, dearest," Bert said, in the fond, amused tone of a big brother, "you mustn't let yourself get worked up like this!"

"And you'll promise me," she said, in a whisper, her eyes fixed on his —"you'll promise me that you won't—think about it—any more?"

But he had held her hands just a moment too long, and been close to her, slim and confiding and disturbed, just a moment too long. The expression on his face changed, and he said, a little brokenly:

"Oh, Bee, you're so sweet! You're the sweetest thing in the world!"

"You mustn't—you mustn't!" she whispered, in terror, and a second later she had wrenched her hands free and had run upstairs.

CHAPTER VIII

Strange days for them all followed, while the futile search for the lost plans went on, and the cottages at Spy Lake were closed for the season one by one, and the air grew clearer and thinner, and the leaves began to turn.

Outwardly, everything was as before with the three Challoners. Hugh and Beatrice opened the town house, and a more formal type of living began; Bert they saw only at infrequent intervals; he was not working, he talked restlessly of going West, of going to New York, of wishing he might return to Paris. He was more serious than he had been, not so gay, not so noisy; his grandmother observed with satisfaction that the boy had cut his wisdom teeth.

Outwardly everything was as before, but inwardly there was this great change in Bert, and there were changes to correspond in Hugh and Beatrice, too.

Hugh had always been quiet, but he was actually grave now, and when he spoke or smiled it was with a perfectly visible effort. To Beatrice his manner was only a little more kind, more gentle, than it had been before, but somehow it made her feel, and with a heartsick sense of helplessness, that he was infinitely remote, that there were infinite distances between them.

She herself was tortured and fretted by a dozen currents and cross-currents of doubtful and fearful emotion, sometimes trying to throw off the whole puzzling, befogging matter by a single effort of mind and will, sometimes sunk into a sort of stupor of vague unhappiness, unsure of herself, unsure of Bert, unsure of Hugh.

No use pretending that nothing was wrong;—everything was wrong. Hugh was oppressed and silent; Bert gravitated between moods of the wildest exhilaration and periods of bitter despair; she could never be sure of herself for a second; she laughed, she cried, she pondered aimlessly, forced herself into amusement, and was bored, or stayed at home with books and fire and music, in the old happy fashion, and almost frightened herself by discovering how changed everything was, how melancholy and futile was a pretense that things were just as they had always been.

It was like a bad dream from which she could not shake herself free. Night after night the misery of it kept her wakeful and worried, in the wide, sweet, airy silence of her big bedroom, and she lay staring at the softly

moving shadows of the tree branches and the moonlight on the flowered walls, as quiet as a mouse, lest Hugh, sound asleep in the bed beside her, should be roused. And day after day she determined that she would summon up courage enough to be honest with him about it, that she would somehow falter out the words she was afraid to say.

"Don't be cold to me, Hugh! I'm working it out my way—I'm doing the best I can! Just give me a little time . . ."

To her own infinite distress, she found herself suddenly given to wild bursts of weeping. The thought of her mother came to her with a heartbreaking pressure—darling, ineffectual, loyal Mummy, whose arms she had left so joyfully, so confidently, only a year ago! Beatrice found herself yearning for the California she had never seen, for that little cabin up in the high mountains, where there were peach and orange trees, and peppers and spice-scented eucalyptus, and where Marcia—"only I'm really too well to be so lazy!"—where Marcia dug in the garden, and gathered berries, and where Mummy was beginning to be quite prominent in club work.

Oh, to get away from this city, with its sharp eyes and its sharp judgments, and just for a while to be a little girl again, setting the table and washing the dishes, and gossiping idly with Mummy and Marcia, and sleeping on the old couch in the dining room at night! She was not fit to cope with the problems life was bringing her; it was all too confusing, too subtle for her twenty-two-year-old heart and hands.

One afternoon Hugh came home at about four o'clock and found her upstairs in her own sitting room, crying.

It was a stormy day, with a warm autumn rain falling on the colored leaves, and a leaden sky pressing down closely over the world. All morning long, and for a solitary luncheon, Beatrice had been at home, and all day long the rain splashed drearily on the porches and dripped from the eaves.

She sat up suddenly when Hugh came blundering into the dim twilight of the room, her voice thick and alarmed.

"Hugh?"

"Yes, dear! What is it? Why, what—" Hugh asked concernedly and gently, sitting down beside her, and looking at her swollen eyes and her pitiable attempt at a smile amazedly—"what's the matter, Bee?"

For a few dreadful minutes she could only hold his hand tightly and gulp, in a desperate effort to regain her self-control. Then she said, blinking gallantly:

"N-n-nothing! B-b-but I've been here alone thinking, and I got—I got blue, I guess!"

"I should think you might! Didn't you go out for luncheon today, Bee?"

"No. I had a headache this morning—I was tired. And then I was going over to see your mother, but Min telephoned that this was the day of the luncheon—she wanted our grapes and our chrysanthemums, so I sent them over." Beatrice's voice was steadying; she wiped her eyes vigorously with her handkerchief and tried again to smile. "I didn't want to get mixed in with those old ladies, and I knew they were all mad for their bridge," she faltered, "so I thought maybe you and I would go over tonight—perhaps after the Lambert dinner."

"It mightn't have been much of a thrill for you, anyway," he suggested whimsically. At his tone her eyes watered again, and she clung tighter to his hand. Twenty-two, he thought, and mistress of this big, gloomy, old-fashioned mansion, with the prospect of a call upon his mother and sisters to break the rainy day. Not much of a life for a girl, after all.

"Hugh," she said suddenly, either emboldened by the moment of intimacy and tenderness that was unusual now, or forcing herself from sheer desperation to take the leap. "Hugh, are you—are you angry at me?"

"Angry at you!" he echoed, shocked and reassuring and affectionate, all in one. "My dearest child, of course not!"

She faced him bravely, indifferent to her reddened eyes.

"But Hugh—but Hugh, *something* is the matter; I mean with all of us, lately, all the time!" she persisted.

He hesitated, looking down at the hand he held, looking up, with all his own good composure and kindness, into her face.

"Nothing that is your fault, Bee," he said, slowly.

"Is it the loss of the plans, Hugh?" she asked. For the fifteenth of September was long past now, and Hugh Challoner's name had not been listed as a contestant for the Kreutzmann Memorial College Prize.

"No! That was the fortune of war," he said, philosophically. "It still worries me," Hugh added, "not to know anything about it. It was no accident, that's plain. And if it wasn't an accident——?" He smiled and shrugged eloquently. "But I shall always love the thought of the Kreutzmann Memorial," Hugh went on, resolutely cheerful, "because of those happy days we had in this room, Bee, last winter, and last spring——"

“When I was sick,” she whispered.

“When you were sick, and I came home early every night, and we worked away on dormitories and gym lockers,” he agreed, smiling.

“And when you brought me little playing cards for my solitaire,” she said, with symptoms of tears again, “and my lace negligee——”

“Lots of fun!” Hugh said, resolutely unemotional, in the silence. He was watching her anxiously; she looked feverish and distressed. “Well, what’s the news from the cowboys?” he asked, glancing at the sheets of one of Marcia’s long letters, scattered on the silk cover of her couch.

“All good. Hugh, I really believe Marcia is going to marry that awful person who writes the spiritualism tracts and has a beard!” Beatrice said, still struggling with her own emotion, and with an almost hysterical laugh.

“Not really!”

“Really and truly it begins to sound like it, Hugh!”

“What does she say about him?” Hugh asked, with a well-feigned interest.

“Well, you never heard anyone knock a person so terribly, to begin with!”

“That doesn’t sound any too hopeful, Bee.”

“With Marcia it does!” Beatrice’s voice was still thick, and her face inflamed with tears; she laughed at him shakily, through wet eyelashes that were stuck into dark points. “She’s constantly talking of a certain individual who seems to feel that he can get anything just for asking for it,” she went on. “And about how absurd it is, at her age, to have anyone hanging on one’s words, and thinking everything one does perfection, and so on.”

“Would you feel sorry, Bee?”

“No, I’d feel glad. If she wanted to. Marcia’s odd, you know; she’s apt to be sensitive and morbid. If she married at all,” Beatrice said, clearing her throat, and more sure of herself every minute, “it’d have to be a freak. And then it wouldn’t be all—all—up to you, all your responsibility, Hugh, if Marsh married,” Beatrice said shyly.

His face darkened.

“That isn’t what’s worrying me!” he protested briefly.

"I know it isn't. I know it isn't, Hugh. But—but just the same I don't forget it," Beatrice said. She watched his thoughtful face and distant eyes for a minute wistfully, before adding, "Is it Bert?"

"No, I'm not worried about Bert!" Hugh answered, on a long sigh. "He'll find himself. Does he—does he seem to you much older?"

"Oh, much!" Beatrice said quickly.

"Did he telephone today?"

"No. Why? Did you want to get hold of him?" The color had come quickly into her face, which had paled, in these last few contented minutes, into a sort of weary restfulness.

"Not that I know of," Hugh said. And he told himself that Aileen Kavanaugh had been mistaken, that was all. Beatrice had not been downtown this afternoon, having tea with Bert, in a little out-of-the-way restaurant on Washington Heights.

Aileen was having remodeled the two houses on Washington Heights that afforded her her entire income. She had made this the reason for frequent calls at the offices of Challoner, Fairfax & Flint during the last few weeks; she had come in this afternoon, just before Hugh's departure for home.

"Just saw Bert!" Aileen had said.

"Where was that?" Hugh had asked, idly.

"He and that pretty *belle-mère* of his," Aileen had supplied innocently. "They were up my way. What's Bert going to do—real estate? They were having tea at the Arms—talking like mad. Fun to have them good friends, isn't it, Hugh?"

"They get on splendidly," he had answered. But his voice had trembled, and he had felt suddenly shaken and helpless. He had come home feeling sick and cold, supposing the house to be empty, dreading the minute when Bee would come in and loosen her fox scarf and take the little hat from her crushed bright hair and tell him some story about her afternoon.

But to find her lying crying among her pillows had been strangely disarming, strangely reassuring. Sitting here beside her, watching the gallant struggle she made to control herself, hearing the youthful, appealing notes in her voice, Hugh had allowed a certain peace and confidence to creep into his harassed spirit. This was his old Bee, restored to him, this eager, loving, ardent girl to whose flowery upstairs room he had returned so many times

during the snows and winds of last winter, to find peace and comfort and companionship after the day.

She had a fire tonight; there was no other light in the room, and the autumn dusk had closed in early, in heavy, steady rain. They could barely see each other's faces now; the sweetness of violets crept out into the air—infinitely poignant, infinitely reminiscent of those other hours he had spent here so many months ago.

"Hugh," she said suddenly.

"Bee?"

"There's something," Beatrice began quickly and resolutely—"there's something I have to say to you, something I have to explain. And I don't know whether to tell you now," she went on, straightening herself up a little on her pillows, to bring her face closer to his—"I don't know whether to tell you now—to ask you now to—to forgive me, Hugh——"

She was getting frightened again; she held tightly to his hands.

"I don't think there's anything you have to explain to me," Hugh said, reassuringly, quietly, in a falling world. "You mustn't worry so much, dear. There's nothing—you know that!—nothing that I wouldn't forgive you. You're just like a little girl with her big brother, to me, Bee. You don't have to be afraid of me."

"I'm such a fool!" she whispered, penitently, the tears starting again. "And you're—you're so wonderful to me, Hugh!"

"I want to be."

Beatrice wiped her eyes with the wet ball into which she had rolled her handkerchief, and rushed quickly on, as if she feared that with hesitation her resolution might fail her.

"I did something terribly silly, a month ago, Hugh," she began again, not looking at him, her voice very low. "And it's worried me—worried me horribly ever since. I didn't do it deliberately—I was sort of carried away by—by feelings that I didn't know myself that I could feel—and I—I had no one to consult, and—in a crazy moment——"

"Well?" he said slowly, as she paused. The hand that held hers was still warm and steady. But his world was still rocking about him.

"There's something—there's something I want tremendously to happen before I can tell you, Hugh!" Beatrice said, her lips trembling. "And yet—I

know you're worried, I know you see that I am—am not like myself—and it kills me to wait—not to tell . . .

"I don't know why I shouldn't tell you what I'm waiting for!" she presently burst out, as Hugh, his face invisible in the gloom of the winter afternoon, was silent. "I want—*terribly!*—to have Bert get settled, to have you see what—what he's really got in him, Hugh, how really clever he is! And if—if he proves that to you—if you feel that he has really found his work, then—then I shan't mind so much your knowing just how—just how silly——" She stopped short.

"I think I do know something of what you've been going through," Hugh said, in a voice that did not sound to him like his own.

"You know everything!" she conceded, with a little shamed and penitent laugh. "Hugh," she added quickly, looking up, "I have nothing really on my mind, you know—nothing *wrong*!" she said, with her own characteristic childish widening of eyes and shaking of head.

"As if I didn't know that!"

"But in some moods," Beatrice said, "it does seem wrong—it *does* seem wrong!"

"I don't think anything is ever wrong," Hugh offered, steadily, "if it makes things clearer. It seems to me half-measures—being afraid to tell the truth—is what's really wrong. You've given me a year of heaven, Bee—no man in the world could ask more than that! And now, if something's changed——"

She lay there silent, answering him only by a sudden closer pressure of her fingers on his. He knew she was not listening, and fell silent.

"Only promise me you'll never be cross with me, Hugh," she whispered. "I couldn't—I couldn't bear it!"

"How would you like," he said, in another silence—"how would you like to go out to California for a while, just by yourself? How'd you like to see your mother and Marcia again, and think things over——"

"But now, Hugh, now," she began eagerly, in a puzzled voice, "since your plans didn't go in for the Kreutzmann, we aren't going to California at all!"

"No, I'm not. But it seems to me that it would do you a world of good."

"What, alone?" Beatrice asked, alarmedly.

“Well, alone only on the trip. You’d have company when you got there. And then you could make up your mind—think things over, and write me ____”

He could see the glint of her eyes, trying to see his, in the dark.

“Think what over?” she asked, surprised. “Make up my mind about *what*?”

“Everything!” he said, cheerfully.

“But—but I would come back, Hugh?” Beatrice demanded, with surprise in her voice.

“If you wanted to.”

“But I should want to!”

“Then of course.”

“It’s only—” she said in a low voice presently, as if she were thinking aloud—“It’s only that I seem to have made such a mess of everything here!”

“You haven’t made a mess of anything at all!” Hugh said, decidedly. “We’ve all managed to make a mess of things for you. I wish—I wish you would go about a little more, Bee, with girls your own age—to matinées and lunches at the club—that sort of thing,” he diverged, after a pause.

For some reason this hurt her, and tears came to her eyes.

“I hate girls my own age, Hugh—most of them aren’t out of college yet!”

“I know, I know,” he said, in quick sensitiveness. “That’s just—just it. You oughtn’t to be expected to go about with Minnie and Harriet!”

“The children are wonderful, and I love Minnie and Harriet!” Beatrice insisted stoutly. “If—if you were happy, Hugh,” she added wistfully, “I’d be perfectly happy. I never get tired of books and walks and lectures and—” her voice thickened—“and meeting you!” had been the concluding words, but they emerged only an indistinct jumble.

“I *will* be happy, dear,” he said. “Everything will straighten out, and you will be running round picking oranges and eating figs and sand dabs——”

“They sound like spiders!”

“But they’re really nice little flat white fish—delicious fish.” Hugh began to beat on her hand lightly; his voice was low and steady in the dark.

“And you’ll write me letters!” he said, in his pleasant, encouraging voice.

Beatrice’s face was wet. She spoke carefully.

“Was it—was it losing the plans that made everything seem to go wrong, just lately, Hugh?” she asked. “Or is it Bert?”

“It isn’t either, Bee. It’s just that I’ve begun to see things in a different way—perhaps——” Hugh’s voice died into silence, and for a little while neither spoke.

“I wish we need never have the lights,” Beatrice said presently, “because I feel—I feel nearer to you—safer—now than I’ve felt for a long, long time!”

“As to the plans,” Hugh said, following his own thought, after another long interval, “from the beginning I’ve known who hid them, Bee.”

“Hugh!” she breathed, panting.

“Yes, I knew Bert had hid them, knew it that very first night,” Hugh went on.

“Oh, Hugh, *no*!”

“I think so.”

“But why—but why?” she stammered.

“That very first night,” Hugh repeated, “something in his manner struck me. I thought it over, and I knew it was Bert.”

“But—but what motive——” Beatrice gasped.

“What motive?” Hugh echoed dreamily, and was silent.

“Why should he, Hugh? Oh, Hugh, you’re wrong—whatever the explanation is, that isn’t it!” Beatrice exclaimed eagerly. “He wouldn’t! He couldn’t! Bert’s crazy—he’s spoiled, in a way—but he couldn’t do that!”

“At first,” Hugh pursued, as if she had not spoken, “I thought I would speak to him about it. And then I thought, no, that would accomplish nothing. He wouldn’t admit it. But I was more or less confirmed in my opinion with every word that he said about it—and the days went by, and the time was up for the Memorial contest, and I thought to myself, ‘If I ask him now, he’ll know I’m too late, and he’ll have all the more reason to stick to his story!’

“And then—when it was too late!—it came to me where they were,” Hugh said.

“Where they *were*!” Beatrice whispered sharply.

“Yes, I thought that out, too. I remembered that afternoon when we discovered the loss, and how Nelly had told us that Bert had come home to lunch, and had had a sandwich, or something, and I followed Bert’s train of thought. He would have driven over from Mother’s in his car, because he had come down to lunch with her, and they had all moved into town—do you remember? Well, I figured that he would park his car just where he always does, on the grass by the old barn, and that when he came out of the house, with the plans, he would look up at that stable roof, above the old hay loft, and think what a place to thrust that roll those old cobwebby rafters would be!

“The idea only came to me about three weeks ago, and I drove down to Spy Lake that afternoon,” said Hugh. “I parked near the old barn and walked in the door and climbed up on two or three bales of hay that were there, and put my hand on them as calmly as I’d take a hat off a shelf!”

“Too late!” Beatrice said, hardly above a breath. “And you didn’t tell me!”

“I felt too badly about it, Bee. Besides, what was the use?”

For a few minutes she was silent.

“But Bert didn’t do it!” she said, then, positively. “Hugh, Hugh, why should he?”

“Possibly,” Hugh’s voice said slowly, “he did not want me—want us—to go to California this year.”

Beatrice was stricken silent; she felt as if her heart must stop beating, for fear.

Immediately—it was as if she could feel him gathering force in the darkness—Hugh was his considerate self again.

“Here, your hands are cold—why, you’re shaking all over, Bee!” he exclaimed. A moment later he had touched a switch, and here and there in the comfortable book-lined room lamps suddenly bloomed. “Shall I get Nelly—do you want a hot-water bag?” he said. “I’m going to bathe—there’s no reason why you shouldn’t lie there for another hour and get to sleep, if you can; it’s only five o’clock, we’re not dining until half-past seven. Don’t we go out tonight?”

“We’re dining with Judge and Mrs. Lambert,” Beatrice, settling down under her silk cover, answered. “No, don’t call Nelly, Hugh. But give me my electric heater—it’s right there in my dressing room—and I’ll be warm in no time!”

“I’ll have this fire built up,” he said, ringing a bell, going toward her dressing room. Beatrice lay staring ahead of her into space, thinking, thinking.

“I seem to be a pretty poor person at managing things,” she thought, contemptuously. “Everything seems to go wrong—with me!”

Meanwhile Hugh had found the electric heater, a limp gray flexible thing repellent to the touch, dangling a long heavy cord with switch and plug. And taking it from its shelf in the big, white, spacious closet, he had chanced to glance down at the floor, and had seen her neat little brown overshoes. . . .

Bee’s overshoes, one tumbled down and one standing erect, and both wet.

There was no mistake about it; little pools of rain water had formed around them on the white-tiled floor.

He did not come into Bee’s dressing room twice in a year. But he had come in here today . . .

He laid down the foot-warmer he carried and picked up one of the shoes. Cold and soaking.

A minute later he brought her the heater and knelt to attach the plug. Bee thanked him sleepily; she had been nervous and cold and uneasy all day, but now Hugh was home, and Nelly laying a fire, and everything—for the moment, anyway—all right again.

It was more than an hour later that she suddenly sprang up, with the hurry of one who had dawdled to the danger point, and beginning her own dressing in mad haste, went to Hugh’s open dressing-room door, to see why he was so unnaturally quiet, and to remind him of the time.

The sight of him struck a chill to her heart, even though there was nothing startling in his attitude. He was merely standing quiet, motionless, at the window—not looking out, for obviously, even with the low light that was in the room, he could see nothing but a dim reflection in the streaming dark panes. But he was in the position of a person looking out of a window, his arms folded, his head dropped forward, his eyes—for he was half facing Beatrice as she came in, and she could see them—closed to slits.

“Hugh, aren’t you going to Judge Lambert’s dinner?”

He turned at the sound of her frightened voice, and she saw that his face was that of a stricken man. But immediately, in his normal tones, he answered that he would begin dressing at once, and as he moved from dresser to closet, opening and closing doors, Beatrice, after a moment’s troubled watching, withdrew to finish her own dressing. They started for their dinner party at quarter-past seven, in silence.

Judge and Mrs. Lambert were the richest persons in North Underhill. Mrs. Lambert, who, as the dashing and beautiful Nettie Couzens, had been heiress to an old mining grandfather, was nationally known as the “girl who owned a county.” Now, in her fat and comfortable fifties, she lived in an Italian villa incongruously situated at Washington and South E streets, mispronounced French and Italian words cheerfully and fluently, and was interested chiefly in diets and bridge.

But she loved to entertain, and the handsome old dignified Judge loved to entertain, and there were always daughters, giddy, garrulous, pretty daughters flying about; five daughters, every one of whom had married stubbornly, unfortunately, and permanently. Hugh’s firm always designed the house, when Mrs. Lambert, accepting a chauffeur or ribbon clerk or veterinarian as a new son-in-law, established the young couple in a home.

Tonight the Lamberts’ guest of honor was a senator-elect, and they had spared neither pains nor money to entertain him fittingly. Forty-nine persons sat down to the elaborate dinner, and at least that many more came in afterward for the dance.

Beatrice was placed between her old friend Dr. Bingham, who had taken care of her during her illness last spring, and a nice young Mr. Peterson, who appeared to be a sort of secretary or confidential clerk to the senator-elect. Far down the royally broad and glittering, flowered and candle-lighted table, she could see Hugh’s handsome, sleek head, respectfully bent toward Mrs. Senator-elect, who was his left-hand neighbor. Hugh, she thought—there was no one in the world like him, there was no face in the world whose expression was at once so grave and so pleasant, so serious and yet so sweet.

Beatrice was by far the youngest person at the table.

“The youngsters are coming in later to dance,” she told Tom Peterson. “I only ranked a dinner invitation because of my husband!”

“Your husband! I thought you were Miss Challoner; I thought you weren’t much more than a little girl!” the secretary said.

"Oh, no. I'm very much married. There—that's Hugh—that's Mr. Challoner, down there next to Mrs. Estee."

"Is that *so*?" Tom asked, inspecting Hugh. That rather quiet middle-aged man the husband of this brilliant girl in blue velvet, Tom reflected! "Are you from North Underhill, Mrs. Challoner?" he went on.

"Oh, yes—born here. My father was a surgeon, and they said that he would have gone a long way in his profession," Beatrice explained, turning her candid blue eyes upon her interlocutor, "but he died when I was only a baby, and after that my mother had—quite a time—looking out for my sister and me," she finished, with a little laugh.

"I see," Tom said, quite truthfully. That explained it. Nobody in connection with the stunning young red-headed creature was having quite a time now; that was obvious. Wealth spoke in every line of her, her shining hair, her smooth skin, her flowing exquisite gown of dark blue velvet, and the line of fine pearls about her white throat. Her hand looked young in its plain gold ring and guardian emerald.

"Is your mother in North Underhill?" he asked.

"No, my sister wasn't at all well," Beatrice said, readily, "and the doctor—this very gentleman here on the other side of me—thought that she ought to try rest and change. They were afraid of anemia. So she and my mother have gone to California. It seems a long time!"

"I see," young Peterson said again. His wife had been anemic—well, no, not anemic, but pretty far run down, he said, after the birth of their little boy. He was from Arizona, and it had been simple enough to send wife and baby there for a while. "You'll have to get out to California, for I can assure you your people won't come back, Mrs. Challoner!" he smiled.

"Oh, I may go," Beatrice answered. But her heart gave a strange little sinking twist as she said it, and she looked again toward Hugh. "Not long now, Hugh," her soul said to him—"not long now before we can talk honestly, dear, and clear this all up!"

Once, among the many glances she sent to his end of the table, she caught his eye. It made her heart plunge, that steadfast, quietly smiling look of Hugh's, all goodness, all kindness, all faith. Tears misted her lashes, and when she turned to speak to the doctor, he told himself once again that she really was an extraordinarily appealing creature, and that Hugh Challoner was a lucky fellow.

To Beatrice the dinner dance was all a blur, a strange bright troublesome dream from which there seemed to be no awakening. Lights and glass and mirrors, brilliantly dressed women circling and laughing and chattering—and the men strange little blocks of black, moving in the throng.

After dinner the women congregated in several upstairs bed-and-sitting rooms of truly imperial splendor, and Beatrice found herself vaguely listening to different voices that praised her gown.

"It's lovely, dear!" said the elderly women, affectionately.

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it. . . . Oh, I'm so glad you like it. . . . Yes, right here in town. At Emma May's. . . . At Emma May's. . . . I thought Sylvia looked so pretty tonight. . . . I thought Mary—Joan—Betty looked so pretty tonight. . . . No, I got it here in town, at Emma May's. . . ."

They went downstairs. There was dancing, talking, dancing. Beatrice could not see Hugh anywhere. A clock, a grandfather's clock too old, too scarred, too discolored and shabby to be anything but perfectly new, said twenty minutes to eleven, to twelve, to one. Twenty minutes to one o'clock. How early could one decently go home from a party that began at half-past eight?

"Bee," said Bert's voice, beside her.

"Bert!" She caught at his arm. "I wanted to see you. Where can we go? I have to talk to you."

"Could we go to the house?"

"Our house? Oh, no, I don't think so. I would have to find Hugh and explain to him—and at this hour——"

"Listen, I've got a job," he said.

Beatrice fixed him with bright, attentive eyes.

"Anyway?" she asked, frowning faintly as she pondered it.

"Anyway."

"Well, I think you're wise, Bert. I know you are!" she conceded briefly. Her eyes were abstracted. "But anyway—I have to talk to you," she repeated. "Hugh is in a terrible state of mind, Bert. I don't know what he's got hold of, or thinks he's got hold of——"

"Isn't there anything smaller than the main concourse of the Grand Central in this place? Do you suppose they have a jam closet or a bathroom

or something that you don't have to have a flivver to get round in?"

She laughed shakily, hysterically. Their hostess, ambling by, was waylaid by Bert for information.

"They say he's crazy about her, and my Lord, you can't blame him!" Mrs. Lambert thought, even while she amiably directed them to a "den," back of the main "liberry," where Pa often went to smoke.

"That young feller Bert Challoner don't make much secret of the way he feels towards Hugh's wife," Mrs. Lambert reflected. "But you can't tell me that there's anything crooked about *her*, Judge," she immediately added, projecting herself into a conversation she would have with her husband somewhere in the small hours, when the guests were gone. "She's so straight that she's all but simple, that one. She may not love Hugh like Romeo loved Juliet," Mrs. Lambert imagined herself saying shrewdly, "but she loves him all right."

And the Judge, in her musing, agreed admiringly. He always agreed admiringly with the late Nettie Couzens.

But long before her thoughts had reached this point, Bert and Beatrice had left her and were following her directions to cross the hall, and go through the "liberry," and in past "them porteers with the pitchers of Diana on them."

The enormous library itself was almost empty; they drifted slowly on, pretending to talk, looking at calf bindings that had never felt the touch of a Lambert finger, and at bronzes and enamels and miniatures.

Presently Bert parted the heavy tapestry curtains that concealed the door of the "den," and they went through quickly and quietly into a dimly lighted small room where there were pipe racks, and a deep leather couch, and a fire.

Instantly Beatrice, who entered first, saw that the room was already occupied, and half turned to draw back. A woman in white was sitting on the low-backed leather couch before the fire, with the spangles of her gown twinkling in the soft lamplight, and a man was with her, seated on the same couch, with his body squared about so that he faced the woman, with his back toward the door. Mrs. Kavanaugh and Hugh.

Bert, following Beatrice, saw them—they all saw one another. It was too late to retreat now, although Beatrice was conscious of a sick and terrified conviction that retreat was still their only course.

But she came slowly in, Bert behind her, and Hugh rose and gave her his seat courteously, as if he had expected her, and she sat down.

"Hello, Dad!" Bert exclaimed hardily, discovering his father.

"Come in," Hugh said, after a second's pause. "Come in. We—we were talking about you." Neither of the women spoke. But Aileen Kavanaugh gave a little flicker of laughter—a schoolgirl snicker that grated on Beatrice's nerves like a file.

Against the shadows behind her, and the dark leather of the couch, and the dark blue of her velvet gown, her own face looked pale and strained. But the light found her hair and played and glimmered there strangely, mysteriously, turning it into an aureole.

Both the men sat down; Aileen turned in her white hands the little frilled bouquet of roses and maidenhair and pinks that she had been carrying all evening.

"We were talking about you," Hugh said again. And turning to Bert, he said lightly, significantly, "I was just going to tell Aileen that I had found my plans, after all."

"Found your plans!" Aileen exclaimed. "Why, Hugh, I didn't know that. Where on *earth*——"

Bert was staring at his father blankly.

"How do you mean you've found your plans?" he demanded, bluntly and rudely.

"I mean I went to the place they had been put, and found them," Hugh explained, with a level look.

Bert's stupefied glance went to Beatrice.

"Did you know that?"

"Yes, I—he told me this afternoon."

"They weren't burned, then? I always sort of thought they had been burned," Bert murmured, amazed eyes still on his father.

"No, they weren't burned, Bert."

"Gosh, that is tough luck, Dad!" the boy exclaimed youthfully, shaking his head.

Beatrice, who was deathly white, saw that Hugh was trembling. His voice was shaking, too, shaking with passion, as he leaned toward his son and said:

"No, Bert, my boy. Don't—don't take that tone with me! It's too late. I understand—I'm not angry. But trust me, Bert. Don't—don't hurt me any more than you've got to hurt me!"

"What are you talking about?" Bert demanded.

Hugh got up from his chair and stood with his back to the fire and his hands in his trouser pockets. There was a pause, during which they could hear the distant, throbbing strains of dance music, saxophones and drums.

"You know what I'm talking about!" Hugh answered, levelly, in a quiet voice.

"I give you my word I haven't the least idea!" Bert stammered, looking from one face to another in turn for light.

"You don't have to keep it up," Hugh said, with a faint sneer on his lips. "It's all plain now. If you and Beatrice——" He glanced toward her for a second.—"If you and Beatrice had only known how thoroughly I understand," he said patiently, "you might have discussed all this from quite another angle, while you were having tea this afternoon at the Washington Arms."

Bert, who had been looking moodily downward, now looked up sharply.

"Yes, I knew that," Hugh said wearily. "It's true, isn't it?" he asked, looking at his wife.

"Quite," Beatrice admitted, evenly and briefly, after a second's pause.

"And you telephoned him tonight just before we left the house?" Hugh pursued, unemotionally. "It wasn't enough to have tea with him," he lashed out, in sudden passion. But instantly he was calm again. "It wasn't enough to have tea with him," he repeated in a voice of forced quiet, "but you telephoned him just before we left the house."

"I did," Beatrice said, raising hard, bright, defiant eyes to his.

"To tell him that you must see him this evening, that he *must* come to this party?" Hugh went on.

"Whoever your spies are, they are very efficient, Hugh," Beatrice admitted, breathing hard.

“I have no spies,” Hugh told her, in a tired voice. “You were seen at the tea room, and it was casually mentioned in a conversation——”

“Exactly. I know how casually!” Beatrice said bitterly, with a glance at Aileen. “We saw Mrs. Kavanaugh, too,” she said, icily.

“I had no idea——” Aileen began, charmingly regretful and apologetic. But nobody was listening. Between the three Challoners the air was thrilling as if to electric currents, and their words rang in the quiet warm air like pistol shots.

“As for the telephoning,” Hugh was saying, “I tried to get the garage, to find out why Moon didn’t bring the car around. I had gone down to the library—you were upstairs in your room—and when I took the telephone off the hook I heard you talking to some servant at my mother’s house, asking for Bert.”

There was a pause, then Beatrice said scornfully, “Exactly.”

“But look here—I don’t know where you got the dope about my knowing something of the plans that were lost,” Bert now said, hotly. “How do you get that way? Do you think I’d touch your plans!”

To this Hugh returned fiercely, “You’d touch my wife! You weren’t too noble—too lofty, for that!”

Bert’s glance flashed to Beatrice, who sat like a woman of stone, her red head held high, her eyes brilliant, her under lip slightly bitten. She had clasped her white hands against the rich, dark blue velvet of her lap; they did not stir.

“That’s a lie!” Bert said, very gently.

Hugh seemed suddenly to weaken, to crumple; he had run his hand frantically over his hair, in a gesture entirely unnatural to him; he looked disheveled and demoralized.

“If it is, I apologize to Beatrice,” he said, in a breathless sort of way, not looking at her or at Bert. “In any case, I’m not going to—I’m not going to stand in your way.” He made a blind bow toward his son. “In yours or in hers,” he added, with another quite unseeing gesture in Beatrice’s direction. “I’ve thought it out,” said Hugh, in the strange, throbbing silence that held the room. “She will go West—to her mother and to her sister,” he persisted, pronouncing every word formally and with difficulty. “And I will remain here. You will stay here, too, for a while, I hope, Bert, for all our sakes, and then whatever arrangement you make will suit me. Paris. New York.”

He was not looking at any of them. He was talking with a dry mouth, and with strange little bows, and with averted eyes. Bert, who was on his feet now, too, took a quick step toward his father and caught him by the shoulder. Aileen drew a quick little shocked breath and pressed her fingers over her mouth. But Beatrice neither moved nor spoke.

"I know nothing—nothing of your plans!" Bert said hoarsely. With all of them, he felt horrified and shocked beyond measure at this scene. And with all of them, too, he felt a sudden fear for his father's reason.

Hugh looked in his direction apathetically, shrugging.

"Then I am very sorry that I suspected you," he said, with that faint sneer in his voice again, and with his eyes still avoiding his son's eyes. "And now I think I will go home," he said.

"Hugh, dear, Bert knows nothing about it, I'm sure!" Aileen now put in, persuasively. "I don't understand this whole thing one bit," she protested, stretching out appealing hands. "But this I do know. Bert knew absolutely nothing about the loss of the plans!"

They had hardly been listening to her, but now Bert turned a sharp, almost a suspicious, look upon her.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked harshly.

"I mean——" Aileen looked at Beatrice, and hesitated. "Is it still a secret?" she demanded, dropping her head on one side, her eyes full of affection and concern and sympathy for them all, as became an old family friend.

"I don't get you!" Bert said bluntly.

"I'm not talking to you, my dear. I'm talking to Beatrice," Aileen said, her eyes not moving from Beatrice's face.

"What does Beatrice know about it!" the boy exclaimed.

"A good deal, I think," Aileen said confidently.

"I don't understand you," Beatrice said, swallowing with a dry mouth.

"Ah, yes, you do!" Aileen said gently. "Don't you think that we'd all be happier if you told us, now?" she asked.

"Told you?" Beatrice muttered, heavily, stupidly. "Told you *what*?"

"Told us why you took those plans that afternoon," Aileen pursued mercilessly. "And why you hid them in the old barn, down at the Spy Lake

cottage!"

Bert burst into a laugh.

"So *you* were the one!" he said, turning on Aileen scornfully. "You've betrayed yourself now. *You* took them!"

Hugh seemed electrified into sudden life.

"Bert, my boy—my boy!" he stammered. "It wasn't you?"

"Certainly it wasn't me!" Bert answered impatiently, shaking off his father's hand. "You heard her. She's just admitted it, hasn't she?"

"No, I haven't just admitted it," Aileen asserted, unruffled.

"You knew where they were, anyway!" said Bert.

"Yes, I knew where they were, because I happened to be calling there that afternoon, and they told me that Beatrice had just gone down to the garden," Aileen said. "I told the maid—it was old Nelly—that I'd wait, but I didn't wait. It occurred to me that it might be some time, and so I went out, and saw Beatrice, down at the end of the garden, where the path forks to the barn, taking the turning there. I went after her, and by the time I'd reached the fork, she was disappearing into the barn. I called, of course, but she didn't hear me, and so I followed, and was just in time to see her, up on some bales of hay, stuffing something in between the shingles and the roof beams. It didn't occur to me for days what it was, but it puzzled me, and I turned back, and walked through the berry garden to the porch, and sat down. I thought there must be some explanation. It was weeks after that—days, anyway—that Hugh told me that his plans had disappeared—that he was too late for the contest—and then I knew that it must have been those plans that Beatrice had hidden. But even now," she ended, glancing about the circle, "even now, I don't know what it's all about."

"I don't believe you!" Bert said, rudely, in a silence.

"No, no, that's not the explanation, Aileen," Hugh added, with his tired smile. "*Beatrice?* Nonsense!"

"Why, look at her!" Aileen exclaimed suddenly, pointing at Beatrice. "Look at her! She'll tell you that's the truth!"

Beatrice's face was completely drained of color; her hands were gripped tightly in her lap. Her agonized eyes ignored the other two, and fixed themselves upon Hugh's face.

"Bee!" he said, in a whisper filled with fear and stupefaction.

“It’s not true,” Bert began angrily, loyally. Aileen silenced him with a quickly lifted hand.

“Ask her, then. *Ask* her, Bert,” she triumphed.

Before either man could speak Beatrice spoke, her voice coming out hoarse and faint.

“Yes, it’s true,” she said. “I hid them.”

CHAPTER IX

Hugh looked at her quietly, pursed his lips, and turned to the fire. Bert caught a quick audible breath. Aileen sank back against the soft leather curves of the couch, satisfied.

"Aren't you—aren't you surprised, Hugh?" Beatrice asked him, panting a little, smiling a desperate little smile.

"No, dear, not entirely!" he answered, without turning. There were pity and sorrow in his face.

"Bee!" Bert said, in a sharp undertone. "What possessed you?"

She began to laugh a little, a painful and mirthless laugh.

"Why did I do it?" she said, with the deliberate satisfaction of a defiant child. "Why, for love, wouldn't you suppose, Bert? That must have been my motive, mustn't it?"

"Don't, Bee!" Hugh said, quickly, infinitely distressed by her manner. "Let's go home, now," he urged her anxiously, "and we can talk of these things tomorrow——"

"While I'm packing to go off to my mother and sister?" she asked, with another disquieting laugh. "Hugh, why don't you send me to a Magdalen Asylum—it's so much cheaper!"

"Don't!" he said, wincing. "We must get home, Bee," he added, soothingly. "You're overexcited, and you don't know what you're saying. Tomorrow——"

"Don't touch me!" she said, fiercely, as he came nearer. She got to her feet and moved about so that she was facing them, with her back to the door. "Don't touch me please, Hugh. Don't you want to know why I stole your plans——"

"Beatrice!" Bert entreated her. She did not seem to hear him.

"Why, it was because I was in love with Bert, of course," she said, flatly. "I didn't want to go with you to California, I wanted to stay here with Bert. Isn't that simple? We love each other, don't we, Bert?"

"Beatrice!" Bert said again, in a low tone full of pain.

“Yes, I know!” she assented, slipping her bare hand through his arm. “I think we’ve regaled Mrs. Kavanaugh with quite enough of our family troubles,” Beatrice said, formally. “Take me home, Bert, and as Hugh suggests, I’ll go to the House of Correction in the morning, and you will come home and live with your father, and repent——”

“Please!” Hugh muttered, in a dragged, low voice. He had taken the corner of the couch where she had been sitting, and had buried his face in his hands, and bowed his body forward like a thing bent and buffeted by storm. “Please!” he said, hoarsely.

“I’ll say good-night to Mrs. Lambert, Hugh. Bert’s taking me home,” Beatrice said, in a silence. Her breast was heaving, her cheeks were pale, and her eyes flashing. She gave Aileen one level, significant glance. “It all worked out exactly as you hoped it would, didn’t it, Aileen?” she asked. “Good-night. Come, Bert,” Beatrice added, her voice growing a little faint. She and Bert left the room.

“Get me out of here,” she said to him, in the library.

“I will, dear. I will, dear!” he assured her, frightened. “We ought to say good-night to Mrs. Lambert—or needn’t we?” stammered Bert.

She gave a frantic little laugh for reply. She was like a person in a fever, hurrying him through the bright rooms, past vaguely moving forms and voices, hurrying him down the great stairway and out into the cool, fresh autumn night, still jeweled with raindrops against the shaft of light from the doorway. Moon maneuvered the car out from lines and lines of cars; they were in it, they were speeding home.

Even in the car she did not relax. She sat on the edge of the seat, both hands clinging tightly to Bert’s big hands, her slim, fragrant body so close that he could almost feel and hear the rapid beating of her heart.

“I’ll have to get away, Bert!”

“You will, dear. Only don’t worry about it now—wait until you’ve had a good night’s rest. Then you can arrange it.”

“Do you think——” Her breath failed her—“Do you think I can sleep in his room—that man’s room?”

“Beatrice, just calm down. Just wait until you’ve had time to think all this over——”

“Think it over! Are you crazy, Bert, or am I? Did you hear what he called me? Did you hear what he thought of—of us——”

“Bee, he was beside himself—he didn’t know what he was saying, dear.”

“Oh, well, then, believe me,” she said proudly, and Bert fancied that he could see her eyes flash angrily in the dark—“believe me, then I’m beside myself, too, and I do know what I’m saying!”

She was silent for a moment, and Bert was conscious of a trembling hope that the worst was over, Then she burst out more violently than before:

“Bert, I will have to get out of all this!”

“Yes, of course. But you’re all wrought up, now, Bee——”

She leaned against him wearily, her bare smooth shoulder against his breast, her red fragrant hair close to his cheek. It was the first time that she had yielded, the first time that he might have had her—might have drawn her sweetness and softness unresisting into his arms, might have found her soft, exquisite mouth with his kisses. Sitting there, in the rocking car, Bert knew the taste of infinite desolation and renunciation, and felt the agony of growth, hard, painful, rending, in his soul.

“Bee,” he said, at the house, “you’ll not worry, you’ll not think any more tonight? Won’t you go straight to bed?”

“Come in,” she said, instead of answering. There was a new brevity, a new definiteness and authority, in her tone. It was as if the girl had suddenly become a woman. He followed her into the square, dimly lighted hall.

“Come in here just a moment, Bert,” she said, leading the way into the gloomy, magnificent old parlor. She touched a light; there was a soft glow in the room. “Bert, about my going away——” Beatrice began, without preamble.

He put his hands on her shoulders, brother-fashion, and looked down at her affectionately, concernedly.

“Surely, dear. Tomorrow!”

“I cannot stay with him, after what he said tonight!” Beatrice said, at white heat. “I’m going away—I don’t know where—not to my mother and sister, I know that. That would drive me wild. Besides, he could find me there. Bert, when this has blown over, if I write you, will you come see me?”

His eyes remained on hers steadily for a long minute, without expression.

“Bee, I’ve been an awful fool,” he said, irrelevantly, in reply. “But I won’t do that. Tonight—when he was raging at me—right in the midst of it,

it came over me—what he is to me, and what I am to him, and I—I——"

He paused. Beatrice had rested her clasped hands on his chest; she was studying him with bright, curious eyes.

"I've got to stand with him," Bert said gruffly, and was still.

There was a moment of silence. Little silver wheat-ears outlined the top of the blue velvet dress, and Bert saw them move with her breath. Her breast was full and white; there were tendrils of red hair, like little chicken feathers, curving about her ears. Her stormy eyes looked black in the shadows, rather than gray.

"It—sort of—came to me," Bert said awkwardly, as she did not speak, "that—if he loved you, as I love you, Bee, and if he—he had had you, for his own, then—then it's no wonder that he—went crazy tonight!"

"That's not love!" she said, youthful and disdainful.

"It might be, Bee."

"Oh, no, no, not without trust!" she said, tears suddenly in her eyes.

"It might be, dear," he said again, timidly.

She shook her head, her lowered eyes averted.

"Then you can't be my friend?" she asked, hurt and proud, looking up.

Bert smiled down at her. He did not answer.

"But Bert," she said, forlornly, "if I don't see you—if I have no way of finding out how—how things are—how Hugh is——"

"That's the real rub, isn't it?" he said, half aloud, watching her, speaking as if he spoke to himself.

"I've always told you," Beatrice went on, "that I didn't need you—that I wouldn't take your friendship, Bert. But tonight—tonight it's different. Tonight I found out—when Hugh failed me——" Her voice broke, and she was still.

"Tonight I found out something, too," Bert said.

"That you don't really care for me, that you don't want to help me!" Beatrice said, angrily and childishly, as he paused.

"No, not that. But that—it isn't a thing to fool with, and that I've been fooling," Bert answered, feeling for words as he thought it out.

"And what you felt for me was fooling—was that it?"

"No. Oh, no!"

"You found out that you didn't really care," she said proudly. "You found out that you didn't love me?"

"No," he answered, puzzled and fumbling, and always with his hands on her shoulders, and his eyes smiling down at her. "No, I think that I found out that I did."

"Did! And yet now you won't even be friends with me, you won't let me write to you!"

Bert was silent. He moved a big thumb to and fro across the silver wheat-ears on her shoulder.

"That's the reason," he said slowly.

"Now, when I need you!" Beatrice exclaimed stingingly.

"I've taken a job," Bert said. "I'm going to get out. I'll come back—Christmas, maybe—and it'll all be like a dream."

"What's happened to you!" she asked, frowning.

There was a pause. Then he said simply:

"I think, perhaps, I've grown up. It came to me tonight that I loved you, and that this is the only way out, for me. I love him, too. It's all perfectly clear, now," Bert said, in an undertone, half to himself.

"Not to me!" she said, impatiently, gloomy, irresolute.

"In that room there—that room in the Lambert house," Bert added, "something seemed to split—to clear—inside my head. And I saw him—Dad—well, I don't know!" He laughed gruffly; there was a little break in his voice. "I grew up," he finished, with an eloquent smile and shrug. "God knows I've been long enough about it!"

"And I grew up, too, in that same room," Beatrice began warmly. "I knew, all of a sudden, that I'd been asleep, all this year—playing at marriage, playing at being in love with Hugh, loving myself because the tradespeople and the servants and the firm were so nice to me—poor fool that I am! And I can't go back, Bert," she went on excitedly. "I can't be a little girl playing in a doll's house any longer. I'm awake! I'm grown up! And Hugh can't bundle me off to my mother—with my hands slapped——"

"No, no, no, dear!" he agreed, soothingly. "But you must remember that he's a quiet old fellow, Bee, and that he was terribly lonely, and that he

doesn't love easily. You'll go to bed now, won't you, Bee? Get a good rest, don't get up in the morning, and then think it over quietly. It'll all come out right, you'll see. And then," Bert said, his voice thickening again, "you and Dad will have to forgive me for monkeying with your happiness—for thinking it was funny to butt in—to make him jealous——"

"Hugh and I!" she protested, seizing upon that part of his sentence angrily. "You don't think that I am going quietly to forget—to overlook all this? That woman—that odious Aileen—she wants him, she can have him!"

"But after you talk," Bert argued. "When Dad understands. When he knows why you hid those plans—as I do, you poor little simp," he broke off to interpolate affectionately. "Then—can't you see?—everything will be different. He'll be sorry—he'll apologize——"

"As if that would make any difference!" Beatrice said inflexibly.

"Why, my dear child, do you suppose that when my father understands, he can possibly go on feeling angry or jealous——" Bert began, pacifically.

"His jealousy—his stupid, wicked, horrible jealousy has spoiled everything!" Beatrice exclaimed. "He can't take it back!"

"You'll feel differently in the morning," Bert told her. And as she made no answer, but continued to stare into space, with somber brooding eyes and a bitten lip, he added, "I must go now. Dad may be home at any minute, and I mustn't be here."

"Do I see you tomorrow?" she asked, rousing from a reverie.

"I don't know. I suppose so. Good-bye, Bee," he said, simply.

"Good-bye, Bert." She looked at him wistfully, "I suppose we'll see why all this had to happen some day," she said, forlornly.

"But that's just *it*——" he began, protestingly.

"Just what?"

"Well—nothing has happened," Bert offered lamely.

Beatrice's eyes flashed again.

"*I* think something has happened!" she said hotly.

"Ah, no, Bee. Dad's made you angry. But—but married people have to forgive each other!" Bert suggested, uncertainly.

“Not things like that!” she answered quickly. “Not having the—the *lowest* suspicions of the person nearest you, not putting the *worst* construction on everything, without waiting for an explanation, or giving—giving anyone a chance to explain! Not letting a person like Aileen,” Beatrice rushed on bitterly, “come into it, interfering, and hinting, and making trouble! If he could think that his own wife, and his own son—why, if he could really think that, Bert,” she interrupted herself to ask, beginning to cry, “what earthly peace or comfort is there ever going to be in this world for him, or for me? Why didn’t he ask me quietly—why didn’t he wait?”

“I don’t suppose, when a person gets jealous, he can exactly control what he does, Bee,” Bert suggested, anxiously placating.

“But there seems to be no *use* trying to please a jealous person, Bert,” she said, sobbing. “For if there isn’t any real reason for trouble, he’ll—he’ll invent it!”

“He didn’t invent that I—I care a terrible lot for you,” the boy said humbly, in a low tone.

Beatrice threw up her head. Her bright, impatient eyes did not falter in their steady look at him.

“Well, what *of* it, Bert! He didn’t want you to hate me, I suppose?” she demanded.

Bert laughed a hopeless, gruff little laugh.

“No. But that’s what has driven him sort of—cuckoo,” he suggested ineloquently.

Beatrice reflected on this, looking away, sniffing, wiping her eyes.

“I’m going away tomorrow, for a while,” she said.

“To your mother?”

“No!” Her eyes returned to him indignantly. “Why should I be sent to my mother, as if I’d done something wrong? She to report, I suppose, in weekly letters, that I was in bed every night at ten o’clock, and that I was apparently repentant——”

“Beatrice,” Bert interrupted, “that doesn’t sound like you! We’ve all been wrong, in this mess——”

“I haven’t, and you haven’t!” she asserted haughtily. “Perhaps Hugh, with his crazy suspicions, has!”

“You’ll feel differently in the morning, when you’ve had some rest,” Bert repeated, “and when you’ve had a chance to talk it over coolly. It would be crazy for you to go away, Bee—you’d only be sorry! Why, what would you do——”

“I could work!”

“I don’t mean that. Dad—Dad would never let you work,” Bert said, turning red.

“He’d have to, if I wouldn’t touch his money!”

“But your mother and sister——” Bert hadn’t meant to mention them; he felt himself floundering hopelessly. The color flew to Bee’s face, and for a moment her eyelashes were lowered, as if she felt a touch of shame. Then she said proudly:

“You don’t think I’d—I’d swallow my pride on that account? You don’t think I’d put up with anything from Hugh—bear anything, because I’m—because we’re all dependent on him?”

“No, of course not!” Bert protested quickly, in painful embarrassment. “But it never does anyone any harm,” he went on, somewhat timidly, “to forget and forgive. Does it?”

“I don’t know,” she said somberly, looking away.

He had taken his hands from her shoulders, and now she walked restlessly across the big room, picked a book from the center table, looked at it, and went with it to a distant bookcase. The velvet gown was short in front, but it trailed on the ground behind her; she looked young and slim as she stood before the books, fitting the volume she had found into its place. Her arms and throat were white among the shadows.

There was a picture of Hugh’s mother, in a silver frame, on the bookcase. Beatrice studied it absently, turning it in her hand to catch the light, and put it down again. Bert stood irresolute, in the center of the floor, watching her.

“I think,” she said, coming back to him, “that it will be better if I go away for a while. There is something about that woman—Aileen—that makes me go gooseflesh. I’m all wrought up, Hugh’s a wreck, and you—you’re unhappy.”

“But go away where?” he said.

"I don't know. But somewhere. If Hugh wants me to come back some day, I'll come back. But just now I feel as if I'd made one mistake on another."

"Dad won't want you to leave at all, as far as that goes," Bert said. Her mouth took a faint stubborn line; her eyes were distant.

"Well, I'll have to," she persisted, briefly.

There was a silence. Then she said, with a sigh:

"I wonder if other families—I wonder if other women—get into messes like this!"

"I'm not very proud of my share in it!" Bert commented briefly.

"Nor I mine!" She raised her troubled face like a child, and he kissed her, putting his arms about her for a second, and turned to pick up the overcoat he had thrown over a chair. Beatrice went with him to the hall door.

"Where's Hugh, do you suppose?"

"Walking the streets, probably. He looked like a crazy man."

She looked out at the black night with a little shudder.

"Good-bye again, Bert," she said. And then, in the phrase from the old story, she added whimsically, "God doesn't always make the right man King!"

He did not answer. He stooped his fair head for a moment over her hand, and then ran down the black and twinkling steps and turned into the street. Old Mrs. Challoner's house was but a few squares away; he would go there, Beatrice thought, turning back into the hall.

When the door was closed she ran upstairs, her breath beginning to come fast again, and her eyes bright and feverish with sudden determination. The blue velvet gown came off and was flung carelessly aside; Beatrice tore off slippers and thin stockings, and substituted more practical wear; tan silk hose, sturdy, square-heeled patent leathers with round buckles, and a homespun suit with a short pleated skirt and a belted jacket. She pulled a little beige-colored hat, of the shade of the suit, down over her brilliant hair.

While she dressed, her opened suitcase lay on her desk, and she flung into it everything needed for a week's absence at least. Underwear, a plain silk frock, stockings, shoes, blouses, gloves, handkerchiefs. With powders and pastes and toilet waters the bag's beautiful array of boxes and bottles were already filled. Beatrice added her pearl earrings, her chain of pearls,

her check book and fountain pen, and the little photograph of Marcia and her mother; two lean smiling women, looking about the same age in white gowns and hats, in the sunlight of the Panama steamer deck.

There was a beautiful picture of Hugh on her dresser; Hugh at his dearest. He had had it taken not long after their marriage; no one else had a copy of this particular pose; Beatrice had selected it as her favorite, and hers in a special sense it had become.

She looked at this picture tonight, and her breast heaved. But she put it aside. There was another picture of Hugh—the picture this one had replaced. It had been temporarily shelved, in her closet; she found it and slipped it into her bag instead. It wouldn't do to let him know . . .

Her warm gloves, her heavy fur coat—she was ready. She caught up the suitcase, snapped off the dressing-room lights. And at the same moment there was a footstep in the hall, and somebody came into the bedroom. Her heart stopped beating. Hugh! She was too late.

But it was not Hugh. It was old Nelly, amazed and tousled and sleepy.

"Nelly!" Beatrice said, in an electric whisper, her heart resuming its normal beat by painful degrees.

"For heaven's sake! You ain't going out now!" Nelly said, stupefied.

"Only—only as far as Mrs. Challoner's," Beatrice said quickly. "And by the way, would you call me a car, Nelly?"

"The front door blew open," the maid said. "And I could feel the draft blowin' through the house. So then I seen the lights in your room, and I thought maybe you weren't home yet. Had ye better go out, as late as this? It's after three," Nelly reminded her.

"Oh, yes, please. I must. And if Mr. Challoner comes in, please say that I'm at his mother's," Beatrice said quickly and decidedly.

"I'll get into my clothes and take you there. I'd never leave you go at such an hour as this!" Nelly averred, after a puzzled silence.

"No, indeed you won't do that!" Beatrice refused her.

"I'll call Moon, then; he won't be asleep by this time!" the old servant persisted stupidly.

"Nelly," Beatrice pleaded, feeling that in another minute she would cry, that Hugh would come home, that everything would be lost, "you don't understand. Mr. Challoner and I have had a——" She discarded the ugly

words fight and quarrel; they sounded like living over a grocery—"a very serious disagreement," she said, breathlessly and quickly. "I'm going away—I'm going to his mother. You mustn't stop me."

"Where's Mr. Hugh now?" Nelly demanded.

"I don't know. Mr. Bert and Mrs. Kavanaugh were mixed into it—he may be with Mrs. Kavanaugh, for all I know," Beatrice said recklessly, frantic to escape. "But wherever he is, I don't want to be here when he comes back!"

"You'll come back tomorrow?" Nelly asked, considering.

"Oh, yes—surely!"

"Just give me time to get into my coat and shoes, and I'll take you over to Mrs. Challoner's," the maid offered.

Beatrice hesitated; an odd look narrowed her eyes for a minute. Nelly's room was on the third floor, at the back of the house.

"Well, hurry then!" she said.

"There's just this one thing," Nelly said, turning in the very act of departure. "Are you sure you ain't makin' a turrible mistake?"

Beatrice could smile, shakily, impatiently.

"Isn't it possible that you don't understand the situation at all, Nelly?" she asked.

"Well, of course I know that," admitted Nelly, hurt.

"Isn't it possible that the one thing Mr. Hugh wants is to have me get out?" Beatrice pursued, stubbornly.

But here Nelly was stubborn, too.

"No, ma'am, that isn't possible!" she asserted firmly. "I've known Mr. Hugh Challoner, man and boy, for thirty-four years," Nelly went on, rising easily to her tone of droning narrative. "I was at his first wedding. I knew Miss Alice Merritt when she was still in Miss Dayton's. He married her like any boy will marry a pretty, popular girl—she was cold as ice, Miss Alice, but she always did everything like it ought to be done, and they were happy, just like other folks are.

"But he never loved her like he loves you," Nelly added, with a keen look, as Beatrice, her lips still bitten, and her eyes scornful, made no comment. "He never—in all those years!—was like he's been in this last

year. His mother seen it, and his sisters seen it, that—fifty or no fifty—he was getting, at last, what he'd never gotten before in his life!

"Why, those vi'lets and primroses he brought you, every day of the world, when you was sick here, last spring!" Nelly continued. "Us girls down in the kitchen used to look at each other and say, 'Whatever's come over him?' He used to fly up them stairs like a boy, and we'd hear the door shut, and then maybe—if I was putting away the linen or something up there—I'd hear you laugh, and then him laugh, and then maybe the piano playing."

Beatrice flung up her head and swallowed. But she did not speak.

"The very day you were took sick," pursued Nelly, "I come into the library, just before dinner, and he was sitting there all alone, and his eyes were brimming with tears. It sort of went to my heart——"

She paused, her own eyes filling. Beatrice felt as if teeth were tearing at her.

"I says to him that we were all sorry," Nelly resumed. "And he says to me, that way he does, you know, sorter smiling, 'I'd have been glad to see a little girl of hers running around here, Nelly,' he says, 'because Mrs. Challoner would have loved it so much. She's very motherly,' he says. 'But the only thing I care about is that she gets well,' he says," Nelly finished, wiping her eyes.

She looked at her mistress, but Beatrice's young face was adamant.

"I'll get my coat, I won't be three minutes," the maid said hastily.

"Hurry, then," Beatrice said, sitting down. She waited, in a fever of impatience, her eyes on the clock, until Nelly had had time to get well out of hearing. She had felt vacillation, irresolution, a few minutes ago, leaving the bright warm orderly dressing room, hearing the fresh soft autumn rain pattering on the porch outside.

But she was determined now. To stay would be to soften, to feel herself breaking, yielding. She would not do that. Quietly, noiselessly, she slipped from the room and went swiftly down the broad central stairway, and opened the front door and let herself out. The street car was two blocks away, down the hill. She started toward it gallantly, carrying her suitcase lightly and easily. But before she reached it a cruising taxi came around the corner, and Beatrice hailed it.

“There’s a New York train from the North Central, that makes up here and pulls out about four o’clock,” she said breathlessly to the driver. “Can you make it?”

“What time have you now, lady?”

“Nineteen minutes to four.”

“Oh, sure, we’ll make it easy,” the man assured her.

Beatrice settled back in the smelly cab, which was odorous of wet leather and tobacco smoke and warm rubber. A sudden peace descended upon her spirit; she felt confident and exhilarated and adequate.

She crossed the station with a springing step, a tall slender figure in a fur coat, with a beige hat pressed down over red hair. Her gloved fingers handled change and tickets easily. Car Twenty, compartment D. Thank you.

The room was made up—it seemed an absolute haven of peace. The bed was neat, smooth, quietly lighted; there were hooks for her coat and gown, a paper envelope for her hat, and a hard, firm, heavy door to shut her away into a zone of quietude and comfort.

The mood of confidence, of exultation, lasted until she got into bed. She had flung a new magazine into her suitcase, and she turned its pages slowly, studying advertisements of dogs—of boarding schools. Occasionally, after the train had started, with hardly more than a sigh, she snapped up the tense little curtain and looked out at flying factory lights, and streaks that were small towns.

Beautiful houses in this magazine. A California Spanish house, with balconies and patio and iron grilles. If everything had been different, she and Hugh might have lived in such a house next year. She had sometimes dreamed of such a year, and that they would take Nelly with them—just in case. . . .

“Nelly, there is no question about it! Mr. Challoner wants me to see some good doctor in Santa Barbara——

“This boy’s a Californian, aren’t you, Anthony? We named him for my father. My father was Dr. Anthony St. John, you know. Yes, we were in California when he joined us. . . .”

Happy, silly dreams! The dreams of a child, or a fool. No, not quite that. They had been neither children nor fools, she and Hugh, when they had bent over the plans for the Kreutzmann Memorial, up there in the sitting room, while the soft spring winds blew scents of earth and lilacs and new, milky

grass in through the opened windows, and the dream college had raised itself, arch by arch, tree-shadowed tile roof, and creamy-walled cloister. Not quite fools, then!

Well, that was over. And it was all Hugh's fault. She hoped—with a little firm setting of her young mouth—that Hugh was satisfied!

"Love!" she said aloud, scornfully. "That's not love. That's just—I don't know what!"

But she had lost her serenity, her sense of security and triumph. She was suddenly very much frightened by what she was doing. This was a crazy thing to do, certainly, to rush away from the situation, as if she had been afraid of it. No matter, it was done.

Hugh's mother had always been most kind to her, and his sisters, too. A wretched way to repay them, to run away—with a wild idea that in some way she could make a living in New York—she could write, she could sell something . . .

Terror shook her. The events of the evening seemed already ages past, as if the waters of life had closed over them. Grown up, indeed! She had nothing in common with that red-headed girl who had put on the blue velvet gown for the Lambert dinner dance. . . .

Beatrice looked about the neat, serviceable little room, with its racks and mirrors and switches. Her fur coat swayed slowly to and fro with the swift motion of the train; there was a constant racket and jar about her. The train reached a country town, lights flashed in at the crack under her window shade, and a crossroads bell set up a mad ding-dangle.

She would be in Hoboken, the porter had said, at seven twenty-five. In New York about twenty minutes later. A terrible city to be alone in. A city like a machine.

Beatrice's heart began to hammer in fright. She could not look backward; it was inconceivable either that Hugh should overlook this escapade or that she should stoop to ask him to. But what lay ahead?

She could not even remember, now, what all the trouble and uproar had been about. Hugh and Bert and Aileen—in that stuffy, horrid little room—and voices . . .

"Yes, but why didn't I just explain to Hugh? Tell him what Bert and I have been up to? It would have spoiled the surprise, but then everything is spoiled anyway. Anything—anything would have been better than this!"

Perhaps this was exactly what Aileen had hoped would happen, she reflected. Perhaps Aileen had hoped that she would run away, blacken her own name, and do her best to besmirch the Challoners' good name. Just the one thing that they would find insufferable, the unforgivable sin. Publicity and gossip and scandal, and connected with Bert, too.

Suddenly the full horror of the situation swept over her, and Beatrice sat up in bed, cupping her chin in her palms, breathing hard, staring into space.

"Why, I can't do this! I can't do this! What am I doing? Everyone'll know in the morning; Hugh'll telephone his mother—and then they'll all know! I must be crazy! Why, if I were Aileen's friend, if I were playing her game, I couldn't do it any better than this!"

She rang for the porter. He presented a sleepy head at her door.

"Porter, I've had to change my plans. Is there any way I can get back to North Underhill tonight?"

"To No'th Und'hill *tonight*? No, ma'am—there ain't any mo' trains tonight to it!" said the porter earnestly. "It's most five now, and you goin' to be in Hoboken in two hoaws."

"I see." She knew all about morning trains from New York. People were always coming up on the flyer, at nine, and getting into town at about noon. Noon! Noon tomorrow seemed eons away.

But there was no going back.

She put out her light and tried to sleep. It was impossible, and when the train finally pulled into Hoboken, on a grimy, cool autumn morning, Beatrice was fully dressed again, and had not even closed her eyes.

This was her third visit to New York. She had come once on business for the firm, with Marcia—a thrilling experience. That had been more than two years ago, in the delicious springtime, when all the parks and streets and shop windows had reflected the glory of the season.

The sisters had stayed at the Philomel, and had breakfasted at a near-by Childs, and had walked the pleasant streets, fascinated and happy, buying Mummy little presents, riding on green omnibuses, and going to the theater in the evening, after conscientious bathing and dressing of hair.

The second visit had been with Hugh, early in the summer—only a few months ago. Moon had driven them down, that time, and they had of course stayed at the Chatham, where the Challoners always stayed, and there had

been flowers in Beatrice's big rooms, and callers, and all sorts of excitements.

"We'll come down next winter, and hear some opera, Bee," Hugh had said.

A pang almost physical in its sharpness smote her at the memory, and she put it from her deliberately.

This was New York, into which she emerged, at the top of this steamy-smelling tube, a cold, bright, hard, unfriendly New York, with a dirty wind blowing under the high framework of the elevated train. Crowds surging this way and that; into subways, out of subways, in and out of office doorways. Newspapers already adrift in the streets.

"Where to, lady?" the taxi-man asked.

"To the Philomel Hotel." He had never heard of it. She knew it was in the East Forties somewhere—near Lexington. . . .

. . . Oh, Marcia, so sure of yourself, so adequate, so protective toward a little bewildered sister—oh, Hugh, with your gloves and your worn fat wallet, your positive easy manner in the big restaurants, and your delight in your companion's delight—where were you now? . . .

The Philomel hadn't a spare inch. But they could send her to the Toggenburg. . . . Here, boy, take the young lady's bag, and get her a taxi. . . . Beatrice got into the second taxi with a new fear gnawing at her heart. "The young lady's bag." Of course, she was married, she had been married more than a year, and yet—at twenty-two, one didn't look especially married. . . .

Another rather gloomy hotel foyer, with plenty of colored glass to brighten it. Palms. The elevator shot her up to the seventh floor; she walked into a room. This would do nicely. Thank you.

The boy opened the window a crack, set down her bag, and went away. Beatrice sat down on the edge of a perfectly comfortable and perfectly clean-looking bed. She experienced all the despair of a lost child.

"This is awful!" she said, aloud. She opened her bag and put some brushes and bottles on the flat, bare bureau. A pincushion had "Toggenburg" embroidered in red thread on its white cotton cover; the towels had that, too.

Clean, stringy white curtains were at the window; through its clean panes Beatrice could see only the backs of large buildings.

After a while she went out, locking her door, and down the street. She walked to Madison Avenue, trying to remember why she had been angry at Hugh. Well, because he had—he had——

Oh, Hugh, Hugh! Why aren't you one of all these thousands of men, to let me talk to you—to take me home again!

A cold wind blew along the avenue. Winter was coming. Winter. Beatrice, feeling dazed and cold, stopped at a shop window and stared at its display.

But she did not see it. She was beginning to see her own life for the first time, its romance and its tragedy. She had been only a little girl, a little more than a year ago, bewildered by the story-book prospect of a marriage with a rich man more than twice her age. She had known nothing of men, nothing of life and of her own heart. She had been like a little dream wife, loving, eager, responsive, unexacting. Knowing nothing of passion, she had never felt its absence in herself.

Now she was awake. Or rather, she had begun to awaken weeks ago, under Bert's youth and ardor and adoration. And awakening, she had stumbled blindly out of Paradise.

"I've had no breakfast, that's why I feel so giddy!" Beatrice reminded herself. "I'll go somewhere——"

Near by was the Roosevelt. She and Hugh had breakfasted there, on a hot early summer morning, and he had said that of all his trip to New York, he always liked that moment best. . . .

She went in. A waiter bowed to her, and she followed him. . . .

Two men were breakfasting together at a table near by; or rather were talking together in low tones while they awaited their breakfast. Beatrice looked at them, and then left her guide, and went to their table, and looked down at them.

"Hugh——" she said, in a faltering voice.

CHAPTER X

After that a great many things happened rapidly; Beatrice clung to Hugh's arm, and watched them from the weary depth of a divine content. The strange man, who had been writing things on a card, relative to a red-headed young lady with a pigskin suitcase, pocketed a check, beamed with satisfaction, and remained to eat both breakfasts.

Hugh guided Beatrice out to the hotel entrance—and suddenly fascinating New York was fascinating again, the shops were glittering and gay, and the crowd was friendly—and they took a taxi and were at the Chatham before he would let her say a word, or would even look at her.

And here they had their own enormous old room, with its three great windows into Forty-ninth Street, and boys were running to and fro with flowers and newspapers and trays again, and presently, just as the clock struck nine, and the wind died down, and the sun burst out over the city in full glorious force, there was delicious hot coffee and grapefruit and rolls waiting, and they were alone.

Hugh put his arms about her then, and said, in a whisper:

"My God, my God! I have you back again. I have you back again!"

Beatrice began to cry for sheer happiness and buried her face in his shoulder, and Hugh took his fine big soft pocket handkerchief and gently wiped the tears away. There were tears in his own eyes.

"Hugh, I have to tell you! I'm so sorry——"

"Oh, Beatrice—Beatrice—don't! It was all my stupidity."

"No, no, it was mine!"

"Well, let's have breakfast," he said, with a shaky laugh, "and then we can talk."

She sat down, and it was as if the last few troubled months had been wiped away, and they two were on their first happy visit to the city again.

"I'm so happy!" Beatrice breathed, closing her eyes.

"You can imagine what I am."

"Hugh, were you on that train? The train that makes up in North Underhill and leaves at four?"

"No, but I thought you might be on it."

"But how——" The miracle of it! The miracle of security, after even this short taste of desolation. "How could you possibly guess that, Hugh?"

"I telephoned Mother—I came in just after you left, by the way, and met poor Nelly coming downstairs, almost frantic. So I telephoned Mother, and of course you weren't there. Nelly called two or three big hotels, and I changed as fast as I could——"

"And made what train?"

"No train. Moon drove me. Or rather, I drove Moon."

His face grew grave at the recollection, and she drew a deep breath.

"One hundred and thirty miles since four o'clock this morning, Hugh?"

"It wasn't the distance. But what I was thinking—what I was fearing! My God, what an awful sensation, Bee! Black night, and rain, and you somewhere—somewhere in the world. The feeling that any minute might be the minute you needed me—the feeling that even while I was asking at one place for you, you might be within a few feet of me, walking away!"

"I know," she said in a whisper. "I know."

"We got into the city at about eight, and I telephoned the Chatham,—no news. I couldn't think of any other hotel you'd be likely to go to so I got in touch with an agency—a detective—and put him on the search. His very first question," Hugh said, marveling, "was whether you had ever been to the city before, and where you had stayed."

"So you would have traced me anyway!" she exclaimed, glad that it was so.

"Oh, yes!" But his face was serious still. "There are a good many things that might have happened to you first, Bee," he said.

"I know," she said again, meekly.

She had finished her breakfast, and now she went to one of the big deep chairs, and wheeled another near to it, with a touch of her foot, and beckoned to him.

"Come here and sit down, Hugh. I have to talk to you."

"And I to you," he said, joining her. "And first," said Hugh, holding her hands in his own—"first you must promise me never, never to do this again! Another time, just come to me frankly, and tell me what's wrong, Bee—I'll

help you—I'll do anything! Only, don't make me suffer again as I did last night."

"I promise you!" she said in a whisper, salt tears on her face.

"I blame myself for this entirely," Hugh began again, presently. "You couldn't see how things were drifting—I could. You never suspected how—how that poor boy was feeling. But I knew!"

"No, it's true," she said, widening her honest, childish gray eyes upon him. "I didn't know, Hugh. I thought it was all fooling. And I had no idea how deep it went!"

"Not with yourself, either, Bee?"

Her candid look met his with unalarmed surprise.

"Not with myself? How do you mean?"

"I mean," he said steadily, "that I want you to be happy."

Beatrice could only stare at him in simple bewilderment.

"You surely don't think—you can't think that I'm in love with Bert?" she finally stammered, the color flooding her cheeks.

"Would it be so strange, Bee?" Hugh asked, smiling.

"Yes, it would. It would be extraordinary!" she exclaimed promptly, indignantly. And forcing herself to look at him, with her cheeks burning, she added, "You don't believe that—that nonsense that I talked when I was angry last night, Hugh?"

"No, no, I knew that that meant nothing, Bee," he hastened to assure her. "But—shall I tell you what I've been thinking for weeks and weeks now?" he asked.

"If you like——" she began cautiously, suspicion still in her eyes.

"I've been thinking this, Bee: that you were only a little girl when I married you, and that I—who loved you more than anything on earth—had been the one to hurt you most."

"Everyone says that I was a little girl!" Beatrice said, a little resentfully. "I wasn't such a little girl. I was twenty. My father's mother married when she was fifteen, and had thirteen children, and nobody seemed to think she was such a little girl."

“You were a little girl, just the same,” Hugh said, with his wistful, watching smile.

“I was very stupid,” she conceded gloomily. “I never knew—I never suspected!—how Bert felt until a few weeks ago, a night out at Spy Lake, Hugh, if you remember? You were dozing, and Bert came below the porch ____”

“I remember it perfectly!”

“Well, that was the night that I—knew. But it didn’t seem so bad to me, Hugh,” she rushed on eagerly, “because it was perfectly safe for Bert to—to care for me, because——” She stopped short.

“Because what?” he asked, watching her.

“Well, because, after all, I am married!” Beatrice protested stoutly. “I was sorry—I was even cross at him, Hugh. But I felt that it was perfectly *safe*!”

“And then when did you begin to feel that it *wasn’t* perfectly safe?” Hugh said in his kindest, most natural voice.

Her eyes widened again.

“When did I feel that it *wasn’t*?”

“Yes.”

“For Bert?”

“Well, and for you.”

“But—but it was always safe for Bert as long as I knew—as long as *I* didn’t care!” she stammered.

“Yes. But then when did you begin to feel that even for you it wasn’t safe, Bee?”

“Why, but—but I never didn’t feel that it wasn’t!” Beatrice exclaimed. “That—that ought to be negative enough!” she stammered with a nervous laugh.

Hugh was too deeply concerned to concede it more than an anxious smile.

“You never—were troubled—by what you felt for Bert?”

“No! No! I can’t seem to make that clear to you,” Beatrice complained, speaking patiently at first, and then with sudden heat.

"Well, it's what I *want* to think, dear." Hugh laughed briefly, without enjoyment. "It's what I want to think, God knows!" he said, fervently. "But—but then you *didn't* have tea with Bert at the Arms? Last week—whenever it was——"

"Yesterday!" Beatrice supplied. They stared at each other a moment.

"Was that only yesterday?"

"That's all!" she answered the question. "Yes, I did, Hugh. And I telephoned him at your mother's, to be sure that he came to the Lamberts' horrible party," Beatrice admitted. "But it was because——"

She stopped short and looked at him a moment, a puzzled expression on her face, as if she did not quite know how to proceed. Then she suddenly left her chair and went to the big davenport that faced the green ferns in the fireplace.

"Hugh, come here," she directed, patting the seat beside her.

When he was seated there, she took his hands. Her earnest face was close to his own.

"Hugh, here's something you don't seem to understand," she said. "I'm—I'm married to *you*. I'm *your* wife. I adore *you*."

He laughed a little, shamefacedly, and his kind eyes filled with tears.

"Bee, you mustn't talk to me that way, my dear. You'll break me all up!"

"I never thought of any other man's admiring me, and it wouldn't have made any difference if I had!" Beatrice pursued, steadily. "You talk about my being a child! Well, I *was* young, I *was* inexperienced, I never had been deeply in love, or thought of myself as particularly—what shall I say?" She floundered, half-laughing and half-vexed. "I hate the word sex, I hate the word passion—but you know what I mean?" she finished.

"I do know what you mean!" Hugh agreed. "It is one of the things that makes me——" He paused, and shrugged eloquently.—"It is one of the things that makes you the wonderful person you are!" he said humbly.

"This summer," Beatrice went on, narrowing her eyes, staring into space, "suddenly I woke up. I realized that I was a woman, and that there were a lot of things in the world that I had sort of—well, taken for granted, that I had to lose or to hold. I just——" She looked at him innocently—"I just—came alive," she explained youthfully.

“And did Bert have something to do with that, Bee?” Hugh, listening attentively, asked presently, in a silence.

“Oh, yes, it was because of Bert!” she answered unexpectedly, unhesitatingly.

“I see.”

“I don’t know that you do,” Beatrice said, with a speculative look. “But anyway, it was because Bert liked me so much——” she was continuing, when suddenly a more animated look came into her eyes, and she interrupted herself. “And why *shouldn’t* he like me?” she demanded, with spirit. “I was right there under his feet all the time, I was his stepmother, you were most anxious—you *know* that, Hugh,” she broke off to say accusingly, “you were most anxious to have him like me, and to have me like him; you would have been heartbroken if we hadn’t liked each other——”

Her argumentative, reproachful tone was irresistible. Hugh burst into the sort of laughter with which, a few hours ago, he might have fancied himself done with forever.

Beatrice looked at him, still injured, her reluctant answering smile only faintly sympathetic.

“I went out of my way to make Bert Challoner like me!” she said, aggrieved.

“I didn’t see it,” Hugh explained, sobered and repentant. “I only saw that he admired you tremendously, and that it was making a man of him. I only remembered that I am more than twice your age, and that he was your natural companion—your playmate——”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake stop talking as if I were trotting about in a romper, with a sand shovel, Hugh! If you’d *listen* to me——” Beatrice pleaded.

“Go on, dear!”

“Well, the time came when I did see that Bert had gotten—” she dismissed it superbly, with a shrug—“had gotten a sort of boyish crush on me,” Beatrice continued. “At first I was going to tell you, because I thought it might please you——” She hesitated, eyeing him squarely.

“*Please* me!” Hugh said faintly.

“I thought it might. If I had a daughter by a first marriage, and she got a terrible case on you, I’d be perfectly delighted!” Beatrice said firmly.

"It's impossible for you to conceive of jealousy," Hugh murmured, as if to himself.

"Yes, and it's impossible for you to conceive of not being jealous!" she retorted. "But anyway, when I did see that Bert liked me, and that I had a sort of—well, influence over him," Beatrice pursued, modestly, "then I thought of something I could do for you. I thought, 'The one thing Hugh wants in this world is to have Bert happy and busy!' And I began to talk to him, about pulling himself together, and amounting to something——"

"I saw it!"

"Well," she conceded more moderately, "I thought I did. And then the great—the great surprise came," Beatrice finished, eyeing him with a sort of quiet childish triumph infinitely charming.

"What great surprise?" Hugh asked, elevating his eyebrows.

"This is what we were going to tell you at Mrs. Lambert's, if you hadn't gone so—so crazy, Hugh," she upbraided him. "And perhaps if Aileen hadn't been there," she finished, with a faint, thoughtful frown.

"And what is it?"

"Why, that Bert tried for the Kreutzmann Memorial Prize himself!" she announced, momentously.

"Bert—*what*!" Hugh said feebly.

"Bert himself—all alone—drew plans for the Kreutzmann!" Beatrice said, triumphantly.

"How do you mean?" Bert's father asked sharply.

"Well—well," her words began to tumble out eagerly. "He talked to me about it—oh, months ago. He's done plans. And he has some really wonderful ideas in them, too, Hugh!" Beatrice said enthusiastically, reading aright the skeptical look in the older man's eye.

"Bert!" Hugh said again, stupidly.

"Yes!" She was youthfully elate. "Hugh, didn't you ever guess?" she demanded.

"Guess! Good heavens!"

"I say that Bert did it all alone," Beatrice amended, suddenly serious. "He didn't—quite. Young Fairfax—who was with you in the business for a while, and then went into interior decorating?—helped him. They weren't

any such plans as yours, Hugh," she hastened to say. "But really—really they were remarkably good! And much, much cheaper, Hugh."

"But money wasn't a consideration," he reminded her, with the artist's quick jealous sensitiveness.

"I know it wasn't. But it can't help influencing the committee, don't you think?"

"I suppose so." But he was not thinking of what he said. There was the dawning of a fond, proud, amazed smile in his eyes. "You mean that Bert actually submitted plans, with the rest of us?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! That was our secret," Beatrice said simply. "They were very simple to draw," she went on. "He just had a big open square of buildings all joined, two stories high, and a sort of mansard, and an enormous big court—three hundred and twelve feet square, with oaks and flower beds and tennis courts and everything in it, inside the court. The four corners were four big gateways, with four statues of women above them. We had a terrible time getting the women!" Beatrice said, seriously.

Her tone made him laugh again.

"Because, you see, if they were great, they seemed to be—pretty immoral," Beatrice explained delicately. Hugh laughed again.

"Not Joan of Arc, Bee!"

"Oh, no! We got her, of course. And then we suggested George Eliot and Emily Dickinson and a lot like that!" she said carelessly.

"Not a bad idea——" Hugh said slowly.

"Oh, Hugh, I wish you could have seen those plans—well, you *will* see them," Beatrice went on, animatedly. "They're so *plain*. Not the little darling jumbled Spanish streets of your plan, with the roofs all lapping over each other, and the arches—but *plain*. But they're good, Hugh!"

"They *sound* good," he conceded, pondering.

"And now do you see why I hid your plans, Hugh?" she asked.

"No," he answered, still bewildered, looking at her patiently.

"Why, because I'm your wife, and because your happiness is the one thing in the world I care about," Bee said. "And I believed that Bert's plans would have no chance against your plans!"

“But—my dear child—my dear child,” Hugh stammered. “You couldn’t destroy all the plans that were to be sent in! Why, almost five hundred firms, all over the world, are competing for this prize!”

“I know it,” she agreed calmly. “But none of them will be as good as yours!”

Hugh smiled, but it was a shaky smile, and he put his hand over his eyes suddenly, as though the pleasant big room, with its twinkling breakfast table and its flowers and sunshiny windows, hurt him.

“You—you little idiot!” he said thickly.

“I know I am!” she assented, a little timidly, not quite sure of his feeling. “But—but I did it suddenly, Hugh, on an impulse—just looking at them, and thinking how wonderful they were!”

“I see!” Hugh said.

“It would—it would make you happier to have Bert get it, wouldn’t it?” Beatrice asked, encouraged. “It would mean work for him, Hugh, and success, and that he was proud of himself——”

“I see——” Hugh said vaguely, looking at her.

“You’d said over and over that you didn’t care a rap about it!” Beatrice reminded him, faintly anxious.

Instead of answering, he narrowed his eyes on her penitently.

“Bee, I’ve been such a fool!” he said.

“We’ve all been fools, more or less,” she conceded. “But Hugh, I couldn’t be humble—I couldn’t be patient—last night, with Aileen smiling at me so triumphantly,” she pleaded.

“No, no. I see that. I was wrong!”

“I was an idiot ever to think that stealing your plans would get us anywhere!” she said. “But then last night, Hugh, when you were so cold, so cruel to me,” Beatrice went on, “something just seemed to snap in my head—I went crazy. I hadn’t failed you, I *hadn’t* done anything wrong, and to have you suspect me—to have you think——”

She was getting excited again.

“I’m so sorry, Bee!” he said simply.

For a minute she was silent, her fingers tight in his, her shoulder against his, and her eyes averted.

"Hugh, something happened to me in that room, last night," she began again suddenly. "Something that took my soul right out of me, and twisted it, and put it back again—one great, enormous ache.

"I came alive——" she said, in the silence.

"There, in that study," her voice went on presently, "I knew what you meant to me. I was—suddenly, Hugh, jealous. More jealous than you've ever been, I think! I hated Bert, because he was your son, because you'd adored him from the first moment of his life. I loathed Aileen, because she is one of your oldest friends—because she was Alice's friend. I thought of Alice, and it suffocated me."

She had twisted about to face him; her face was tragic.

"Bee, my dear—my dearest!" he said. "Can you conceive of anything so absurd, so fantastic as that you should be jealous of *me*!"

"I am, though," she said, decisively. "In that one moment—whatever it was, Hugh, I knew that I was—that I am—your wife," she said timidly, feeling her way with words, trying to make him understand. "I realized then that I had been cheated, either because I was so much younger than you, Hugh, or because of some lack in me," she said; "cheated out of all the pangs of—of true loving, the anxiety and jealousy and suspicion. And I knew then that never again could I take it all for granted—as I've been taking it for granted all this year—my big room, that is your room, too, and my name, and my place always beside you——"

"Why, Bee! Why, my dearest!" he stammered, as she was stopped by tears.

"Do you—do you understand me?"

They looked at each other.

"I think I understand that you are trying to tell me—that you love me, Bee," he said, clearing his throat.

"In a new way. As a wife. Not as a very much spoiled baby."

"Have it that way, then," he agreed, after a long look that brought the color to her sensitive face.

"And——" She glanced about the room. "We are on our honeymoon," she stated.

Hugh did not answer. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees and locked his fingers tightly across his eyes.

Beatrice stood up and touched her lips to his dark hair.

"So that," she said, "is that."

"And we don't care who wins the Kreutzmann, Bee?" Hugh asked, looking up.

"We don't care about anything but each other, and having tea upstairs in my sitting room, and going down to the lake, and dining with your mother on Sundays! Oh, but listen——" Beatrice broke off suddenly. "Today's the day! We didn't look! The awards were to be in the paper today! The Kreutzmann Memorial, Hugh," she added, as he looked at her, and her sudden change of mood, blankly. "The judges were to send a sealed decision to the papers last night! I forgot it."

"This is the day, sure enough!" Hugh agreed. They were tearing wildly through the papers now.

Beatrice found it first.

"Hugh Challoner, he's got it!" she gasped.

"Bert?"

"Bert! Oh, Hugh, he's got it! It says you, it says Beatrice and A. Houston Challoner, of the firm of Challoner, Fairfax & Flint," Beatrice went on, in a puzzled voice, "but it must mean Bert, for your plans didn't go in!"

"Let me see——" Hugh was reading it with her. "Well, by golly, that's right!" he said, in what was strange emotion and excitement and inelegance, for Hugh.

"It means Bert——" Beatrice suggested.

"I suppose," Hugh said, looking off the paper—"I suppose we shall come to the end of these revelations some day, but it seems unlikely. You see, Bee, it may mean me. My plans *did* go in."

Beatrice let go her hold on the paper and sat down. Her perfectly expressionless face was turned toward him.

"Your plans?" she stammered.

"Yes. Let me explain: about three weeks ago—just after I had found the plans—Philo Applewhite called at my office. Applewhite, you know, is one of the judges in the contest. Philo's a very old friend of mine; we studied

together at the Beaux Arts. I had told him a long time ago that I intended to try for the prize, and he came to find out why I had not competed. I told him the whole story, although, then, I thought it was Bert who had—— Perhaps I was bitter, I don't know. At any rate Philo insisted on taking my plans along with him. He asked me if I would swear to the fact they had been completed by the specified date; I told him I had not touched them since the day they were found to be missing; that was in early September, as I remember, five days before they had to be sent in. Philo seemed a good deal upset about what I had told him, and while assuring me that nothing would be repeated, he gave me to understand that he would explain to his colleagues, the other judges in the contest, that some unusual circumstances had prevented me from getting my plans in by the stated date."

"Hugh, and you never told me!"

"I didn't think they had a chance, my dear—that the judges would give them the slightest consideration, but evidently—" his voice could not suppress a note of pride and satisfaction, as he looked again at the paper —"they did," he finished simply.

"And do you mean—do you mean—" her face was white; she made a gesture of her shoulder toward the paper—"that you've won?" she gasped.

"It—it looks like it, dear!"

She was on her feet, her arms about him.

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh, I'm so proud of you!" she sobbed, bursting into tears. "I'm so proud of you!"

"But—but you just thought Bert won," he protested bewilderedly, "and you didn't care!"

"Oh, Bert!" She laughed, and wiped her eyes, and choked again. "It's over—the Kreutzmann contest," she said, in an awed whisper. "And you've won! Hugh, can you believe it?"

"No, I really can't, and that—that we're happy again," he admitted, with his artless, kind smile.

"And now, what do we do, Hugh? Can't we—go home, and see your mother, and have them all congratulate you?" Beatrice asked, childishly blowing her nose, and wiping her eyes again, and looking at him expectantly.

"Congratulate *us*. Yes. We'll go home now." Hugh came over to her chair and knelt down and put his arms about her, and she rested her hand on

his shoulder, so that their eyes were close together. “Never, never to make you unhappy any more!” he said, earnestly, humbly.

The gray eyes smiled with Beatrice’s new wisdom.

“Oh, yes, you’ll make me unhappy again,” she said, “and jealous, and anxious, and furious! We’ll worry over children some day, Hugh, and I’ll have pneumonia, and you’ll have typhoid fever. I’ll like people you don’t like and you’ll like—Aileen,” she submitted, with a sudden sparkle of mischief.

“Never!”

“But that——” She laid her fragrant cheek against his, her voice was rich with content.—“That’s marriage, darling,” she said, wearily, exquisitely, dreamily.

“That’s heaven!” Hugh added, slowly.

At about seven o’clock that night it was raining again in North Underhill, and Bert, coming quietly in at the side door of the old Challoner house, the door that opened into the pantry hall, was spattered and damp with the rain.

He saw Nelly there, fixing violets and primroses in silver bowls.

“Any news?” Bert asked.

“There’s all the news in the world,” said Nelly, placidly. “They got home at six; five minutes after you was here before, and anything like the laughing and running around there was in it, you never see. They’d stopped at your grandmother’s, and they’d had time to buy these——” Nelly indicated the flowers that were making the whole room smell sweet.

“Home, eh?” Bert said, blankly.

“I asked Mrs. Challoner was she tired,” Nelly went on inexorably, “and she just went off in a gale! ‘What would tire me?’ she says. ‘Well,’ I says, ‘dancing all night at the Lamberts’ ball for a senator,’ I says, ‘and streeling off into the rain at four o’clock in the morning—maybe that would tire you,’ I says, ‘and maybe not!’ ‘Oh, no,’ she says, as quiet as you are this minute, Mr. Bert, ‘I went down to the city,’ she says. ‘And Mr. Challoner and Moon come down and brought me home!’ ”

Nelly gave a laugh of triumph and relish. Her comparison had been an apt one, and Bert remained perfectly quiet, deadly, palely quiet, watching

her. She put some snipped stems of primroses into a pail and wiped the silver bowls one by one with a white cloth, glad only of an audience, not noting him at all.

"However, she wanted dinner upstairs, and Emma built them a good fire, for it's going to snow, if you ask me, and the paper said, 'Heavy storms with wind and possible snow,' " Nelly resumed. "So she fixed herself all up there on her couch, like she loves to do, and they had this lamp on and that one out, and then that one on and the other off, until you'd die at them! And then nothing would do but Mr. Challoner had his jacket she give him for his birthday on, and his slippers, and him in his chair, and her brushing her hair all over her head, like one of them Eyetalian dolls—and all this while the greatest laughing going on—mind you."

"What—what did she wear, Nelly?"

"That white woolly thing, and the silk cover he give her—would you hand me that vase, Mr. Bert? They're going to have dinner up there," said Nelly, "but will you be here? For maybe——"

"No, I'll not be here. You see, I've got a new job, Nelly!"

"I heard you saying something about it."

"It's in Boston, you know."

"For heaven's sakes!—Wouldn't you think they'd hold their heads up, and not lop over like string," Nelly muttered, of the flowers.

"I'm dining with my grandmother tonight," Bert pursued, "and off tomorrow morning."

"Well, it isn't Europe, anyway," Nelly said politely.

"No. I couldn't go—to Europe," Bert answered. She did not hear him. She called Emma to help her carry the vases upstairs.

Bert went out the side door again. He stopped in the wet autumn garden and looked up at the line of lighted windows overhead among the thinning branches. His father's room, and then the square dim light of Hugh's dressing room, and then six glowing corner windows in a row, all in Beatrice's upstairs sitting room. Inside were firelight and lamplight; Hugh deep in his leather chair, weary and happy and waiting for dinner, and Beatrice—radiant, wrapped in woolly white, her bare feet showing under the light silk cover—Beatrice brushing her mass of silky copper curls into an aureole, like that of an Italian dolly. . . .

Bert stood in the wet garden a long, long time. The rain was cold and light and sparse—already turning to sleet. It was pattering audibly on the packed wet leaves under the old trees; suddenly all the lights bloomed into radiance, up and down the decorous streets, unfriendly, wintry lights tonight, twinkling through sleet.

After a while he turned up his collar and turned toward his grandmother's house, a few blocks away, and began to walk rapidly, his head sunk between his shoulders.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Younger Sister* by Kathleen Norris]