

**LOVE PASSED
THIS WAY**

By Martha Ostenso

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BOOKS BY

MARTHA OSTENSO

Wild Geese

The Dark Dawn

The Mad Carews

Young May Moon

The Waters Under the Earth

Prologue to Love

There's Always Another Year

The White Reef

The Stone Field

The Mandrake Root

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By Martha Ostenso

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LOVE PASSED
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Chapter I

NEW YORK had fetched out of the sunlit blue one of those gilded mornings that cause people disembarking from a southern cruise to wonder why they had ever dreaded their return home on March first. The taxi drive from the pier to her apartment on Bank Street had so exhilarated Mary Hallard that she had been glad no one had been with her to spoil it with banal remarks.

Caroline and Ted Reade had radioed their regrets at not being able to meet the boat—Ted was laid up with the grippe and both of the children had measles. Medford Giles, in his message, had said characteristically that he was wet-nursing a stillborn play out in Chicago, but that he'd be back at once. Reporters had met the boat, of course, with their retinues of news photographers, and Mary Hallard had said glowingly, "Yes, indeed! I'm convinced that we can count on the friendship of our South American neighbors."

The cab drew up before the green door with the brass knocker, and Mary was surprised at the flutter of excitement that first glimpse of it stirred within her. It was not as though anyone waiting in that house mattered vitally to her. There was nothing waiting there, really, except her typewriter and the clean sheets of paper always greedy for more work. Was it possible that at the age of thirty-one she was settling down to the kind of sublimation she had seen in older women, unattached, who wrote to live—or lived to write, according to their individual providence?

Could it be true that an apartment furnished and maintained by herself in a small remodeled house on Bank Street, in Greenwich Village, gave her now an old-maidish thrill of possession? Possession—when once the idea of possession had meant racing a prairie wind over limitless green pastures that you thought were really your own, when you were a kid! No, Mary Hallard decided swiftly, she was not one of those sublimating women. Not quite. She could almost wish she had been. Material things; a cushion to bring forgetfulness . . .

People help you with your luggage when it is enveloped in fawn suede. Reverentially the taxi driver made two trips up the flight of stairs, while Mary's colored maid and her young secretary burst into the hall with their exclamations of welcome.

"What a gorgeous tan you have, Miss Hallard!" Susan Hastings cried, as soon as Mary had laid aside her fur coat and hat. "You look simply wonderful—and so rested!"

"You sho' does, Miss Mary!" Irma beamed. "Did you have a grand time?"

"It was marvelous, Irma. But it's good to be back again." Mary looked about the room and smiled. "You've got everything polished within an inch of its life!"

Irma grinned. "I kep' thinkin' you might be bringin' somebody along from the cruise. I knows about them boat trips, Miss Mary. I took a cruise one night to P'keepsie, an' I ain't had my freedom since."

"Some people have all the luck, Irma," Mary laughed. "I wish you'd take my bags in and unpack them."

"Yes, Miss Mary." Irma lifted the bags and bustled happily off to the bedroom.

"And how's everything, Susan?" Mary asked her secretary.

"Oh, just fine! Your new book got a flock of dandy reviews in the Sunday papers."

The girl started toward the desk, but Mary sank into a big chair in front of the fireplace. "Don't bother about them now," she said. "I'll look them over later. I had a radiogram from Mr. Frobisher. He says the book is starting out very well. No mail of any importance, I suppose?"

"Nothing much. There's a pile of fan letters and requests for contributions and autographs and what not. I put them in the desk drawer. Here's a clipping from Dolan's column yesterday."

It was only a brief paragraph:

We understand that Mary Hallard of “Balcony in Heaven” fame is returning this week from a cruise in sunny waters. She is timing her arrival nicely, for we also hear that her new novel, “Hunger Dance,” is already among the best sellers.

“And here’s another Who’s Who blank to be filled in,” Susan said. “It came this morning.”

Mary looked up and saw the girl standing at the desk, the long brown envelope in her hand, a curiously wistful expression on her pale, thin face. Susan had been doing part-time work for Mary Hallard during the past year and a half. She lived with an older sister, a disillusioned soul who had been recently divorced from a worthless husband and was now eking out a living in a beauty shop on Union Square. Most of Susan’s time, Mary knew, and most of her energies—to say nothing of her money—were being spent on courses in a dramatic school.

“Those things seem to come around almost every month,” Mary said, stretching luxuriously. “I’ll fill it in later. I’m going to be lazy today. How are things going at the school? Are they going to make another Helen Hayes out of you?”

There wasn’t much humor in the girl’s smile as she turned from the desk. “Oh, I—I’ve been working so hard, but I’m so small and I haven’t much looks and some of the other girls are so clever that I—”

“I *thought* you looked kind of peaked,” Mary said. “You’ve been overdoing it.”

“No, it isn’t that. But when I saw that Who’s Who blank this morning, I couldn’t help feeling futile. Some people—you, for instance—you’re so talented and beautiful and—and you’ve got everything! I haven’t—”

Mary laughed. “Do you know what I’d give just to be nineteen again?”

“Yes, I know, but—”

Mary felt a warning twinge of discomfort as she looked at the girl, and then suddenly Susan burst into tears.

“What on earth, Susan!” Mary was on her feet, throwing an arm about the girl’s shoulders. “Has something happened?”

Susan shook her head. “No, nothing. But—Harry wants me to marry him.”

“You mean that nice brown-eyed boy who came here for you one afternoon a couple of weeks before I went away?”

“Yes. We’re terribly in love, but he’s only making thirty dollars a week, and my sister says I’d be a fool to give up all my ambitions now. She—she

did that once, and now she's divorced and has to make her own living, and I —" The rush of words was suddenly interrupted by another freshet of tears.

"Quit bawling!" Mary commanded.

Across the girl's shoulder she saw piece by piece the furnishings of her own living room. Why in the world should she be reminded at this moment of Medford Giles' description of this room when he first saw it? He had flung out his hand mockingly, as though he were indicating a stage set, and had said, "Decor, old ivory and rain-blue; maple furniture and hooked rugs; bookshelves built in on either side of a wood-burning fireplace; deep chintz-covered chairs and couch; a branch of white dogwood against an indigo screen; a pleasant but modest setting for a beautiful woman who could have much more if she desired it. And why does she not desire it? Damn it, Hallard, why won't you marry me? You and I could do great things together!"

A strange feeling had come over Mary that day as she looked at him and saw—actually *saw!*—not Medford Giles at all, but another—so young, so tormentingly different.

Mary shook herself back to the moment. There was no dogwood at present in front of the screen, and no Medford Giles standing before the fireplace, but otherwise the scene was the same. That other, so young, so different, stood there again, taunting her with his slow smile, daring her to speak.

Well, she *would* speak! "Listen, Susan," she said. "You marry the boy if you really love him. Don't let your sister or anyone else stop you. There's nothing more precious in the world than young love. You can still come to work for me, mornings, and keep house for Harry the rest of the time."

Susan was wiping her eyes and smiling. "I know we can get along on what he's making, especially if I'm able to help."

Irma came from the bedroom, beaming broadly. "Everything is hung up, Miss Mary," she announced. "I left the packages on the dresser." Her round face shone expectantly.

"Thank you, Irma. You might bring me the packages, please."

From the bedroom, Irma brought two small boxes, one containing perfume for Susan, the other a string of gay native beads from Brazil for Irma.

There were grateful exclamations, and Mary said, "Well, all right, now. I won't need you for anything today, Susan. I'll spend the time getting settled. Come back tomorrow morning. And you too, Irma. We won't bother with

dinner tonight. I'll eat out somewhere. And we'll all start in tomorrow as usual."

Chapter II

WHEN MARY was alone, she stood looking through the window to the little court and its single ailanthus tree. Not budding yet, of course. Bare and gray, straining toward a patch of sky.

The telephone rang. It was Medford Giles. “Lovely Mary,” he said, “welcome home!”

His voice was mellow with just the proper degree of urgency; not too eager, yet provocative enough. The voice that had contributed as much as his famous profile to the magnetic personality that had drawn hordes of drama lovers to his performances before he left the stage nearly eight years ago to give all his time to the writing of successful plays.

“Why, Medford! I thought you were in Chicago.”

“And you here? Don’t be absurd, my dear! I’m at La Guardia Field—just stepped from the plane. How soon can I see you? I’ve got to talk to you. Something very important, darling. I came back especially—”

“What’s it all about? Can’t you tell me—”

“Not over the telephone, sweet. Wire tappers and such—*you* know how careful we have to be these days. But how about cocktails at my place this afternoon? There’ll be some others hanging about, but you and I can sneak away from them.”

“But Medford, I’ve just landed back home!”

“Listen, darling, this is positively the most brilliant idea I’ve ever had. Can’t you make it at five o’clock?”

“At five, then.”

“Good! And it’s grand to have you back again. Cheerio!”

One would have to be something less than human, Mary thought as she turned to her desk, not to be kindled by Medford’s enthusiasm. She picked up the Who’s Who blank and spread it out before her. This it was that had moved Susan to an admission of her own futility. This paper had brought tears to Susan Hastings’ eyes.

Self-pity was the most ignominious of emotions, Mary reminded herself, and she glanced again about the room that vouched so substantially for the fact that she had much to be grateful for. “Any time you get tired writing best sellers, Mary,” her friends said, “you can go in for interior decorating and make a million. Your ancestors must have been in the business.”

Yes, she might have replied, her great-grandfather had whitewashed a tar-paper shack in South Dakota, and when it was torn down and replaced by a three-room frame house, her grandfather had decorated those rooms with brown wrapping paper from the general store in Red Willow Junction. Those doings were hearsay, but she herself could remember when her father and mother had papered the farmhouse walls after the two-room extension was built. The paper was the cheapest advertised in the mail-order catalogue, excessively green and yellow. She had been five years old then, but she recalled vividly her parents’ efforts to beautify the house with that wallpaper—especially the suffocating smell of homemade paste, and the exciting event of her father’s falling off the stepladder and spraining his ankle so that her mother had to finish the job while he sat and intoned sonorously from his battered volume of Shakespeare.

Interior decorating, indeed! As for writing best sellers . . . Her first novel, “A Balcony in Heaven,” had appeared five years ago and had made quite a stir. That book had derived from her knowledge of the poor she had worked among while she was in social service in New York. The critics had complained flatteringly, “This cannot be from the pen of a young woman of twenty-six!”

A second book, brief as a drop of acid, had come out of her stay with a share-cropper’s family in the South. She had called it “First the Root,” and it had been puzzling and disquieting enough to make people discuss it over good dinners. But it was her third novel, “Hunger Dance,” just published, to which she pinned all her hopes for a place in the sun.

“An author’s third book is the real test,” old Cyril Frobisher had said when she went to him with the completed manuscript. And now they were waiting . . .

Mechanically, Mary Hallard slipped the questionnaire into her typewriter. Full name . . . Occupation or profession . . .

All at once she felt infinitely weary. Why hadn’t they sent two of these things while they were at it—one for the truth; one for the lie? It would take only a few minutes to fill in those spaces with data to make up the fictitious history of one Mary Hallard, born of the fiercely bitter imagination of a girl of seventeen. She had done it before—only to be irked by a task that should have been gratifying, but gave her merely a sense of falseness and shame.

She could ignore it, of course. There was no law against throwing the thing into the waste-basket. What did it matter who she really was; who her parents really were?

Yet in this world one needed an origin, it seemed. Had anyone ever looked for the birth certificate of Mary Hallard, daughter of James Hallard and Ella Martin, of Minneapolis, Minnesota? And had the curious one been mystified at finding that no such person had ever been born; no such parents ever existed? The distance between Mary Hallard, of Greenwich Village, New York, and Minella Hanks, of Red Willow Junction, South Dakota, was so great that even Mary Hallard’s best friends had never heard of Minella.

Well, let Minella Hanks fill in the questionnaire with ghost writing that nobody would ever read!

Full name: Minella Ardis Hanks. Born on Father’s farm, one mile from Red Willow Junction, South Dakota, May 12, 1909.

The Hanks homestead consisted of one hundred and sixty acres: wheat, oats, barley, rye; pasturage east of the farm buildings; a cottonwood wind-break, and a willow scrub fringe flanking the creek because James Hanks was too sentimental to root it out. The neighboring farmers jeered at him. Crazy stunted willows, where he could have had wheat growing right up to the creek’s bank! They had laughed at him—but that was before the black, stinging, dust-freighted winds came; that was before James Hanks and his maundering preachments had gone to the grave; that was before James Hanks’ wife Ella was dead; that was before his daughter Minella had become Mary Hallard through a swift and violent metamorphosis, and had at last found her way to New York City.

He had never been meant for ordinary farming, that visionary, James Hanks. It would have been hard to say, at that time, what he was meant for. He preferred to stretch out on his back in a grassy corner of a field and marvel at the nachre tints in the clouds of an April sky rather than go on with his plowing. He would rather sit in the shade of the cottonwoods on a scorching August day, whittling a beautiful wooden chain out of a dried ash limb, than hitch up the sorrel mare and drive over to Peterson's to dicker for the use of a threshing machine before his crops burned up. As who wouldn't, for that matter?

On Saturday night, when the problems of life became insupportable, he was commonly to be found in Fry's saloon, playing pinochle or discoursing flamboyantly on all the ills that flesh is heir to, until he was either left there on a bench to sleep it off or escorted home by some less befuddled crony.

By the time Minella was six, she knew that her father was the buffoon of the county. She did not know that word then. But the people of Red Willow had their own homely epithets which they used freely when they spoke of James Hanks. Fool, loafer, big mouth! The children of the town laughed at him when he strode down Main Street in his snuff-brown suit and homemade shirt, his straw hat set cockily on the back of his head, his big thumbs hooked high into his suspenders, his proud, dramatic nose lofty in the air.

Minella's mother, a knotted string of a woman who toiled early and late, was too mortified by her husband's conduct to have anything to do with the town except when she brought her butter and eggs to the general store. Ella Hanks had thanked God that He had seen fit to bless her with only one child.

At six, Minella owned a frightened wisdom far beyond her years. She had heard her father holding forth on street corners about the folly of the war in Europe, when she knew he should be at home repairing the silo. On one such occasion, she had heard him declare that he was all for President Woodrow Wilson, and some town wag had retorted that it was a good thing Wilson didn't know it. Two drinks would remind James Hanks of a line from Aristotle, but they failed to remind him that the cows had to be milked and the pigs fed.

Minella knew little of other children. She had seen York Clifford—the only son of John Clifford, who owned the model farm a mile south of the Hanks place—ride by on his way to and from school, Prince Charming on a piebald pony! A few children, older than herself, had come past the farm to fish or paddle in the creek, and she had shyly accepted their invitation to join them. But underneath the willows that overhung the creek, they had

held a whispered conference and then had asked her point blank if her father was *really* crazy.

That was why she was deep in the pigpen making ragweed wreaths to encircle the pigs' ears when her father called her that morning in September, at half past eight, to tell her that he was taking her to school in Red Willow Junction.

Minella hid, face down, among the tall ragweeds. In her loneliness, she had always pretended that the weed patch was a deep, mysterious jungle, where tigers and lions might leap out at her without a moment's warning. Now it was a haven, a sanctuary from that ghastly thing called "school."

She felt her father's hand, very gentle upon her thin shoulder.

"A person must go to school, Minella," he said sadly. "It is the law of the land, it seems. They teach nonsense in schools, but you can keep the good and toss away the bad. It'll be better for you in the end, no doubt. If I had gone on, I might have amounted to something. You might have been proud of me. I want to be proud of you someday, Minella."

She did not dare look up. In the sound of his voice there was something very like tears. But he spoke again, suddenly. "Come on, Minella; get up from those weeds and get ready for school!"

She scuffed to her feet then and raised her eyes. There were tears streaking down her father's cheeks. She hurried to him and wrapped her arms about his legs.

"I—I'm no good, Minella," his voice muttered above her. "I've got some ideas—good ideas, but I've no pot to stew them in. Come on, girl; you've got to get more learning than I've been able to give you!"

He had taught her the alphabet. She knew that ten and ten made twenty. She knew that Shakespeare was the greatest poet who had ever lived, because her father had told her so. And now he was telling her that she must learn more than he could ever teach her.

She put her small hand in her father's big one and walked with him to the house. Her mother washed her face and hands and gave her a dinner pail that contained an apple, a roast-beef sandwich and a hard-boiled egg. Her father hoisted her into the seat of the old buckboard and climbed up after her. He gave the whip lightly to the sorrel mare and set out for Red Willow Junction.

It was that little girl, though no one else knew it, who went to Medford Giles' cocktail party that afternoon.

Chapter III

FROM the penthouse overlooking the East River, the city to the southward was a towering, fantastic erosion of stone in the sunset. But Medford Giles' guests were too accustomed to the sight to give it more than a nod on their way to cocktails in the white leather, black lacquer and chromium space which was all but solid with people.

They were the kind of people who lounged ostentatiously upon gaining admission a second time through the portals of the great. They assumed a faintly bored air, lest it be suspected that hobnobbing with fame was not their wont.

Mary paused in the doorway and looked in upon them. She knew some of them. There was Aaron Small, who made a cult of eccentricity, and had been hailed as the American Gauguin by some of the lesser critics. There was Hilda Ferris, a copier of antique jewelry, a flat-chested New England spinster, with slate-colored eyes. There was also Olive James, past mistress of sardonic verse and the inspiration of New York's risqué quips of the hour.

Mary looked for Medford Giles. He was beyond reach at the moment. A group of adoring young females had taken possession of him in a far corner of the room. Stage-struck youngsters, Mary guessed, and turned aside. Poor Medford! He could fly into an eloquent rage at the mere mention of anyone aspiring to the stage, but he loved adoration. For all his later success as a playwright, he was still a matinee idol at heart.

Aaron Small's voice reached Mary above the babble. "What does it mean? It means that I'm ascetic—I'm myself! Isn't that the answer?"

No one replied. A young man sat at the piano, improvising softly. "This is silver silver, this is golden gold . . ."

Words and music scabbled over Mary's senses. Perhaps it was because she had been away from this sort of thing for some weeks, but everything seemed unintelligible, slightly insane.

"Mary!" She turned at the sound of a soft voice.

"Charles!" Charles Britt was one of New York's veteran literary critics. "How nice to see you!"

"Can I buy you a drink?"

He led her to the revolving, built-in bar at one side of the room. A moment later they were seated near a window, cocktails in their hands.

"When I was very young," Charles Britt said, "I made it a point to turn up at four or five of these affairs every week, during the season. Then, for about fifteen years, I shunned them. Now, at a ripe old age where I might be expected to know better, I'm back at it again. I find a cocktail party almost irresistible. Can you account for that?"

Mary smiled at him as she sipped her drink. He was probably close to sixty, but he looked older. His mind was perhaps the shrewdest among the literary critics of a whole generation. Many books had scored a temporary success in spite of his acid reviews, it was true, but a word of praise from Charles Britt was a warrant of success for any book. He had paid a wary tribute to "A Balcony in Heaven," and had written a cryptic paragraph or two on "First the Root"—almost as if he were suspending judgment, awaiting some more reliable proof of maturing talent before he committed himself.

Before leaving her apartment Mary had glanced over the reviews Susan had clipped from the papers, but none of them was from the pen of Charles Britt. She had not been disappointed. She had even felt relieved. She was frankly afraid of Charles Britt. She would have bitten her tongue out rather than ask him how he liked anything she had done.

"Maybe you fancy yourself becoming a glamorous old rake, Charles," she said innocently. "You have all the makings."

He chuckled. "You think so? Well, I have no such ambitions, my dear. I have given the problem a good deal of thought lately. And I think I know the answer. The fact is, I'm getting to the place where I hate to be alone. It's ghastly!"

His wife had died years before Mary had come to know him, and there had been no children. But she had never thought of him as a lonely old man.

“Why, Charles, you have more friends than anyone I’ve ever known,” she replied in surprise.

He drained his glass and set it aside. “You’ve been to South America, I hear,” he said.

“I got back just this morning.”

“They have you in the evening papers—proclaiming the spirit of brotherly love that unites the nations of the western hemisphere.” His eyes sparkled with amusement.

“They ask questions, and you have to give the answers.”

“Of course. How long were you away?”

“Nearly two months. And it was wonderful!”

“No doubt. I didn’t know you had gone until Caroline Reade told me. Ah—running away from something, were you?”

His glance, though half humorous, was so penetrating that Mary felt stripped. Just what did this shrewd old man know about her? The question sped through her mind. She struggled to regain her composure.

“Away from my new book, perhaps,” she laughed carelessly.

He ignored that with a sigh. “Maybe I’ve been hoping there *was* something—something that would catch up with you one day and never let you go again. I’ve read the new book. Most of the other boys printed their raves in the Sunday papers. I’ll have my say a little later. There’s something about you that eludes me, Mary. I can’t quite make it out.”

Secure again, she smiled and gave a slight shrug. But deep down the old voice, the old fear, cried out within her: Ah, York, York! I want to tell you everything. I want you to know that I am not as bad as you think I am!

From behind her, Olive James’ voice came across a momentary lull: “And if his wife hadn’t shot him on the day his book was published, it wouldn’t have sold a thousand copies!”

It was then that Mary saw Medford Giles coming toward her.

“Hallard!”

“Now, look here, Giles,” Charles Britt spoke up, “I’m on the point of finding out something that has been keeping me awake nights for the past ___”

“Sorry, Charles,” Medford interrupted, “but I’ve been waiting all day to have a talk with this young woman. It’s important. I’ve come all the way from Chicago—”

“Run along,” Britt said. “I’ll see you later, Mary.”

“How many of these people do you really know?” Mary asked as Medford steered her to the glass enclosure he called his conservatory, which led out upon the flagstones of his lofty court. A few plants and trailing vines did make a certain verdure.

Medford shrugged. “Who really knows anybody? Here—sit down in this chair and draw a deep breath. I have a shock for you.”

Mary smiled. “You’re not going to propose again, Medford?”

“One thing at a time, darling.” He sat down opposite her. “Look—I’ve read your new book. I got the advance copy you had Frobisher send me. I read it the day before I left for Chicago and immediately sent it to Morris Ransome, the producer. He’s looking for a new play for Kitty Blaine.”

“You mean—”

“Just a minute, darling. Ransome talked to me on the phone yesterday. That’s why I landed in town this morning. I had lunch with him and spent two hours talking it over. There’s a great play in your book—it’s made to order for Blaine—and you’ve got to help me write it.”

“Help *you*?” Mary frowned at him.

“I know. I’m not usually modest about my work, but for once—I’ve got to be. I *need* your help. I had an outline ready to show Ransome this afternoon, and he’s excited about it. He wants a look at the first act as soon as we can throw it together. I promised to show him something by the end of next week at the very latest. We’ve got to get busy, darling. Are you with me? Will you chance it?”

“Chance it!” Again her words echoed his, but with increased excitement now. “A play! Do you really think—”

“Will you be ready to go to work at it on Monday?”

“Medford, I’m thrilled to the bone! I’ll start tonight.”

“That’s settled, then. Now—forgive me for not asking you all about your trip. I had to get the play off my mind before I could talk about anything else. But you’re looking simply luscious—and more ravishing than ever! How about stepping out to dinner with me tonight? We can talk about everything.”

“I’d love it.”

“I’ll get rid of this crowd in half an hour.” He glanced through the doorway. “My God, why do I do these things?”

Mary laughed. “But *how* do you do it? You got in this morning, had lunch and spent two hours with Morris Ransome, and by five o’clock you

have a houseful of guests.”

“Isn’t it astonishing! I don’t know where they come from. I invited ten people over the telephone, opened the door—and there you are. One sweet creature asked me where she was five minutes after she got here. Actually! And I’d never seen her before in my life.”

Mary was aware of someone in the doorway behind her.

“Hel-lo, Evelyn!” Medford called, and got quickly to his feet. “Come out and meet Miss Hallard—Mary Hallard, you know. This is Evelyn Chadbourne, Mary. Evelyn and I worked together—oh, years and years ago!” He put his arm about the shoulders of a dumpy little woman in her sixties and smiled down at her. “You were a grand little trouper, Evelyn. You won’t mind if I leave you for a minute? I have to keep an eye on the party inside. I’ll see you later.”

“Medford’s such a dear!” Evelyn Chadbourne beamed as soon as he had gone. “And so clever! He was always wonderful to work with.”

“You were on the stage, Miss Chadbourne?” Mary asked.

“Oh, my dear—all my life!” she sighed. “In the days when the theater meant something. You’re not—”

Mary smiled deprecatingly. “No. I write for a living.”

“Ah, a writer! I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

“Mary Hallard.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” The name apparently meant nothing to Evelyn Chadbourne, and Mary felt a sense of relief. “I do a lot of reading now. For years—” She looked at Mary for a moment in silence. “Why, Mary Hallard! Didn’t you write—what was it? ‘A Gallery—’ ”

“You’re thinking of ‘A Balcony in Heaven,’ ” Mary said.

“Oh, my dear! And that was yours? You wrote it? Why, I can’t believe it. I read it four times—but *four* times! It was a work of genius, my dear. A work of genius!”

“Don’t you think it’s a little chilly out here, Miss Chadbourne?” Mary asked quickly. “Let’s go inside, shall we?”

Chapter IV

A WORK of genius!

It was when she was twelve years old, in 1921, that Minella Hanks happened to overhear two of her teachers in the school at Red Willow Junction discussing the children in their classes.

“There must be brains somewhere in the Hanks family,” Miss Petrie said. “That child of theirs has the earmarks of genius.”

The only marks Minella’s ears bore at that moment were those caused by the flaming humiliation she felt on behalf of her father and mother. But she knew Miss Petrie must not be embarrassed by discovering that she had eavesdropped, so she stole to the cloakroom to get her hat and dinner pail.

James Hanks, by that time, had become something more unique than a clown who couldn’t make a decent living out of a good farm. During the war years he had spent hours writing letters to the state legislature, railing against the farmers who plowed up the last square foot of their land to produce wheat, stripping the earth and leaving the topsoil defenseless, so that they might have their crops of automobiles and player pianos and bathtubs. James Hanks was quite crazy, as any sensible farmer could have told you in those days. Now, although prices had slumped from over-production, people still saw no intelligence in James Hanks. At twelve, Minella was bitterly aware of that, and that worry showed like an old root in her mother’s face.

Through the years of her growing, she had also been aware of York Clifford's face shining with boyish pride whenever he was in the company of his own prosperous, dignified father.

"My dad's a swell guy!" he seemed to say. "No foolishness about him!"

York himself was stretching out tall and strong, and around his straw-colored head there existed, in Minella's imagination, a small halo of sheer joy. But she hated York Clifford, even though he was Prince Charming! Even though he said "Hello!" gruffly when he met her, and then gazed sternly off into distance as becoming a person of his age and station.

Those were years of torture for Minella, especially at school, where the children singled her out as the daughter of "loony" James Hanks. She wore dresses made out of remnants that did not always match, and coats cut down from those donated by the minister's wife, for whom her mother did sewing now and then.

But it was when she was barely fourteen, at the end of her first year in high school, that the really ghastly thing happened.

June had come in hot, and the evening of the graduation exercises was one of those which the prairie sun seemed still to hold under its stifling power, even though the stars were out.

The whole school, from the sixth grade upward, had been included in the program of the great occasion, and there was no escaping the ordeal. Minella's mother had made her a lawn dress flowered with forget-me-nots, the color of her eyes, and had put her chestnut hair up in rag curlers the night before, stretching her scalp so tight that she scarcely slept a wink. But the catastrophe that would have kept her awake anyhow was Mrs. Nichol's shoes.

Out of the kindness of her heart, the minister's wife had brought Minella a pair of high-heeled, high-laced white canvas shoes, scarcely worn at all because Mrs. Nichol had developed a bunion. Minella had accepted them with tragic thanks and was forced to wear them when her father drove her into town for the commencement exercises. Her mother was too tired to go along. Besides, she had no clothes fit to be seen in among "nice people."

Minella's father let her out in front of the school, promised to be back in good time to hear the program and gaily waved to her as he drove on into town. Standing alone at the school gateway, her white shoes stuffed with paper so that they would stay on her feet, Minella looked after him with a sinking heart. When he was jaunty like that it usually meant that he was up to no good. At funerals, weddings, political meetings, or even at auction sales and church picnics . . .

People were crowding in at the wide-open door of the schoolhouse, but Minella stole around to the side and in by way of the gymnasium. She was almost safe in the empty hallway at the rear of the auditorium when appeared as if out of nowhere Lucille Kellog, the banker's daughter. Lucille, who was in Minella's class although she was a year older, wore nice little white kid slippers with straps across the insteps. She stared at Minella's feet in wonderment.

Minella was thin and wiry, whereas Lucille was soft and pink and plump. Minella drew her lips back across her teeth. "Well, what are you staring at?" she asked.

"Why—why—" Lucille's little mouth fell open in terror at the deadly blue of Minella's eyes. "Nothing—honest, Minella! I was just—gug-gracious, don't hit me!"

"I couldn't be bothered," said Minella loftily. "Mrs. Nichol gave me these shoes, if you want to know. I had to wear them because she's going to be here tonight, and she'd feel hurt if I didn't. Now, would you like to say something about it?"

She stamped away, the high heels making a grim echo in the empty corridor.

On the stage sat the eleven graduating students, while Mr. Twamley, the principal, ensconced behind a desk at the right, bent upon them a benevolent eye. Minella sat with her classmates in the second row of the auditorium, her feet tucked as far as possible under the seat.

She wished bitterly now that she had acted on her impulse to feign a toothache so that she might have stayed at home. In her forget-me-not dress, her chestnut curls a satiny cascade over her shoulders, she was as pretty as any girl there, but she would rather have gone barefoot than shod the way she was. And what a story Lucille Kellog would have to tell about the shoes!

Minella fixed hot, miserable eyes on the stage, on the six girls and five boys who sat there staring rigidly ahead, the girls in white with corsages of sweet peas, the boys in navy blue with stiff white collars. But of all those eleven solemn young faces, Minella saw only one. That was the face of York Clifford, the class valedictorian.

He was more than that, Minella thought, her childish resentment toward him having somehow vanished. He was even more than Prince Charming; more than Galahad. Eighteen, six feet tall, gray-eyed, with a smile like the sun rising over the prairie, he was the greatest quarterback the Red Willow high school had ever had. And in the fall he was going to the State Agricultural College. His maternal grandfather had been of the "landed

gentry” in England, and a sense of the land was deep within him. His father was the only man in the county, moreover, who had not laughed at James Hanks’ views on soil conservation.

But it was not of these things Minella was thinking as she heard the rustlings and murmurs about her and felt the tense, awed excitement. She was thinking that nothing would ever be the same again, now that York was going away. He wouldn’t be riding past the Hanks farm in his white sweater, khaki breeches and brown riding boots. For although the Cliffords had an automobile now, York still preferred the saddle.

One memory especially she cherished. It was the memory of a day the previous fall when she had been walking the mile home through a cold rain, and York had reined in beside her, smiled down and said, “Hop up, kid!” And there she was sharing the saddle with him, clinging to the pommel while his arms were about her! Her heart had throbbed so that she could say nothing until the Hanks gate appeared out of the rain. Even then she had to swallow hard to get out a word of thanks for the ride before shyness overcame her and she dashed toward the house.

Mr. Twamley was rising from behind his desk where lay the eleven diplomas tied with blue ribbons. A hush fell upon the auditorium. Miss Coulter, the teacher of music and sewing, struck the piano in the opening bars of the school hymn, and everyone rose to join in singing “To Thee, O Lord, we dedicate . . .”

It was all very solemn and impressive, but when York Clifford came forward to deliver the valedictory address, Minella thought her heart must burst from the magnificence of it. A pallor shone under his tan, but he stood straight and fearless and tall, his head high and his voice ringing out like a clarion call. When the applause finally broke deafeningly, York smiled and bowed and blushed and went back to his chair.

It was not until the last student had received his diploma that the frightful thing happened.

There was a commotion at the back of the auditorium, and all eyes turned to see what was causing it. James Hanks was careening down the middle aisle, waving his hat.

“Wait!” he bawled. “I have a word for you from the Bard of Avon!”

At the front of the room he halted, turned to face the audience, drew himself erect and in a tremendous voice intoned:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools . . .”

But pandemonium had already broken loose. Two men sprang from their chairs to grapple with James, but were sent sprawling. Now everybody was up, men scrambling over children, women crying out, girls hysterically laughing.

Minella had run down the side aisle to the hall door at the right of the platform. There, in the dimly lighted corridor, she encountered York Clifford, who had slipped out by way of the stage entrance and confronted her just as she felt herself fainting dead away.

Outside, in the school yard, she heard York murmuring words that were gentle and half laughing, but made no sense at all.

“Hey, now, you’re all right, Minella. It was too hot in there—no wonder you passed out. But you almost scared me to death, kid! Come on, now, snap out of it!”

“How—how did I get out here?” Minella asked weakly.

“I hauled you out,” he told her.

She began to tremble violently. York took off his coat and put it around her shoulders.

“You sit here and I’ll get you a glass of water.”

He disappeared, and Minella began to sob uncontrollably. If the strength had been in her, she would have run away before York returned. But waves of heat and cold kept rushing over her so that she was certain she was about to die.

He was back in an instant holding a glass of water to her shaking lips. “There, that ought to make you feel better.”

“Th-thank—you,” Minella stammered. “But don’t take me back in there. I couldn’t bear to see anybody. I—I—”

“I won’t, if that’s the way you feel about it. But listen here!” York spoke sternly. “Those fools should have let your father speak his piece. He wasn’t doing anybody any harm.”

“Oh, York!” Minella moaned. “You’re just trying to be nice to me. It—it was horrible! I can’t live—for shame! I’ll never go back to school—never!”

“Don’t be a nut! Your father—”

“He was drunk, York,” she whispered strickenly.

“Of course!” York laughed. “What of it?”

“Mother will die when she hears about it. Oh, I can’t bear it, York!”

“Cut it out, kid!” He pulled her to her trembling feet. “Come on, now; our car is out in front. You can sit in it till I get Mother and Dad. We’ll drive you home.”

“Where—where did he go?” Minella quavered faintly as York led her out through the school yard.

“He’s all right,” York assured her. “Fred Nelson said he’d go home with him.”

And then she was in the Cliffords’ car. York’s father and mother came out presently, and Mrs. Clifford put her arm about Minella and stroked her forehead.

“There’s nothing to feel so upset about, my dear. My own father did something much wilder when I was a little girl.” She laughed softly. “Why, he stood right up in church and told the preacher that he was a hypocrite!”

“A damned hypocrite, wasn’t it?” Mr. Clifford laughed.

“He called the poor man a whited sepulchre and a baboon!” Mrs. Clifford went on. “The men in the church had to throw him out and sit on him till he was quiet. Imagine that!”

In the front seat, John Clifford chuckled to himself. “Maybe you’d like to hear about *my* governor,” he suggested.

“Not tonight,” Mrs. Clifford replied.

The next day York and his mother left for a trip to California, and Minella did not see him again until he returned in July to help his father with the harvest.

Out of loneliness and young pain grows the dream, for these are the roots of beauty in the strong spirit. Minella Hanks would say that her dream had begun that time when she was a child, when she had known that she would love York Clifford beyond eternity; beyond the limitless purple that cradled the stars of the prairie summer night.

She knew when York came home. The next day she was swimming in the creek, alone as usual, when he came down from an adjoining field. For an instant she remained motionless and spellbound, so like a tall bronze god he seemed.

In the nick of time she was able to scutter to an overhanging clump of willows, from behind which she watched him while he knelt beside the cool running water, whipped off his shirt and sloshed his head and shoulders.

When he stood up again, he was tall enough to see Minella. He laughed in surprise.

“Hey, there! Spying on a guy, eh? I might have taken off all my clothes!”

Minella went crimson and crouched lower in the shallow water to hide her bathing suit, which was nothing more than an old calico apron that only partially covered her. It would be too mortifying to have York see her in this! But to think he suspected her of peeking at him was even less bearable.

“I was here first,” she said frantically. “And I wasn’t spying on you. I didn’t want you to see me!”

He laughed again, a wonderful, ringing laugh of youth and health and happiness, and thrusting his shirt-tail down into his brown drill trousers, he stepped closer to the overhanging willows.

His laughter vanished as he looked down at her, and in its place came a grave expression that made him seem older. “I didn’t know you were here, kid,” he said. “How’s everything at your place since I went away?”

He had asked the question with such delicacy that Minella felt her throat draw tight. “Oh, we’re getting along,” she said. “Pa’s experimenting with some new sort of wheat.”

“Dad was telling me. He says you’re going to have something the government will sit up and look at one of these days. James Hanks may be a famous man yet.”

Minella’s eyes flashed proudly. “Maybe. We’re not saying much about it.”

York grinned. “That’s the system, kid. Don’t let on till you’ve really got something to talk about.”

Minella’s throat felt full of birds’ wings now, beating up for air from the excitement of her heart. “He—he has been very good since you left,” she ventured shyly.

“Sure—your dad’s all right.” York smiled at her reassuringly.

“He sold a heifer the day after you went away and bought me a bicycle to ride to school on this fall,” Minella said. The money from the sale of that heifer should have been turned in on taxes, but that was none of York’s business.

“Swell!” he said. “Why not ride over to our place one of these days? Mother was asking about you last night. She’d like to see you.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll tell her you’ll be over,” he said quickly. “I’ve got to get back to the binder. But we’ll be looking for you. Take care of yourself, kid!”

He was gone then. She never dared accept the invitation to visit his mother, and after a while the summer was gone; the blackbirds were flocking and wheeling over the silvery stubble, gleaning the last fallen grains, and the crows were raucously cawing their farewells.

By that time York had left for the State Agricultural College, and Minella was back in school at Red Willow Junction.

Chapter V

MARY HALLARD stood before her pier glass and gave a last critical look at her sapphire-blue hostess gown and her soft chestnut hair done high on her head in a crown of curls, the handiwork of deft Philippe. Quite a step, Mary, she said, from Red Willow Junction and the rag ringlets of yesteryear!

Her mouth shaped a full red curve, but there was no joy in it tonight. Excitement, yes—and why not, with Medford Giles bringing Morris Ransome to visit her here in her own apartment this evening? She studied her reflection. A bit on the thin side, perhaps, but with a bosom high and rounded as if it might have been meant for—oh, such nonsense! She must put a stop to this old habit of ruining every new triumph by perversely comparing it to another sort of triumph that could never be—was never meant to be! “Memory of loss profiteth no man!” Who had said that?

Irma had drawn the window drapes, and there was an applewood fire going in the fireplace, but as Mary entered the living room she could hear the sleet scratching against the windowpanes. At home—back across the years—that had been a cozy sound while Minella Hanks sat doing her arithmetic with her feet in the oven of the glowing kitchen range. She put the memory firmly away, shivering a little as she thought: What a night for the great Morris Ransome to come calling on me! Perhaps he won’t come, after all.

But he did come, and when Medford Giles introduced him, Mary felt an inward flicker of amusement at the gloating expression on Medford’s face.

He might as well have put it into words: "This meeting is an event—and mine is the credit for it!"

Mary was amazed to find nothing impressive in Morris Ransome. He was almost egg-shaped, very bald, and timid-looking, unless you could see beyond the black opacity of his eyes. He was in his fifties, and Medford had told her that he had been producing plays for twenty years. There was a rabbitiness to the end of his drooping nose—which, Medford had already explained to Mary, accounted for his ability to smell out a good play at least a thousand miles away.

He spread his small, pink hands to the fire, and at once the timidity vanished from his face, giving way to a jovial, almost puckish smile as he looked at Mary. "Only for you," he said, "should I have ventured out on a night like this."

"Death rides this March night blast!" Medford declaimed.

But Morris Ransome was paying him no heed. He was still looking at Mary, his young-old eyes twinkling. "But for you—and what I have heard about you—I came," he said with an effort at gallantry. "And now, we shall sit down, eh?"

"It is dreadful out," Mary said, and she glanced at Medford. "We might have arranged for another night—"

Ransome brought his hands together in a hearty smack. "Another night? This is the night I like. When it is cold outside—b-r-r-r!—when here it is so warm, eh? In the street they are strangers; here we are friends. What does it matter we have not met before? We are already old friends just the same. That is because it is such a night, you see?"

Irma stole into the room and set a tray with a decanter and glasses on the coffee table. Mary made a gesture to Medford, and he poured a drink for each of them.

Seated on the couch, Morris Ransome held his glass up to the firelight. "It is a good night for talk, so I'll tell you something," he said. "It is something I do not tell everybody. You see, I am not Morris Ransome. Ha—even my very good friends do not know that. But I'm telling you. Who am I? I could tell you, but what does it matter? It is a hard name for Americans to say, so—I change it. Very simple, eh?"

Very simple indeed, Mary thought. If only her own reasons for taking another name had been as simple!

"When I come to America first I am a very young boy," he went on. "My father and mother are both dead—in Russia. But I have an uncle—my uncle Morris. He is my father's brother. So—he sends me money, and I come to

America. But my uncle is not in New York. Oh, no! I must go on a train three whole days—west of the Mississippi—before I find him. And so I live with my uncle. And every day I go with him into the country, buying and selling, buying and selling. We have a horse and wagon. We pay for things people do not want, and we sell them again to people who want them.

“It is very simple, eh? But we make money like that. We have hard times too, but we know all about hard times. And then, sometimes at night maybe we drive past a nice farmhouse—and it is cold and raining—and there’s a light in that farmhouse, and I’d like to go in and sit there. But my uncle always wants to go on somewhere else. That was many years ago. And now—you see?—I sit here where it is warm!” He chuckled and put his glass to his lips.

“Don’t stop there, Morris,” Medford urged, and Mary wished he had not spoken. A spell had fallen upon her, as if this little man were some disembodied spirit who had come into the room and thrown a cloud of forgetfulness over the present.

“I did not stay too long out there,” Ransome continued but somehow the magic had gone from his voice. “I came back here where my people are. But I have not forgotten. No! For six years I saw three states, I saw every town, I saw every farmhouse many times. I have seen the places in your book, Miss Hallard, and I have seen your people. And I cannot forget what I saw. So when I read your new book I can see, I can *smell* the land. And I say, ‘Here is something. Here is a play! I will do it. Maybe it will be a hit; maybe it will be a flop. Who knows?’ But I do not care. I know it will be good!”

He flashed a glance at Mary. “You see? You know now why I am glad to be here on a night like this? Maybe once I was really in that place you write about. That would be funny, eh? Maybe I have talked to your Bernice and her father and her mother. And maybe—is it a real place you write about?”

This was too much. Mary looked down at her slim, folded hands. “I came originally from the West, of course, Mr. Ransome,” she told him, “and I once lived on a farm.”

“You never told me that,” Medford Giles said.

“You never asked me,” Mary replied. “I was born on a farm. I have been back there since I left—to see how conditions have changed. But—”

“Maybe it is your own story you tell,” Ransome suggested.

“My God, Morris, a writer doesn’t need to have lived a story before writing it!” Medford protested. “She lives it *while* she writes it. What do you suppose an imagination is for?”

“So! Well, we will talk about our play,” Ransome said. “You have something done already?”

Imagination! Could imagination have given Mary Hallard all that Minella Hanks had known about the land; about its tyranny and its belated benevolence? Could imagination have drawn the picture of James Hanks, who lived and moved and had his being in the labyrinth of cross-fertilization and the tiny patches of ground over which he watched day and night?

The years following York Clifford’s graduation from high school had wrought an unbelievable change in Minella’s father. How the family had lived was a mystery to her even now, for they had little time to devote to harvesting a vulgar crop similar to that of their neighbors. There was time for nothing except the new wheat that was still little more than a dream in the mind of James Hanks. When the new seed was perfected, it would not only be impervious to rust, but it would have an opulent character never before thought of in wheat growing.

Except for the small experimental area where James spent his days, the land was worked for the most part by Minella’s mother and a hired man, Ben Anderson, with Minella lending a hand when she was home from school. Back-breaking labor, penury and debt were only the means to an end in those wonderful days when the dream was still alive.

A change had also come over Minella’s mother. Ella Hanks was happy for the first time in her life. She was passionately convinced that the husband she had once given up as hopeless was on the right track at last. If they could only hold out now! But it was a long, slow process, with one setback after another.

In the spring before Minella’s graduation from high school Ella Hanks took a chill in a rain-soaked field and died within the week. She must have known she could not live. Two days before she died she looked up at them with a white smile and whispered: “You two go on! You’re both going far—I know it!”

But Red Willow Junction by that time was satisfied that James Hanks was crazy as a coot—letting his wife toil in the fields until she had taken to her deathbed, while he puttered around a few square rods of ground where toothpicks sprouted!

George Kellog, the banker, was becoming increasingly impatient concerning the loan he had made James Hanks two years before. At last he warned James that he was no longer considered a good risk. Unless he did

something about his note before the coming autumn, foreclosure was inevitable.

Ben Anderson had shown what he was made of that night at the supper table. "I got a little laid away, Jim," he said when he heard of Kellog's threat. "It ain't much, but it'll be enough to hold him. And it ain't doing nobody no good layin' in a bank."

But Minella's father smiled. "Let the old skinflint sizzle, Ben," he said. "Thanks just the same. We'll manage."

He knew something that George Kellog didn't know. His work had been rewarded last August, and this spring he had seeded two acres in wheat that would make the county agent's eyes pop out when he saw it in head. The name of James Hanks would be written in gold on the tablets of agriculture henceforth!

Why should he worry about a note at the bank? It would be taken care of in good time. George Kellog, however, was skeptical. He constantly reminded James that the bank was being altogether too generous in extending the loan to the date on which the season's crops would be sold.

In June, Minella graduated with honors, sitting stiffly on the stage of the auditorium silently repeating the words her mother had spoken that day when her daughter and her husband had stood beside the bed. It was the only way Minella could keep from bursting into tears because her mother was not there.

The next day Mr. Twamley put in a word for her, and his brother-in-law, Mr. Penhollow, who owned the Penhollow Department Store on Main Street, gave Minella a job in the lace and trimmings, at nine dollars a week. Someday, she would have enough saved to see her through State Normal School, so that she could become a teacher.

York Clifford, home from college, was at work on his father's farm. During that first month of the summer, Minella saw him very seldom, and when she did he was usually with Lucille Kellog—at a band concert in the little park opposite the Methodist Church, or taking her to a Saturday night dance at the Odd Fellows' Hall or to a movie at the Dreamland Theatre. And Lucille's attitude toward York was always one of complacent ownership. It puzzled Minella that York's manner toward Lucille, on the other hand, was so airily nonchalant.

It puzzled Minella because Lucille was prettier than ever since she had begun driving over to the golf course at the county seat. Her adolescent chunkiness was giving way to smooth curves. She looked lovely, racing

down the street in her canary-colored roadster, her golf clubs rearing up smartly in the rumble.

Occasionally she dropped into the store to ask Minella for buttons or something equally trivial, or to riffle absently through the dresses and coats hanging on their circular racks. "Heavens, I simply must drive over to the cities one of these days and get myself some new rags. I'm not fit to be seen!" By the "cities," she meant Minneapolis and St. Paul, no mean distance away in those days, even in a canary-colored roadster. And if Lucille wasn't fit to be seen, Minella wondered who was.

But neither Lucille Kellog's arrogance nor the fact that York Clifford must be forever only a romantic vision could dampen Minella's spirits these days. For James Hanks' two acres of hybrid wheat were heading out in ineffable beauty.

The county agent had seen that wheat, while James stood by almost bursting out of his skin with pride. Then two other men had come from the experimental farm miles away, and they had rolled the large milky kernels of green wheat in their palms and had loosened the stems from the roots and stared and smelled and muttered in frank amazement. James Hanks walked on air and scarcely ate or slept from elation and agonizing suspense.

One evening after supper Minella walked down to the field with him, and the marvel of it in the setting sun took her breath away. She did not hear the Cliffords' automobile come to a stop in the road near by. She heard nothing except, in the stirred depth of her heart, the rich and patient growing of her father's magnificent wheat. She saw nothing except that miraculous trooping legion of silvery heads, with the streaming red glory of the low sun animating them into something that was not the yield of the soil, but the fruition of a man's long and passionate dream.

It was while she was standing motionless and tranced that York Clifford touched her arm. She started, frightened, and looked up at him with wide eyes. Hot color leaped into her cheeks. The mingled brilliance of earth and sky, of the silvery-green, softly breathing wheat and the crimson tumult of the setting sun, enveloped her, and it was so that York Clifford really saw Minella for the first time. He gazed at her speechless, and she grew aware of the odd tightening of his mouth and the pulse beating in his brown throat.

Their eyes unlocked, and York glanced confusedly away at the field. "It's wonderful," he said, a huskiness in his voice. "Your dad certainly has something here!"

"If—if the weather just holds," Minella managed to say. "But that's always the question, isn't it? Dad's getting thin—waiting. I don't know what

he'd do if anything happened now."

"It'll turn out all right." York looked toward the two older men who stood talking together, out of earshot. "It'll be the making of him. I hope we'll be able to get a few bushels for seed. Have you thought of a name for it yet? You'll have to register it, you know."

Minella flushed. "He and Mother talked about a name just before she—died. They both wanted to call it after me, but I'd rather have it named for my mother."

"Still, if she wanted your name . . . 'Minella'—that'd be a swell name for it." It sounded golden and flowing, the way he said it. He glanced down at her again with that look of almost angry surprise. The rapid beating of her heart was stifling. She fixed her eyes away from him at a night hawk sailing down across the pasture near the barn.

"Wouldn't you and your father like a glass of lemonade or cider?" she asked politely. She was glad she had brought home lemons today from the store. They were a luxury, but—

"Thanks, but we have a couple of men coming to see about some stock they're buying. We'll have to be getting back. Look, Minella." He hesitated, clearing his throat. "A cousin of mine is coming from the Coast to visit us for a couple of days. He's on his way to Chicago, but he'll be stopping over here next Saturday. I—Lucille and I thought we'd take him to the dance at the Oddfellows', Saturday night. How about coming along? We need another girl to fill out the foursome. And you'll like Ralph. He's a good guy."

"It's awfully nice of you to ask me, York," Minella said. "I've never been to one of those dances. But I've only got my graduation dress—" The white organdy dress, which she had made herself, would look more grown-up with certain alterations. She'd take the sash off it, and have streamers of blue ribbon looped down in bows at intervals from waist to hem, and she'd add material to the back of the skirt so that the front would be shorter and in style. . . . "It's such a simple dress, though—"

He interrupted her with a queer, remembering laugh, and his eyes grew dark as he searched her face in that rosy stillness. "You wore a funny little apron once—when you were bathing in the creek," he said. "Remember?"

"How could I forget it? I almost *died!*"

"Why? You were only a kid. It's funny how—"

His father called to him, and York waved a hand in response. "You're coming with us Saturday night," he said quickly. "Don't worry about your clothes. Wear anything you like."

“All right,” she promised. “I’ll be ready.”

Her father and John Clifford were walking back toward the Cliffords’ car.

“We’ll be round for you about nine o’clock, then,” York said, very businesslike now. “Good night, Minella.”

“Good night, York.”

She had said that. She had said, “Good night, York!” How sweet; how unbearably sweet! Throughout the next two days at the store those words and their hidden burden of meaning echoed wonderfully dear across prosaic thoughts of how many yards of lace Mrs. Thompson wanted for the wedding lingerie of her daughter Phyllis and what trimming Adelaide Horne should choose to match her summer jacket.

Of that Saturday evening, Minella remembered only one thing separately from all the whirling brightness, from all the jazz music and gay laughter. She remembered that she had danced three times with Ralph, but four times with York. There had been other dances in between, of course, with boys she knew. But *four* times with York!

Lucille’s patronizing smile meant nothing at all. When York danced with Lucille he talked and laughed. But when he danced with Minella he said nothing. He didn’t laugh. If he happened to look down into her eyes, he looked quickly away again—and fell out of step with the music.

“I’m all feet,” he apologized once. “And you’re light as a feather!” He gathered her close to him as he spoke.

She could believe that she was light as a feather, because her feet were with her heart on the silvery mist drifting through a world of stars.

She saw Lucille gliding by in rose georgette, blond hair cut in a bang and a modish fishhook pasted to each cheek. But Minella, in her homemade white organdy, her soft, waving hair brushing her neck, felt her heart beat in wild disbelief. For York Clifford’s arms were holding her close.

Presently there was “Home, Sweet Home,” and although York danced the waltz with Lucille, above her head his eyes were searching for Minella.

In the dressing room, Lucille indolently powdered her nose and said, “Well, I suppose a change is as good as a rest.”

Minella stared at her. “You mean Ralph?”

Lucille crimped her mouth into a smile. “I was thinking of York. I imagine he must have found you—different.”

The blood stung in Minella’s cheeks. “I’m sorry I—” She checked herself, and a wave of anger swept over her. “No, I’m not sorry I came. I’m

glad! It's the first time I've ever been to a dance. It's the first time I ever danced with York, and I'm not going to let you spoil it, Lucille Kellog."

Lucille started back in feigned surprise. "Minella, don't be so *obvious*! It was nice of you to come along, and I'm glad you had a good time. After working all day in the store—"

Minella snatched up her coat and ran from the room.

They drove Lucille home. Then, at the Hanks place, York got out of the car and walked with Minella to the door.

"If you're going to be home tomorrow," he said, "I may bring Ralph over for a while in the afternoon. I'd like him to have a look at your father's new wheat."

"We'll be home all day," Minella told him. "And—thanks for tonight, York. It was lovely!"

"We'll do it again sometime," he said.

Her hand darted out, and the pressure of York's fingers about it sent a thrill through her body so exquisite that she felt almost faint. Then she was in the house, where she stood leaning against the door until the stormy beating of her heart was quiet again.

Oh, York, York, I love you! I'll never love anyone else as long as I live!

Chapter VI

“THE trouble with you, Hallard,” Medford Giles declared the day after Ransome’s visit, “is that everything you’ve done so far has been a success. You’ve never known the meaning of failure.”

They were in Mary’s living room. It was almost noon. Morris Ransome had not left until three in the morning, and now Medford had come to tell Mary that all the work they had done on the first act would have to be thrown away.

It was bound to come sooner or later, she knew. She had heard weird stories of people who attempted collaboration. Last week the work had gone smoothly, too smoothly. With shrewd intuition, Ransome had torn the thing to ribbons. He and Medford had fought over it for hours, while Mary listened. She had gone to bed at last only to lie awake, racking her brain for solutions to some of the problems.

She was sitting at her typewriter now, and Medford was pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind him. Acting, Mary thought to herself; dramatizing himself because he couldn’t help it. And yet it was at just such times that Medford was often most serious. It was never easy to distinguish between the man and the actor in Medford.

She looked from her window at the March sky. For nearly an hour she had been arguing with Medford, and she was tired. “I really think you’d do better working alone on this play, Medford,” she said wearily.

“That’s what I mean,” he said angrily. “You run into a snag—and you want to give up. You won’t fight!”

“I’ll fight if I’m angry,” Mary retorted, “but I don’t like to get angry.”

Medford looked at her. “So you don’t like to get angry!” he said, then came and stood above her. “Someday, darling, you’re going to forget yourself. You’re going to be angry; you’re going to fight; you may even fall in love!” he ended.

She laughed. “Perhaps. But I don’t see what all that has to do with the play we’re trying to write.”

“Very well,” he said, suddenly composed. “We were discussing the scene with Bernice and her father. Let’s get on with it. You want to bring Susan on ___”

“I merely suggested it,” Mary reminded him. “I promised Susan I’d give her a chance to speak a line or two if—”

“Look, darling,” Medford interrupted, painfully patient, “I know your secretary is a sweet young thing. And she’s pretty. And she may be another Bernhardt. Let the gods take care of that. You and I are doing a play. We’re definitely *not* trying to find spots where sweet young things can walk on.”

“Certainly not, Medford. I’m sorry I suggested it.”

She would never have thought of it, in fact, if Susan had not spoken of it when she had finished copying the first act. “Oh, I think it’s thrilling!” Susan had gushed. “I’d love to have a part in it.”

Startled, Mary had said, “I hadn’t thought of that, Susan.”

“Of course not, Miss Hallard. But *I could* play Anna, Bernice’s sister. I know I could. It’s only a bit.”

Mary had not committed herself. “Have you given up the idea of getting married?”

Susan had blushed. “Oh, no! But if I could get a small part in a play like this—”

“Well, don’t count on it, my dear,” Mary had cautioned her. She was glad now that she had said no more about it.

“Let’s begin all over again,” Medford said; then hesitated. “But remember—what I just told you holds. You don’t know the meaning of failure, nor the value of it! And you’ll never be worth a damn as a writer until you do! Damn it, people *do* fail, you know, and it’s good for them. I could tell you about that myself. But they don’t give up, thank God! They go out and get drunk, and they come back and pitch in again. And most of them come through. Now, then, let’s see . . .”

Mary laughed softly to herself. So he could tell her about failure, could he? She might have told *him* something about the way people act when they have failed.

That Sunday after the dance in the Oddfellows' Hall in Red Willow the sky was a cloudless, baked blue, like a porcelain dish hot from the baking oven. At noon dinner, James Hanks was too calm. After the pork steak, mashed potatoes and gravy and fresh peas, he complimented Minella on her cooking, then moved away from the table.

"Ben," he said to the hired man, "you might as well take your old car and go over to see that girl of yours. There's nothing you can do here. If the weather breaks this afternoon, it breaks. That's all there is to it." He stood in the doorway. "'Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!'" he groaned.

Minella washed the dishes and changed to a thin blue cotton dress she had bought on sale at the store. It had a ruffled skirt and a lace yoke, and had been marked down to \$1.98.

The heat continued its metallic jig between earth and sky, and Minella waited on the front porch, trying hard to read a book from the library. But her eyes were on the road from the south far more than they were on the printed page. At five o'clock the porch thermometer stood above a hundred.

Supper—and her father pretending to eat.

"It's bound to rain tonight, Pa," she comforted him. "I'll bet there'll be a cloudburst just when Ben is ready to come home."

"Sure!" James laughed, staring out of the window. "It'd be just Ben's luck to get his best pants soaked!"

Dread of something coming crept into Minella's bones. If only the slightest breeze would spring up! But all that night there was no breeze; nothing but the black mantle of heat that made sleep impossible. Minella lay awake. Why hadn't York Clifford come? Of course he had not said for sure, but . . .

In the store on Monday morning the heat was almost unbearable. The girls kept pushing their hair back from their ears and going repeatedly to the washroom for water. Poor Mr. Penhollow, who had counted on making a profit from his midsummer silk sale, walked up and down the aisles sweating and cracking his knuckles.

At twelve-twenty-five Minella looked up and saw York standing at her counter. Her heart gave a glad leap. But he smiled calmly down at her.

“How about stepping out for lunch at the Blue Bird?” he suggested. “Or am I too early for you?”

“I’ll be ready in five minutes,” Minella said.

Even when she sat opposite him in the booth at the Blue Bird, she could not quite believe that it was so. She heard him give the order with a worldly air—chicken croquettes and asparagus, chocolate sundaes and iced coffees. The fifty-five-cent lunch!

On the way from the store York had said, “A gang came to our place yesterday, so Ralph and I couldn’t get over to see you. But I had to come into town this morning, so—”

“We sort of looked for you,” Minella had admitted, “but—goodness, this heat!”

“She’s a purple scorcher, all right.”

Now, sitting across from him, Minella wondered in a panic what she should talk about. “Has Ralph left yet?” she asked, grasping at the first thing that came into her mind.

“I drove him to Brookings last night in time to catch the through train. He was sorry he didn’t see you again.”

“Ralph’s nice.”

The waitress brought the chicken croquettes—cone-shaped hats with brims of white gravy. Minella had never tasted one before. She would always remember the surprising break from the brown crust into the seasoned, unrecognizable hash.

“Ralph’s all right,” York observed when the waitress had gone. “He wasn’t so hot at college, but now that he’s through, his dad wants him to get around the country and incidentally meet some of the big shots in the lumber trade. Uncle Dave has been in lumber on the Coast all his life. He’s taking Ralph in with him as soon as he gets back.”

“That’s pretty swell for Ralph,” Minella said.

York laughed. “Yes, it’s pretty swell, all right—if he keeps his head. I guess Uncle Dave just about had to bribe him to take this trip to Chicago. Ralph told me about it. He almost came a cropper over some girl in California.”

Minella glanced up from her plate. “Was there—something wrong with the girl?”

“I guess she was all right. Ralph seems to think so. But the Cliffords have a funny streak. Dad denies it, but I saw plenty of it in Uncle Dave when I was out there. Mother makes fun of it, and I think it’s plain dumb!

Dad never says much about it, but it's there just the same. Uncle Dave made no bones about it. He kept saying, 'Blood will tell, blood will tell!'

"But wasn't the girl all right?" Minella persisted.

"Well, sure! But her father got himself into a jam of some kind—embezzled a few thousand dollars from a bank he was working in, and had to skip the country."

"That wasn't the girl's fault, exactly," Minella said.

"No, of course not! But Uncle Dave laid down the law just the same, and Ralph had to quit seeing her and come East. We got into an argument about it at breakfast yesterday morning. Mother thought it was a shame, but Dad said Uncle Dave probably did the right thing."

"He thought Ralph shouldn't marry the girl?" Minella asked. The waitress had brought the ice cream.

"Well, it isn't always easy to tell what Dad thinks about anything. And of course Ralph was listening, and Dad wouldn't go back on his own brother. But—well, Dad's a Clifford, as Mother always says. And anyone that marries into the Clifford family—" He made a gesture with his hands, then dug his spoon into the ice cream. "Not so far as money is concerned, of course," he added quickly. "My dad's a great old boy, but if he ever showed a streak of that, I wouldn't have any respect for him. No, he's not like that. For instance, he barely tolerates George Kellog."

"Mr. Kellog?" Minella could not believe her ears.

York glanced about him, then leaned across the table. "That mealy-mouthed—I was going to say skunk, but I like skunks. Lucille's okay. She'll be a good kid when she grows up—if they ever let her grow up."

Minella smiled. "Pa always makes fun of Mr. Kellog, but—"

"Your dad, now," York said. "There's a man my dad respects as much as any man in the country."

"Really?" She had to say something. "That's because of his new wheat, I suppose. It took him a long time to get round to doing what he wanted to do, didn't it? But he's been fine lately. He ought to have a farm like yours. And he would have, if he had only—"

"Say, why don't you come over and take a look at our place?" York suggested eagerly. "You promised to come years ago—remember? On your bicycle."

He laughed, and Minella knew what was in his mind. He was still thinking of the little girl hiding beneath the willows, her thin body covered with nothing more than an old calico apron. Would he never forget that?

“I still have my bicycle,” she retorted.

“I’ll drive over and pick you up. Why not bring your dad along for dinner next Sunday? The folks would love to have you. We’ve put in a lot of new gadgets in the past year. It’s something to look at now.”

“Next Sunday? I’d love to. I’ll ask Pa.”

When they walked out of the Blue Bird, Minella suspected that she was too happy. It wasn’t that York had said anything, really. It was just that they had sat there in the booth almost as if no one else existed anywhere in the world. And now—there would be next Sunday! But perhaps the wonderful Sunday would never come.

There was a nasty sweet coolness, a waiting greenish light over the sky as she walked down the street beside York. She had not been back at work in the store more than ten minutes before the hail came.

How did people act when they had failed?

The hail had cut a clean swath through the district north and south of Red Willow. With tears in her eyes, Minella Hanks had seen her father gather a handful of the crushed and broken heads of his matchless green wheat and stand gazing across his precious two acres that had been beaten flat by the storm. But James Hanks had shed no tears. He had staggered away and retched up the supper Minella had forced him to eat. Then he had made for town and Fry’s saloon.

“Don’t let it get you down, Minella,” York had said when he came into the store next day. “We were all hit pretty hard. But that’s farming!”

She looked at him, trying to keep her lips steady. “I know, York, but it’s different with us. This will just about kill Pa.”

He leaned toward her as if he meant to put his hands on her shoulders, then dropped them palms down upon the show case. “Hell, no! Not James Hanks! He’ll go at it again, and next time he’ll do it!”

“Oh, I hope so, York!”

“And don’t forget you’re coming over for dinner Sunday. I’ll be there to pick you and your dad up.”

At that moment Lucille Kellog came up and caught York by the arm, smiling her surprise. “Why, York! I saw your car out front, but I—Oh, hello, Minella! Isn’t it nice and cool today, after the hail? Such a relief—and especially for you, Minella, closed up here in the store all day. Come on, York, and treat me to an ice-cream soda!”

He turned slowly and looked down at Lucille with a peculiar smile that seemed to rub across his teeth. But Minella did not wait to hear what he

said.

“I’m going to the washroom, Annie,” she said to the girl at the end of the counter. “If anybody comes in, look after them for me, will you?”

“Sure, kid!” said Annie, and gave her a curious glance.

Next day the heat set in again as intense as ever. But at the Hanks farm nobody thought of the weather. A blizzard might have been raging over the lacerated fields; it would have been all the same to James Hanks in his numb defeat.

Minella tried to be blithe when she came home from the store. She told her father about Mrs. Jens Jensen buying red flannel underwear for her husband when the air itself was blistering red. She told of old Mr. Khonkle losing his toupé when he took off his hat and bowed to the minister’s wife. And she knew her father did not even hear her. When she reminded him that they were invited to the Cliffords’ for Sunday dinner, he responded only with a dull wave of his hand.

On Friday morning, before Minella went to work, her father drew a letter from the mailbox at the gate. It was from Banker Kellog asking him to come to his office in the bank building at four o’clock that afternoon. Minella read the letter and thought mechanically: Four o’clock. After the bank was closed. Her father, alone with George Kellog. The banker telling him that it was regrettable, of course, but James Hanks no longer possessed a farm!

She saw her father’s mouth set. His blue eyes flamed, and he laughed aloud. But he said nothing, and Minella was stricken dumb with pain for him.

By noon the leaves on the trees in the park south of the depot hung as if they had been dipped in hot wax. The shadowless sky was like hot wax. The air seemed to have been becalmed here through stale centuries.

“Cyclone weather!” Minella overheard an old man say when she was on her way back from lunch.

But people always said that. Anyhow, Minella’s concern was not about the weather. She could think of nothing but the hour of four, when her father would be with George Kellog.

Time crawled grayly along, and at ten minutes to four Minella went to the front of the store and glanced down the street. Less than a block away, on the opposite side of the street, drowsing between the shafts of the old buggy, stood the mare Dolly. James Hanks was nowhere in sight. But just as she was turning away, Minella saw York Clifford drive into Main Street and park his car in front of the bank.

The events of the rest of that afternoon would never assemble themselves into an entire experience. They were bizarrely separate, like the fragments of a shattered prism.

She was behind the lace counter when the light from the windows turned suddenly livid. A woman with a baby in her arms came rushing into the store.

“There’s a tornado heading this way!” she cried shrilly.

Instantly everything was confusion. Mr. Penhollow ordered the clerks and the customers away from the windows and doors and tried to drive them toward the basement stairs. Already above the eruption of voices there was a thin wailing that increased in volume until it became a demoniacal shriek. The lights in the basement were blotted out, and over the darkness swept a guttural bellow that could have escaped only from some black pit of wrath.

Then, except for the whimpering of a child or two, there was paralyzed stillness in the basement where the panic-stricken people were huddled. It was with a start that Minella heard her name spoken. A hand seized her arm and drew her aside into a niche of darkness underneath the stairway.

“Get in there!” York said, and all but threw her into the corner. “Don’t be scared, kid. Just keep down. And don’t move. It’ll be over in a minute.”

His arms were about her, and suddenly his mouth found hers in the frantic heat of life and youth threatened by instant oblivion. Minella sobbed and clung to him with all the surrendering strength of her body, with her lips and her arms, and the shaken, terrified rapture of her blood.

“Oh, York, York! Even if we die—”

“Minella, darling! We’re not going to die.”

At that moment there came a sound above them as of a huge steel rake tearing up granite, and the staircase crashed about them. Minella looked up across York’s slumped shoulder into a sky of wild and hideous grandeur. It was lemon and green with smoky manes of cloud riding it. She gazed at it in trembling disbelief.

York stirred, shook his head and opened his eyes to blink at Minella. She got to her knees, swayed forward, and tried to raise her hand to the ugly gash on his forehead.

“York—you’re hurt!”

“I’m okay, kid.”

He came suddenly alert and glanced about him. The store had been partly shorn off its foundations, the basement filled with the wreckage.

Minella pressed her hands against her ears to shut out the horrible medley of groans and screams.

Staggering a little, York got to his feet. "I'll have to give a hand here," he said quickly, and lurched clear of the splintered staircase. In a moment he was throwing aside the litter of brick and cement, hoisting women and children up through a gap in the north wall.

Minella became conscious of a new and shocking sense of terror. Clambering across the wreckage, she came to York's side. "York, I've got to find Pa! He was at the bank."

York spoke without looking at her. "He left the bank. I saw him driving out of town. Go ahead, kid. I'll see you later—tonight."

Minella looked frantically about her. She stumbled across smashed crates and torn bales of material to an opening at the rear of the basement.

It had begun to rain, but strangely not in the torrential way that ordinarily followed a twister. This rain had a mocking gentleness that seemed to encase Minella's breast in ice.

The road homeward was endless. For a little more than a block east of the store, Main Street was a shambles of tumbled walls and strewn debris. Beyond that, the stores and houses wore a grotesque guise of calm and orderliness.

Minella ran on legs that seemed made of string. Where the road turned southward at the edge of town, telephone poles and trees lay on each side and wire fences were corkscrewed toward the sky. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a calf impaled upon a fence post, and a chicken running in circles with scarcely a feather on its body.

Then, where there was a culvert and a tangle of willows, she saw her father. He was lying to the left of the road. Later, Minella was to remember bleakly how her mind rejected the sight of him; how she looked about in wild protest for some refutation of it and saw the buggy smashed to splinters in the ditch, and Dolly the mare gorging herself in an oatfield a hundred yards away.

She crouched on the ground beside her father, and he stirred at her touch. His eyes were the merest slits, but they found her, and his lips labored to a smile.

"Pa!" she sobbed. "You're alive!"

She took his hand, and his fingers clutched hers. "I—I almost made it, Minella." His breath came in a gasp. "That's me, eh? Almost—always!"

"Pa, don't talk! Let me help you."

From the south, a car rattled to a stop in the road. Ben jumped down from it and stared at James, his face suddenly pale.

“Good God!” Ben cried. “Get into the car, Minella. I’ll carry him.”

She remembered nothing of that ride back to town. They were incredibly at the little hospital in Red Willow. Afterwards, she was to recall her detached feeling of surprise that there were so many people in town—and all crowding the hospital that afternoon!

The young doctor was very kind. He found Minella and suggested that she might want to speak to her father, and then she knew. She knew from the way the doctor had spoken.

James Hanks lay on a cot in a white ward at the end of a long corridor. He opened his eyes when Minella spoke to him. When he began to speak in a low whisper, she leaned close to him and pressed one of his hard hands between her own.

“Listen, Minella, get home—*now!* Take the money in the cupboard. Get away from here tonight. Don’t mind about me. I’m done for—I know! There’s nothing left for you. The bank has taken everything. Kellog told me this afternoon. I—I hit him on the head with a chair. He’s dead. I did it, Minella, and I’m not sorry. But you get away tonight. Hear me?”

“Yes, yes, Pa!” Minella sobbed.

“See Jake Fuller—he’ll take you with him on the nine o’clock freight—in the caboose. Tell him I said so. But don’t tell anybody what I’ve told you—about Kellog. Start over somewhere else. Take another name—anything—but don’t come back here. Do that for me—and Ma. Remember? You must go on . . .”

The young doctor was very kind when he came for Minella at last and took her away. Mrs. Nichol met her in the corridor and held her, stroking her hair and speaking gently.

“It’s dreadful, dear, but we must try to feel that God knows best. Many have been stricken. Your friend Lucille has lost her father, too. It’s dreadful, but we must be brave, dear. It’s times like these . . .”

It was Ben who rescued her and took her home in his car. It was Ben who tried to bring her back to reality again as they followed the south road to the farm.

“Don’t you worry about nothin’, Minella. I’ll take care o’ what’s to be done. There ain’t much. I heard ’em say the town was doin’ everything—you know, the buryin’. A mass buryin’—more’n twenty, last I heard.”

But running along like little tongues of flame under everything was the thought that she must get away—get away from defeat and destruction and death. *See Jake Fuller . . . the nine o'clock freight . . .* Don't see York Clifford again! You'd have to tell him how Lucille's father really died. And don't see Pa again. Anyhow, he isn't here. He's gone. Before he went, he asked you to do something—for him, and for Ma. That's what you must do, Minella!

Chapter VII

WITH an explosive oath, Medford Giles jerked the window drapes together and shut out the late March twilight. From her deep chair, pages of manuscript strewn about her, Mary Hallard watched him turn on two floor lamps.

“Damn it, do we have to work in the dark?” he muttered.

Mary spoke with soft emphasis. “I always think better in the dusk. And I love the rain.”

For the greater part of the afternoon rain had fallen in the court beyond the window, soaking the square of new grass, dripping from the branches of the ailanthus.

“God in heaven, we’ve had nothing but rain for a week—and we’re supposed to be writing about drought! And if you think you can *think*, I’d like to see some evidence of it.”

Mary smiled patiently. “I gave you fair warning, when we began this thing, Medford,” she said. “And I’ve asked you a dozen times to finish it yourself.”

He folded himself into a chair. “Look,” he said with an obvious effort at controlling himself, “you can’t have Bernice emote all over the place in this scene. The girl is beyond mere emotion. She’s got to be absolutely blank with grief. Don’t you see that? She wouldn’t be tracing the flowers in her apron with her fingernail after all that has happened to her in the last scene.

She's past that now. She'd be staring straight ahead of her, a frozen thing; lifeless! Don't you see what I mean, or are you just being—"

"I'm not just being anything, Medford," Mary interrupted as gently as she could. "You may be right. I don't know."

"You've been in a theater, haven't you? You know what an actress like Blaine expects in the big moment of a play like this—or do you?"

"It's curious, but I haven't the remotest idea," Mary remarked with elaborate sweetness. "As a matter of fact, I haven't been giving much thought to what Miss Blaine expects, or to how she might do a scene like this. I just happen to *know* how a desperate girl like Bernice would act under these circumstances, and I've tried my best to set it down as I know it. That's all."

Medford Giles' smile was wearily tolerant. "And I've told you, my dear—twenty times, at least—that life, even as you know it, is *not* theater. Life has to be italicized for the stage. It has to be—"

"Oh, I know!" Mary rose angrily. "I *ought* to know. You've told me often enough. And I know the theater can be stupidly obvious, very often. I had hoped that perhaps you and I, working together, might do something that would—"

"But we've got to be obvious, unfortunately. Don't blame the theater for that. Blame the stupid creatures who sit in the plush-covered seats out front. They get no better than they deserve."

"On the contrary," Mary said coolly, "I'm more inclined to blame the—the *agreeable* playwrights like yourself, who cater to their stupidity."

"Very enlightening, my dear!" Medford contrived a nasty laugh that didn't quite come off.

That remark of hers had not been quite fair, Mary realized. Medford was not stupid; he was not the "agreeable" playwright who dealt only in tried maxims, in tricks and motheaten formulas. With a deeper insight, he had outraged the most sacred traditions of the theater. He had been the despair of the critics—but he had been a success.

It was for these very reasons that Mary had been thrilled at the mere thought of working with him. As the days grew into weeks, indeed, that first fine elation had given way to a feeling of pride that filled her every waking moment. There had been times of sheer rapture when she knew, as she had never known before, that she was approaching a fulfillment of the dream that had harried her imagination ever since that awful night when she had set out alone to do her father's bidding.

There had been times, of course, when she was conscious only of her own inadequacy; when she wanted only to give up the struggle and concede defeat.

She looked at Medford where he sat with his head bowed in his hands. She reflected humorously upon what a small boy he really was, for all his forty years, his competent successes, his debonair manner. She knew him better now, perhaps, than she knew anyone else in the world. The past month had done that for her. She knew the painful groping, the blind stumbling, the patiently borne despair, that were a part of every effort he made. Even Ransome, shrewd as he was, had probably never glimpsed that side of Medford Giles.

“I don’t see how you put up with me,” he said finally.

“I don’t put up with you, of course,” Mary laughed, and sat down on the couch. “When I’m not admiring you, I’m resenting you.”

“I said the same thing to Patricia once,” he mused, smiling, “only she gave me a very different answer.”

He had told her a little about Patricia, his one great love, who had divorced him seven years ago.

“And a very much better one, I’m sure,” Mary said.

“Maybe. She left me—that was her answer. It was the only answer possible. When I think of what that girl had to stand for! At the time, I was working on my first play, ‘This Monstrous World,’ and it was going very badly. Everything I’ve ever put my hand to has gone badly—no matter what the dear, dear public may think of it. I’ve had my big moments, of course, but I’ve paid for every one of them. Patricia was the price I paid for ‘This Monstrous World.’ And it wasn’t worth one of Patricia’s little fingers!”

“You still love Patricia, don’t you?”

“I haven’t seen her since—not once in seven years.”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with it,” Mary said. “You could still love her.”

“That’s one of the nice things about you, darling,” Medford replied. “You’re so refreshingly old-fashioned. Let me tell you what a lapse of seven years does to a man. He wakes up one morning to the fact that the woman he has lived with—and loved—for nearly five years has left. He should have known about it before. It was a whole month since they had quarreled. It was a whole month since she had walked out. There had been lawyers’ letters and talks with lawyers, and all the rest of it. He should have known. But he—well, he didn’t. Not until it dawned on him suddenly that he was all alone in the world. He had to start adjusting himself to that.

“I’m not talking now about what polite people call biology. I’m talking of other things. He’s working on a play. He polishes off a scene that seems just right. He’s proud of it. He wants to read it—to *her*. And she isn’t there. Or it’s a bad scene. The thing won’t shape up. He has worked on it till he’s as limp as an old towel. He’d like to sit down and tell her about it. Maybe he’ll get a new angle on it, just by talking it over with her. But she isn’t there.

“Or maybe it’s the opening night, and he’s ready to fall apart until he gets that last curtain down and hears the verdict. Nobody in God’s world can stand him for five minutes at a stretch. He looks around for the one person who can take it—and she isn’t there. That goes on for seven years. And now you say time has nothing to do with a man being in love with a woman who was once his wife. How long would you continue to love a man who was never there when you needed him?”

It would be so easy to answer that question, Mary thought. It would be so easy to tell him that she still loved York Clifford; had gone on loving him through all the empty, hopeless years. The mere telling might bring her a measure of peace.

“Do people just go on, then, forever alone?” she asked. Her voice was a low murmur in the softly lighted room.

“Not quite alone, thank God!” Medford said. “We may bury our first love. Most of us do. But we go on. Call it second best; call it what you like. It isn’t second best. There is a truer marriage than the one that school kids leap into before they’re dry behind the ears. There is the kind of marriage that you and I might have, Mary—a marriage of warmth and understanding and tolerance, and a love that is full-flowered and fragrant. You can tell me that I’m talking like an actor if you like—”

“Oh, no, Medford!”

If he were not quite so perfect, she mused as she looked at him now, if he were not so flawlessly turned out, she might be able to feel differently toward him. She had discovered the truly human limits of his busy mind. The awe in which she had once held him had given way to something warmer. If she could see him physically disheveled just once, she thought, there would be excitement in that.

On an impulse she leaned toward him and rumbled his hair. “Oh, Med! We’re both so tired we can’t think. Let’s go out and have supper. This is Irma’s day off.”

He gave her a strange look, caught her hand and touched his lips to her finger tips. Then got to his feet. “All right. Whatever you want,” he said

quickly. “Go powder your nose. We can come back and do a little more work later.”

They were seated at a table in a near-by tearoom. Medford had ordered cocktails and was inspecting the modest menu.

“You’re in one of your nice moods tonight,” he said abruptly.

“Maybe I’m just—just reduced,” Mary replied.

He reached across the table and laid his hands gently over hers. “By this time, darling, you should know better than to take me seriously when I begin tearing my hair. It happens to be my way of working. I want this play to be the best thing I have ever touched. I want that—for both of us.”

“I’ve never wanted anything more,” Mary assured him. “But let’s talk about anything else—just for the next hour. Here are our cocktails.”

The waitress stood self-consciously poised, tray in hand. She placed one cocktail in front of Mary, but when she lifted the other her fingers trembled so that a little of the liquor fell to the table and splashed over Medford’s jacket.

It wasn’t much, but Medford was suddenly furious.

“Good Lord! Do we have to wear raincoats to—”

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry!” The girl flushed and leaned hastily forward, a napkin in her hand. “Let me—”

“Don’t make it worse!” Medford said as he waved her aside and took his handkerchief from his pocket. “It’s nothing serious,” he added, not unkindly.

Mary, tense with embarrassment, smiled warmly at the girl as she moved away.

There had once been a fly-specked sign in the window of a coffeeshop in downtown Minneapolis. The sign had read—“Waitress Wanted.”

Chapter VIII

YOU crept out of that caboose before daylight, Minella Hanks, somewhere on the outskirts of Minneapolis. You crossed a bewildering network of tracks—remember?—and came at last to a hamburger shop, where you sat at the counter and asked for a glass of hot milk.

After that, you sat under the trees of a park beside a lake, your old suitcase beside you on the bench. And when it was day at last, you made your forlorn way into the heart of the city. That was when you saw the fly-specked sign.

Your clothes were bedraggled, so you went to a cheap hotel where you could wash and make yourself presentable. The seedy clerk looked at you as though he meant to call the police, but you wrote your name in the book—as if you had written it a hundred times before. From the caboose window you had seen an illuminated sign as the train came into the city: “Hallard’s Bread for Health.” So you wrote your name—Mary Hallard.

And after that you were Mary Hallard, the waitress at the Rainbow Coffee Shoppe, at ten dollars a week and a little more, if you counted the tips that were left.

Laura Martin was the other waitress at the Rainbow. She was brown-eyed and laughing, and she went to night school in the hope of becoming something more than a waitress. It was to the boardinghouse of Laura’s mother that you took your imitation leather suitcase that night, Minella Hanks. You had a nice clean room, with breakfast and Sunday dinner, for

five dollars a week. And you went to night school with Laura and took up shorthand and typing.

It was awkward at first, but Mary Hallard gradually became authentic. Orphaned in infancy, she had been reared on a farm by an aunt who had died just before the farm passed into the hands of the bank. Mary Hallard was then cast out upon the world to make her own living. The Martins were simple, kindly people, not so curious as to give Mary cause for discomfort.

“Make this your home for as long as you like, Mary,” Mrs. Martin urged. Mary was grateful, and said so.

That autumn Spike Schofield came to take a room at the Martins’. He was carrot-haired, gangly, and fired with an ambition to be editor in chief of the Courier, on the staff of which he was now a humble rewrite man. “I’ll have a paper of my own someday,” he boasted, “and I’ll call a spade a spade, and what I’ll dig up will be everybody’s business!”

It was Spike Schofield who discovered Mary’s love of books. It was he who launched her on a course of serious reading. It was he who found her a job in a lending library and saw her enrolled in a night course in journalism. Finally, it was Spike Schofield who fell in love with her.

But Mary was twenty-one, and she had developed her own pungent style in feature writing for the Courier before Spike squared his bony shoulders that glittering winter afternoon and blurted out the confession of his unhappy state.

It was Sunday, and they had driven up to Spike’s cabin on Mille Lacs. Usually Spike invited two or three other people on those trips to his northwoods retreat, and Mary felt a certain disquiet at the change of procedure.

The sky was turquoise blue, the snow blue-white with ragged cobalt shadows in the lee of evergreens, and tracings as delicate as smoke lying upon it from the hardwood trees. They had come a mile or more from the cabin on their snowshoes when Spike paused on the shore of a tiny lake that was like a white velvet jewel tray afire with diamonds. On the opposite shore, as if cast in bronze, stood a whitetail buck.

Mary uttered a soft, “Oh!” and caught Spike’s arm. The deer instantly turned and bounded into the forest. As unerringly as a sunbeam, he had found the narrow opening between the trees. “He must have seen us, Spike,” Mary said.

Spike looked at her. The scarlet wool beret and scarlet-and-white ski suit she wore flamed in the low sun against the background of snow-shelved pines.

“Who wouldn’t see you, Mary?” he asked with a hard grin. “Let’s sit down and rest a minute before we start back.”

He got out cigarets. The match he touched to hers wavered a bit. For Mary, sadness crept down upon the beauty of the evening, even before she heard what she was afraid to hear. She had always been a little afraid of Spike, but for quite a different reason. He was not like the Martins. It was possible that he had never believed a word of what she had told him about her past. It was even possible that he had read her mind and knew that she was Minella Hanks, and that her father had killed a banker in Red Willow Junction four years ago.

“You’re working too hard, Mary,” he said. “You’re making a tough thing of your job on the paper, the way you’ve been throwing yourself into it. And now this latest gag—what’s the idea of three nights a week in social-service work? Are you trying to run yourself into the ground?”

Mary laughed. “You’ll never get over bossing me—‘bringing me up,’ as you used to call it when we were at the Martins’.”

“I don’t think I’ve made such a bad job of it, have I? We’ve both come along—and I’m not taking any credit for what you’ve done, either. I didn’t plant that brain in your head.”

“No, but you—you taught me to use it.” That was true, but she should not have said it just now, she realized. Hastily she went on, “You know very well why I’ve taken on this family case work. I grew up in farm poverty; now I’ve got to get acquainted with city poverty. I want to *know*. And don’t worry about my working too hard. There are things that nothing but hard work can ever blot out. Memories of the farm, and my aunt slaving so desperately and—”

“It makes a good story,” Spike interrupted, “but you’ve left something out. Maybe I’m psychic; maybe I’m just a good guesser. But I remember that day you thought you saw somebody on Hennepin Avenue. You grabbed my arm and turned a corner, and your face went white. You told me the guy looked like the banker who took over your aunt’s farm. Remember—more than a year ago?”

“Yes. And that was the truth. He did look like the banker.” She had always feared meeting York Clifford face to face in the street. The Cliffords had been in the habit of visiting the cities several times a year. But it was George Kellog’s face she thought she saw that day when she was with Spike. The same red jowls, the same cold eyes—and a birthmark across the stranger’s temple that might, at first glance, have been a scar.

It would have been easy, sitting there in the white stillness beside the lake, to tell Spike Schofield the truth about that encounter. He would not have been less cordial after such a revelation. On the contrary, he would have overflowed with pity—and pity was the one thing she could not have endured. Pity would have brought to life again Minella Hanks and York Clifford and a brief, searing joy that had been crushed by tragedy within an hour after its birth.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Spike,” she said, “but if you’re psychic, you’re working on the wrong person. There’s nothing to Mary Hallard that you don’t know all about.”

“There is, of course. But that’s all right with me, Mary.” With awkward abruptness he took her mittened hand. “I’ll never ask you to tell me. You wouldn’t marry me, would you?”

She looked down at his bare fingers clasped about the red wool of her mitten. Slowly she withdrew her hand, pulled the mitten off and laid her hand again in his. Tears stood in her eyes as she looked up at him. “Spike, you’re so—”

“Don’t say it,” he interrupted with a grimace of resignation. “Best-friend-I-ever-had, and all that. It wouldn’t sound like you. Anyhow, I was a fool to think that perhaps—well, hell, it either happens or it doesn’t happen. That’s all there is to it. It happened to me, and once in a while I’ve kidded myself into believing that there was a look in your eyes that might mean me. But I guess that must have been when you were thinking of the other guy. I know damn well there was one, even if you were so young!”

The hot blood feathered up into her cheeks. “Yes, there was, Spike. Not in the way you probably mean, though. It wasn’t like that. I—I almost wish it had been!”

She turned her face away. Yes, it was true; she wished there had been everything between herself and York; everything that had been promised in those terrible moments in the shrieking blackness of the store basement.

She got up and reached for her snowshoes.

“I can still put those on for you, can’t I?” he said, and his grin was the old, friendly grin she had come to know as part of the life of Mary Hallard.

It was later that week that the letter came from Ruth Lawson, supervisor of a charity organization in New York. Miss Lawson had come West on a lecture tour in October, and Mary had talked with her at a Women’s Club Luncheon. Later she had written and asked Miss Lawson if she could not find an opening for her in the organization. The reply had not been

reassuring—the salary would be a pittance; the work a challenge to mind and body—but a position awaited Mary if she was still interested.

She showed the letter to Spike.

“So you’re really going?” he asked.

“I’m leaving Sunday.”

“It’s a big town,” he said, “for a small girl.”

“So they tell me, Spike. But I’m five feet five.”

He grinned; then held out his hand. “Good luck, Mary! I’ll get the gang together for Saturday night. It’s got to be class for you, kid. How about the Crystal Terrace? The Old Man can be shaken down for a case of prewar private stock, fresh off a prairie schooner.”

“Spike, dear, I’d rather just—”

“Dandy! Leave it to me. Bib and tucker, if the boys have to rent ’em. And you wear that blue chiffon thing. You look like a forget-me-not in it.”

Forget-me-not! The flower pattern in the dress her mother had made for her for York Clifford’s graduation from high school in Red Willow Junction, when Minella Hanks was barely fourteen and York was eighteen. The swimming stars above the dark school yard, and York gently shaking her out of a strange oblivion, and the forget-me-not dress clammy against her moist, shivering skin!

Chapter IX

REPORTERS, feature writers, editors—they were all there, at the two long tables that ran down one side of the Crystal Terrace. Even the Old Man, Bradley Newsome, was there. Mary had been close to tears as she looked into the faces of the men and women with whom she had worked for three years. A hundred times she asked herself whether her decision to leave them and plunge into a world of strangers had not been foolhardy, after all.

But the music was gay. Mary had danced with Spike and Larry and Bob and the Old Man.

Now Adella Gray, the society editor, laughed as she caught up with Mary coming off the dance floor. “Mary, darling, for heaven’s sake, dance with Spike again and steer him around my way. He’s as graceful as a telephone pole, but I love him and I want to dance with him.”

I believe you mean that, even if you have had a little too much to drink, Mary thought.

She was fond of Adella, who was plump, dark-haired and jolly. Spike and Adella—the only two in whom Mary might have confided, if she could have confided in anyone—why, they were meant for each other! And Spike, the loon, had never even remarked upon the loveliness of Adella!

It was almost one. The party would soon be over. They were dancing again, Spike bouncing awkwardly out of rhythm.

“You’re blind as a bat, Spike!” Mary said. “Adella is a wonderful girl—and a born newspaperwoman. If you had sense enough to last you till tomorrow morning—”

His answer was lost on Mary, for at that moment they had danced past a table in an obscure corner, and Mary had looked straight into the eyes of York Clifford.

She had known that sometime, somewhere, she would see York again. But here at the Crystal Terrace, on the eve of her departure for New York, it wasn’t possible that his gaze and hers should so electrically meet! Yet in that way it had happened. And a moment later Spike was leading her back to the table.

Her mind spun through seconds of disbelief, then came to a pause of brilliant, reckless clarity. The inexorable flash told her that she would have no peace in her heart again if she went away now, remembering only the shocked recognition in York’s eyes, their accusation—and something more.

She picked up her evening bag and threaded her way along the edge of the dance floor until she saw York. He had been with a stranger when Mary had seen him a moment before, but now he was alone, an expression of indecision on his face. The mouth that had been so boyishly, tenderly full had matured into graver lines. His twine-colored wavy hair had darkened. The straight brows above his deep-set eyes were heavier, more startlingly sooty in contrast with his hair and his fresh, clear skin.

He had not seen her approaching, and now a trembling panic rooted Mary to the floor. It was not yet too late to go back! But his eyes had been searching with dazed anger through the crowd. Then he saw her.

“York!” She sank down in the chair opposite him.

Somehow, that moment of rediscovery was more shattering than any they had ever known. They leaned toward each other as if the table were not there between them; as if nothing had ever been between them—difference of birth, tragedy or years.

“Minella!” As he spoke, he grasped the hand she had laid inertly, palm upward, on the table before him. Suddenly he laughed with bewilderment. “I must be dreaming!”

She wanted to say, “Never waken, York! Let it be always like this—you and I!” Instead, she smiled and said, “It’s good to see you, York.”

“Do you know how I’ve looked for you—everywhere?” he asked. “Good Lord, I—” He stopped, staring at her. “I’m sorry, Minella. You’re probably married by this time.”

“No.” She steadied herself. “Are you?”

“Not a chance, Minella! Look, I’ve got to talk to you. When can I see you? We can’t talk here. The fellow who’s with me will be back in a minute.”

“I’m leaving for New York in the morning,” she told him. “I—this is—it’s a farewell party for me.”

“Tomorrow morning? But you can’t leave now—not until we’ve had a chance to talk to each other.”

Mary’s throat had become unbearably tight, but she managed a smile. “Can you come to see me—say, in an hour? I’m sharing a small apartment, but we can talk for a while.”

“I’ll go anywhere—any time, Minella. What’s the address?”

He took an envelope from the pocket of his dinner jacket and hurriedly jotted down the address she gave him.

“It’s under the name of Mary Hallard,” she added, and stood up as she saw York’s friend approaching.

“In an hour,” York said, and Mary moved away as if in a bodiless dream.

Irrelevant thoughts moved with her: I never saw York in a tuxedo before. Why, oh, why, has he found me just now? He’s too handsome in dinner clothes. Steady, Mary, steady.

They wanted to go somewhere else when the Crystal Terrace closed, but Mary insisted that she must get some sleep before she took the train tomorrow. Four of them crowded exuberantly into the back seat of Spike’s car, while Mary and Adella sat in front with Spike. As the car moved away, the quartet in the back seat began to sing:

“For it was Mary, Mary,
Plain as any name can be,
But with propriety,
Society would say Marie.”

Mary felt the rush of tears to her eyes, with an engulfing sense of loneliness.

The car drew up in front of the apartment house at last. Spike got out and took Mary’s arm as she stepped to the snowy walk.

“I’ll be here about nine, kid. That’ll give us plenty of time to make the train.”

“Thanks, Spike. And thanks again for the grand party. I’ll never forget it.”

“Happy dreams, kid!”

She stood in the doorway and listened as they drove away:

“Because there’s something there
That sounds so square,
It’s a grand old name!”

Up the two flights of stairs, then, and into the tiny apartment she had been so proud of when she had taken it, furnished, last year. Now, under the light of the bridge lamp that stood beside the couch, the room looked suddenly cold and bleak.

The buzzer sounded above the door and set her heart pounding. No, no! This was all a mistake—a terrible blunder!

She saw her eyes in the mirror near the door. They were blue torches of fright. But in that moment a startling truth dawned upon her. She was no longer the country girl York Clifford had known. Her mouth and her tilted breast, the flowing lines of her body, were a lovely fulfillment now of what four years ago had been only a shadowy promise.

Her fear mounted as she heard York’s step in the hall. She opened the door. They looked at each other for a long, confused moment, and then Mary laughed tremulously.

“Well, come in, York. I don’t bite. Hang your things up here in the closet.” She heard herself rattling on nervously. “Sit over there in that big chair where I can see you.” Now that they were seated, she must look at him again. “Really, you seem to have grown, York!” Her laugh sounded high.

“You haven’t shrunk any yourself, Minella.” He smiled in a strained way, and then, as if suddenly conscious that he had been gazing at her from head to foot, he flushed and glanced about the room. “We were both pretty young, weren’t we?”

Oh, cruelly and defenselessly young!

“I’m afraid we were,” she said with hurried brightness. “How is everything in Red Willow? Are your mother and father well?”

“They’re fine.” His eyes fastened again upon hers with relentless directness. “Minella—”

“Give me a little time to compose myself, York.” She laughed facetiously. “After all, it has been rather a shock, you know, meeting you again like this. As you said, we *were* pretty young—and silly!” *No, no, York, don’t look like that, as if I had struck you in the face!* “Tell—tell me about Red Willow. Is there anyone living on our farm now?”

His mouth was a study in ironic rebuke. “So we’re going to make small talk, eh? All right, Minella. I didn’t come here for that, but—” He laughed

shortly. “Your father’s hired man—Ben Anderson—took the farm over from the bank three years ago. He married a girl from over east somewhere. She had a little money, and they managed the deal between them. They have a baby now, a cute little girl, two years old. Ben is making a go of the place in a small way, but he hasn’t been able to produce that strain of wheat your father was working on. Your father never said much to anybody about how he worked on that problem. I’ve often wished I knew just how he—”

“If I knew, I’d tell you, York,” she said slowly.

Oh, there was nothing to be gained in keeping up a pretense of detached amusement at their meeting again! Ben Anderson was living on the Hanks farm, and he had a little daughter who would grow up to swim in the creek and probably watch another little boy go riding by on his way to school in town—on a piebald pony!

She struggled vainly against the quick rush of tears, then sprang up to get her evening bag from the table. She was groping in it for her handkerchief when York rose and grasped her arms.

“Minella!”

“No—I’m all right, York. Please sit down. I—I shouldn’t have asked you to come here.”

“Why not?” he demanded harshly. “Look at me, Minella.”

“Please, York.” She released herself. “It isn’t fair—to either of us—to meet again like this,” she said.

His eyes had a new light in them—a light of hope. It was agonizing. She must not let him think . . .

“It’s my turn to ask questions, Minella,” he said. “Why did you run away from me four years ago? Was it because of anything I did—or said?”

“No, no, York. You know that. But there wasn’t anything else for me to do. My father—just before he died—made me promise to go away.”

“But you left that night. You never gave me a chance. That’s what I’ve never been able to figure out. If you had written me!”

“And have you feeling sorry for me, York? No, I didn’t want that. I didn’t want you to think that you had to take care of me just because we happened to think we were—” She bit her lip and gestured helplessly with her hand.

“I thought of that,” York said. “I knew how you’d feel, because you’re so damned proud! But you could have waited for a day and found out how I felt about it.” His expression was dogged as he went on after a brief silence. “Look, Minella—there was more to it than that. Another reason, I mean.”

He can't possibly know, Minella thought wildly. He must not know how George Kellog died!

She could almost have gasped with relief when he added, "I've never quite got over the idea that you simply ran out on *me*."

"Perhaps I did, in a way, York," she said. "You were a Clifford, after all, and I—I was the daughter of James Hanks. Your father and mother were both kind and sympathetic, but—oh, you know what I mean. Even if it hadn't happened the way it did, I'd have had to get out eventually. It never works out." Even to her own ears, the speech sounded unconvincing.

"You weren't even willing to give it a chance to work out!" he charged bitterly. "You could have told me that, instead of—"

"But York—oh, can't you understand? I know it was unfair of me to go off the way I did, without a word to you. But I knew that if I saw you again, I wouldn't be strong enough to go—ever. I'd still have been—just Minella Hanks. I had to get away and make something of myself. I had to do that for my father's sake and my mother's—the memory of them, I mean. I had to do it for my own sake, as well."

The spirit had gone out of his voice when he said, "Well, you seem to have got along pretty well. I haven't even asked you what you are doing."

"I've been reporting on the Courier. But I've been doing a little settlement work on the side—social service. That's what I'm going to do in New York. I've had a job offered me."

"I see." He took a package of cigarets from his pocket. "You smoke, I suppose?" he said, holding the pack out to her. The touch of their fingers before her cigaret was lighted sent a dismaying vibration through her flesh. She wondered in panic if he sensed it. "You've gone pretty far away from me, haven't you, Minella? But maybe not so far as you'd like to think. What made you cry when we started talking?"

Avoiding his eyes, she looked down at the glowing tip of her cigaret. "Isn't it natural that seeing you again would bring back everything? That was a rather ghastly experience, York—that last day in Red Willow."

His face hardened as he looked at her. "It *was*—ghastly! But I want to tell you one thing. That day of the storm was nothing compared to the days that followed. I thought I'd go mad wondering what had become of you. All Ben could tell me was that you left Red Willow that night on the freight. I asked Jake Fuller about it, and all he said was that you'd got out of the caboose in the yards here. I came down and spent a week looking for you. I stuck ads in the papers. I walked the streets. I fine-combed the department stores and inquired at all the employment agencies here and in St. Paul.

“I had visions of you falling into the clutches of some crook. I’d have gone to the police, but that sounded like a screwy idea. If you wanted to get away from me, I thought, I might as well give up and forget about it. Give *you* up!” His voice was rough with feeling. “Give you up—remembering how you kissed me in that store basement! I lay awake night after night, crying like a kid. That’s what you did to me, Minella—not that it matters a damn!—but I’ll never get over it. Not that that matters, either. I suppose you’re what they call a ‘career’ woman now. You were, even then. You wouldn’t let a dumb farmer like me stand in your way!”

“I’m sorry, York.” Her words were a faint whisper. “I—I didn’t want to hurt you. You must know I didn’t.”

He drew her to him. “You didn’t want to, *but you did!* And I’ve told you I’ll never get over it. And now—I’m more in love with you tonight than I ever dreamed of being four years ago. I wouldn’t have thought that possible. I’d made up my mind to do everything I could to forget you. But—look at me, Minella! Darling, you haven’t forgotten, have you?”

She could not speak. She felt his arms tremble as he drew her close, his lips warm upon hers. Out of the tumult of her blood her heart silently cried, *Oh, York, York, why must it be so? Why can’t I tell you the truth? Let me yield now—and not care, whatever happens tomorrow!*

“Minella!”

The name brought her to herself again. She drew away from him with abrupt force. “York, I’m no longer Minella Hanks. I’m Mary—Mary Hallard. That was my name on the doorbell. I don’t share this apartment with any other girl. *I’m* Mary Hallard.”

His silence was so prolonged she thought she would scream. At last he smiled stiffly. “I see. What a conceited ass I am! I should have known this was only a crazy dream.”

“I had to do that, York,” she went on, “if I was to have a life of my own. I had to forget Minella Hanks—and Red Willow. I couldn’t stand thinking about them. They weren’t enough. I had to do things on my own; live where people were doing the things I want to do.” She steeled her eyes against the pain in his.

“Okay, kid! I’ve been acting like a damn fool again. Forget it!” Mary smothered the protesting cry that rose in her throat. “Well.” He clasped her hand with a down-twisted grin. “That’s that, Minella. Mary, I mean. I know where I stand now, and that’s something. Good luck, kid! If you ever get out our way, look in on us. We’ll always be right where you left us. So long!”

He turned on his heel, seized his hat and coat from the closet and was gone before she could release a word from her tight lips. A moment later she heard the street door close.

Chapter X

WHAT finality there was to the sound of a door closing, Mary thought years afterwards, as she sat alone in her apartment on Bank Street, in Greenwich Village.

A moment ago Susan Hastings' young man, Harry Tuke, had closed the door behind him, and Mary had listened again, as she had listened that night in Minneapolis, to the closing of a door.

The play had been moving along very well for the past two weeks, and Medford Giles had taken the night off. Mary had settled herself for a quiet evening when the telephone rang and Harry Tuke asked if he might come to see her.

"I want to talk to you about Susan," he said as soon as he was seated in the chair Mary had offered him. He was a good-looking youth, with a shock of dark hair and brown eyes.

"I could have guessed that," Mary said with a smile. "I hope nothing has happened."

He came directly to the point. "It's this play you're writing," he said. "Susan thinks she wants to work in it."

"I know. We've talked about it, but nothing has been decided. The play is not finished yet, and even after it is—"

"That's why I'm here now," Harry Tuke interrupted. "A month ago Susan and I decided to get married. Her sister tried to break that up, and

then, when you came back from your trip, I thought for a while we had it all fixed.”

“I thought so too,” Mary said. “In fact, I urged her to go ahead and get married.”

“Sure. She told me. And that was darned nice of you, Miss Hallard. But then all of a sudden she gets this bug about some part you’re writing into the play just to give her a chance—and so the whole thing’s called off again.”

“I’m afraid there’s a misunderstanding somewhere,” Mary said. “Nothing was written into the play to give Susan a chance. When she made a copy of the first act, she saw a small part she thought she could fill. The part was there before there was any thought of Susan.”

“It adds up the same, either way,” Harry Tuke declared. “I don’t mean you’re trying to break it up. Susan’s got this idea about wanting to go on the stage, and I’m here to see if anything can be done about it.”

“You want to see her on the stage, is that it?”

“If that’s what Susan wants, Miss Hallard, then it’s what *I* want. I’m not going to stand in her way, see? If she’d rather have that life, I’ll do everything I can to help her get it. But it’s got to be one thing or the other. The way I look at it, Miss Hallard, being married is a full-time job. I don’t care if she wants to put in a little time working for you, days. But going on the stage is something different again. Six nights a week she’ll be out till midnight. And I ask you, is that being married?”

Mary laughed. Harry Tuke was so serious. And why shouldn’t he be serious? He was right, so very right!

“Suppose we let things take their own course,” she suggested. “A great many things have to happen before Susan finds herself before the footlights in this play or any other.”

“Sure! I know all that, Miss Hallard. But do you think she’s got what it takes for a job like that? Will she ever get anywhere? That’s what I’d like to know before she starts out. If she’s going places, okay! But if she hasn’t a chance, what the heck! She’s being spoiled for something better, the way I look at it. What’s your idea, Miss Hallard? If it’s going to be worth the chance—”

Was it worth it? “What you will have, quoth God, pay for it and take it!” Who had said that? If one could only pay—at once and in full—and have it over with! If one didn’t have to go on paying, down through the years . . .

On a suffocatingly hot July evening, during her first summer in New York, after a grueling day at the work that had become her life, Mary Hallard had written to Ben Anderson, of Red Willow Junction, South Dakota. It was a cordial note, congratulating him upon his happy marriage and wishing him all joy and prosperity on the land she herself had loved so well. Casually she asked about York Clifford. Perhaps he too was married by now? And wouldn't Ben write to Minella, addressing her in care of "Mary Hallard"?

Ben did. His letter, laboriously inscribed in a round, schoolboy hand, came a week later.

Dear Minella:

We was knocked cookoo to get a letter from you from New York. Gee whiz, you sure done some traveling since you left the old farm. I can't think of you only as if you was still a little kid. Me and Dora have the prettiest little girl you ever seen. Wish you could come out and visit us so you could see her. Dora says to tell you from her you will be real welcome.

The Cliffords are all fine, and it looks like York and Lucille Kellog are going steady, though for a while nobody thought he was ever going to get married, he didn't have nothing to do with girls at all. But I guess he's got to have a wife for when he comes into the old man's farm, and Lucille is sure plumb crazy about York, though I don't know as she's so crazy about the farm, from what Dora tells me. At the ladies aid Dora says they was talking about Lucille and how she was trying to get York to leave the farm and go into business. We are all well and hoping you are the same.

Yrs truly, Ben.

That large, careful period Ben had placed after his name as evidence that he was not ignorant of how a letter should end, had stamped itself on Mary's mind like a symbol of finality of which poor Ben could never have dreamed.

The summer blistered its way through packed subways; through the Red Hook water-front streets odorous of humanity in its most apathetic and least beautiful form; through tenement houses where the smells of stale coffee, gas, spaghetti and garlic, unaired bedding and grease-clogged sinks created the unforgettable bouquet of the poor.

To Mary Hallard, the dense, putty-colored heat was, in a way, a blessing. She did not confine her day's length to the time expected of her by the organization from which she received her modest salary. Almost every

evening she paid a voluntary visit to one or more of the families in her charge.

After such an evening Mary would take the subway back to Manhattan, climb the stairs to her own room in a house on West Twelfth Street, and after a cool tub, crawl into bed too exhausted to think of her own unhappiness.

It was not that she was without other interests that helped to assuage the pain of remembering York Clifford. Lola Tingley and Marian Hurd, family case workers like herself in the Red Hook District, were friendly, exuberant girls, a few years older than herself, who maintained a tiny apartment together on Horatio Street, only a few blocks away from Mary. She had enjoyed simple dinners at their drop-leaf table, and she had met other men and women at their occasional cocktail parties. It was because of Lola and Marian, in fact, that Mary had taken a room in Greenwich Village, after a month of living in a boardinghouse in Brooklyn. But the Village and its colorful distractions had proved no surcease.

“Oh, you’re too serious-minded, Mary!” Lola had complained. “Don’t we all work our heads off all day long for the poor we have a.w.u., according to Holy Writ? If we can’t relax for a minute, what good are we going to be tomorrow? You’re not obsessed with a mission, Miss Hallard?”

“No,” Marian Hurd had objected that time, “I know Mary’s symptoms. She’s either in love and trying to forget it, or she’s going to give birth to the great American novel or play or something. You ought to take a look at some of her case histories. Old Grumble-puss is so impressed.”

“Shut up, Marian!” said Lola. “I’m getting sick of hearing about the way she writes up her cases. The boys will be here before we’re ready. You don’t have to change, Mary. You’re so darned fascinating with that swimmy, blue-eyed way of yours—like a mermaid in a trance!”

Mary stayed for the little party and went to Harlem with them later for dancing and a midnight supper.

It was fun, polished and brittle, taut as a glass-grotesque blown almost too thin. But it had not been enough to shut out the memory of York Clifford.

Mary’s work had become almost enough. And after the letter from Ben Anderson that told of York’s “going steady” with Lucille Kellog, it became more. For it was shortly after that that she began taking night classes in Social Research, an extension of her work so absorbing that it almost filled her thoughts.

Almost—but not quite.

There was the day when she found the two-year-old boy alone in the tenement room on that street off the docks, his legs stretched out like wrinkled greenish spindles, his abdomen distended, his eyes closed. Mary rushed him to the Long Island College Hospital. Doctor Perron, who was in charge of the dispensary, examined the child and sent him away with the nurse.

“You got that kid here in the nick of time, Miss Hallard,” he told her; then smiled as he added, “Of course, he may grow up to be a criminal—but that’s something we can’t do much about.”

Mary was scarcely aware of what he said. There was nothing about him that resembled York Clifford except his smile, curving up cheerfully, generously, across big, square teeth. But no further resemblance was necessary. For days after that York’s presence went with her again, confused with the presence of Doctor Edward Perron of the dispensary.

And then, when she saw Doctor Perron a second time, to obtain a report on the child’s condition, he smiled again and said, “The little tyke is going to pull through, Miss Hallard. My wife has seen him. By the way, she used to be in social service too, but that’s the first case of beriberi she ever saw. It was sheer luck that you found him when you did.”

Sheer luck! Perhaps it was only that she was dog-tired at the end of a dreary, sleeting November day, but Mary could have burst into hysterical laughter before that radiant grin on the young doctor’s face. Doctor Edward Perron, who had a wife who had been in social service. A wife! But it would not really have mattered. He was not York Clifford, after all.

That evening, when she got back to her room, there was a letter awaiting her. It was postmarked “Red Willow Junction, South Dakota.” And it was addressed simply, “Miss Mary Hallard,” not Miss Minella Hanks, in care of Mary Hallard. It was written in a bold, decisive hand. A nook in her mind was startled by the thought that York Clifford’s handwriting was unfamiliar to her. How strange that you could love a person and not recognize, never really having seen . . .

In her small bedroom, Mary sat down to read her letter.

Dear Mary Hallard,

You wrote to Ben Anderson last summer and gave him the address I am using now. Of course, Ben has no idea that Minella Hanks *is* Mary Hallard. I have told no one about that. In fact, I have forced myself to think of you as Mary Hallard, which is all to the good—for me.

The request I am about to make is one you may ignore entirely if you wish, and I shall understand it if you do. You need not even reply to this letter unless you choose.

Lucille Kellog and her mother are leaving tomorrow for Florida, via New York. Mrs. Kellog has not been well, and they expect to spend the winter in the South. As you probably know, Lucille has never been in New York before, and has no acquaintances there. She and her mother will be at the Commodore Hotel Thursday night only, as they are taking the train on Friday morning.

I haven't told Lucille that you are there, or that I've seen you since you left Red Willow—or anything. She knows nothing about Mary Hallard. But it seems a shame that she is to have an evening in New York for the first time, and must spend it in a hotel room with her mother, who won't be able to go out. I'll leave it up to you. If you want to get in touch with her for old time's sake, I know she will be very grateful. The poor kid has had quite a time of it with her mother, who is more neurotic than really sick. An evening's escape from her, at some picturesque restaurant or a theater, would be wonderful.

I hope all goes well with you, and that you are finding what you went to look for in New York.

Yours sincerely,
York Clifford

Thursday. Tomorrow night.

You don't know what you're asking of me, York Clifford! You don't know that you are asking me to entertain a girl whose father *my* father killed. In a city that I know for its harshness, you are asking me to make an amusing evening for a girl who has never known any harshness; a girl whom you will eventually marry! A girl who is taking the one real thing in life that I want—that I can never have!

There was something ludicrously relieving in the sudden consciousness that her feet were wet and cold. If she could just come down with the grippe tomorrow . . .

But she knew there was no escaping this. York would read into any evasion of hers more than she wanted him to read. There was no way out of it. Tomorrow evening she would telephone Lucille at her hotel, and it would be Minella Hanks speaking. Minella would have to meet Lucille Kellog at

some restaurant in the Village, and then take her uptown to view Broadway's million lights. It would have to be that way.

It was a bright, crisp evening. Mary sat at a table close to the entrance of the little Italian restaurant she had chosen, so that she would be sure to see Lucille the moment she stepped through the doorway.

The day had been one of interminable suspense, in which Mary had rehearsed a hundred times each word she would utter to Lucille, every gay inflection of her voice. Now, as the minutes sped by, the tense fear left her, and it was with a detached curiosity that she saw Lucille Kellog enter.

Mary hurried forward, both hands outstretched. "Lucille! Isn't this wonderful?"

Pink with excitement, Lucille smiled in a flurried way, reached up self-consciously to kiss Mary's cheek, then said breathlessly, "I still can't believe it, Minella. Imagine—you being here! When you phoned I couldn't believe my ears."

Mary laughed and led Lucille to the table. "Let's order first, and then I'll explain everything," she said brightly.

It would take a little doing, she thought to herself, but fortunately Lucille had never been too acute. And Mary had already written to York, so that there would be no discrepancy between his explanation to Lucille and hers.

"This is just one of York's surprises," she said smoothly when the waiter had gone.

Lucille had been gazing about her in a wide-eyed artlessness that was rather funny, when you remembered the sophistication she had affected back in Red Willow. "Oh, I had suspected that," she said quickly. "He's always springing surprises."

"He got my address from Ben Anderson—you know, the man who has our old farm now—and he wrote me that you were coming to town and would be at the Commodore tonight."

"Imagine!" Lucille's smile was sunny, all eager friendliness and enthusiasm. "And if it hadn't been for you being here, I should have been stuck in that hotel room all evening. Mother wouldn't have let me put my head out the door! Poor dear, she has had such a time of it. It's high blood pressure. After Father—" Lucille's smile vanished. "But you too lost your father."

"Please, Lucille, let's not, shall we? I can't bear to think of it. It was all too dreadful. I know how it must have been for you and your mother. I

thought I'd never get over my father's going—that way. But please, let's not talk about it!"

Lucille vouchsafed the information that she had been in an Italian restaurant only once before in her life, and that this food was absolutely grand. Mary explained briefly about her social-service work, but if she had said that she was digging sewers for a living, she thought, Lucille would have accepted the statement with no greater interest. There was one subject uppermost in her mind, as she soon revealed.

"What am I to do, Minella?" she lamented, by way of an opening. "If it weren't for Mother, I know York and I would have been married long ago! Not that we've ever been formally engaged or anything, but—well, we've always taken it for granted, sort of. But I'm all Mother has—at home, I mean. My brother Fred has never seemed like a brother. He's so much older, and he's never been at home except for Christmas or a holiday. And Mother couldn't possibly live on the farm! What would you do, Minella, if you were me?"

Mary Hallard—no, not *Mary*, Minella Hanks now—looked into Lucille Kellog's eyes and said, "But you'd expect to live on the farm, wouldn't you, if you married York?"

"Well, I suppose—it isn't that, exactly. York has a chance to go into business with my brother Fred. Fred owns several cold-storage plants, and he's planning to open another one in Sioux Falls. York can have the job of managing it if he wants it. And Red Willow is such a stupid hole, Minella!" Lucille's rosebud mouth wore the petulant pout Minella remembered so well. "You don't know how lucky you were to get out when you did!"

"Yes, I suppose I was lucky," Mary breathed. Then she asked slowly, "Do you really love York, Lucille, or—"

"Why, of course I love him." The complacency in Lucille's voice stirred Mary to quick anger. "And I know he loves me, though he never was exactly what you'd call a firebrand!" She laughed indulgently. "But we've known each other all our lives, and I know I'd make a good wife for York. He needs managing. For all he's so expert at farm things, he's dreamy when it comes to money matters, and he'll always be satisfied with just a comfortable living unless he has somebody to urge him on. I'd like to see him go into politics. Judge Roberts—one of Father's friends—has been talking to York about it."

"And what does York think?"

"Oh, he's interested in reform and all that, and if I could once get him away from that precious farm of his—"

“Lucille!” Mary broke out in vehement protest. “Don’t do that to York! Don’t take him away from the land. He loves it. He’d be lost without it. I know—because if the land is in your blood you can never be free of it. It’s in York’s, Lucille. Back in England, his people were farmers. Don’t take him away from the one thing in the world he loves—besides you!”

Astonishment widened Lucille’s eyes. “But it would only be for his own good, Minella! Even on a model farm you can’t make any money these days. And—”

“Money is important, but is money everything, Lucille?” In the very asking of the question, Mary felt its futility. By Lucille’s standards, love would be painful where there was too little money.

“Well, of course not, Minella. But I see no reason—”

“It’s really none of my business,” Mary interrupted hastily. “York would do well in business, probably. And he’d do well in politics. He’d make a wonderful Senator, I’m sure.” She laughed as she thought of that. “It just happens that I remember him as”—*as a bronze young god striding down from a ripe field to a little creek!*—“as being so devoted to his work on the farm. Please forget what I said, Lucille.”

“Why, of course,” Lucille said. “I understand how you’d feel about it. And it isn’t that I wouldn’t live on the farm if York refused to leave it. After all, York is *York*. Do you know that I was actually jealous of *you* that summer before you went away? I had an idea—well, anyhow, York and I didn’t really start going together again until this last summer. And he’s *different*, Minella. You wouldn’t know him for the same person.

“I don’t know just how to account for it, but I’ve thought it’s because of my mother. She depends on me so—like now, for instance, when the doctor said she should spend the winter in Florida, and of course I must be with her. York has been so kind about it. But somehow—oh, I don’t know—really, it’s such a problem! I’ve felt absolutely torn apart sometimes, Minella. Mother and York—and me loving them both! What would you do?”

“I don’t know,” Mary said slowly. “I’ve never been in your position. But it’s your life and York’s you ought to think about, isn’t it?”

The spumoni had arrived, and Lucille was regarding it with interest.

It was her eloquent contemplating of the dessert which Mary chiefly remembered the next day, when she knew Lucille was on the train Florida bound.

Lucille had wanted her address, so that she might write to her, and Mary had given it—“care of Mary Hallard.” From St. Petersburg, Lucille sent a postcard, bearing the information, “Most marvelous shells on the beach

here!” She did not write again, but for some reason the autumn of 1931 always thereafter carried to Mary’s heart a legend of empty shells.

Chapter XI

IT would be unfair to blame Spike Schofield for what had happened that spring of 1937—the spring that followed the terrible drought. But if he and his wife Adella had not come East, and if Spike had not so graphically told of the desolation he had beheld on his survey tour of the prairies the autumn before, Mary would never have taken that trip back to Red Willow Junction. If he had not told her of his talk with a young farmer by the name of York Clifford . . .

“He was standing out at his front gate when Sam, my photographer, and I drove up in the car,” Spike had said. “From the look of the buildings, he must have had a good farm—once. But the whole landscape was nothing but gray dunes, with twigs of trees sticking out of them and every bit of paint ground off the buildings by the blizzard of dust. He was a good-looking guy, this Clifford, not much over thirty, but without any life left in him—just like his trees. Darned polite, though! Showed us where they’d hauled out tons of soil that had covered equipment. It struck me that a guy like him deserved to have a nice wife to cheer him up, but he said he wasn’t married. He—hey, what’s the matter, kid?”

“Mary, you look ill!” Adella exclaimed. “Can I get you—”

“No, no—I’m all right, Adella. It’s just—I used to know York Clifford. We—we went to the same school, in Red Willow.”

“You *did*?” Spike’s eyes were keen upon her. “So that’s the setup, eh? You told me once about a— He’s a swell guy, Mary. But look, he’ll come

out all right.”

“Did you meet his mother and father?” Mary asked firmly.

“He introduced me to his mother. Nice old lady. But the old man—it seems he was rounding up some cattle one day in a dust storm, and he stumbled and broke his hip. He lay there a long time before they found him. Anyhow, he didn’t recover.”

“Oh, dear!” Mary pressed her fingers against her eyelids. “He was such a fine person. How was York’s mother?”

“Sort of frail, but she was right in there fighting. She kept telling me their fields would be green again, and she meant it. I hope she’s right. When her son stepped out of the room for a minute she told me that she hoped he’d marry soon. People had to go on, she said, in spite of disappointments. I wish I’d—but how in hell was I to know *you* knew them, Mary?”

She might as well have put the blame for what happened that spring on the fact that she had been able to buy a little green coupé out of her first royalties. Even as she signed the check for the car, the ironical thought smote her again that the summer of disaster to York had brought to Minella Hanks her first success in the world.

It was a modest green coupé, but it took gallantly the bursting spring green of the Pennsylvania mountains. On the western edge of Minnesota, the green coupé received an inkling of what lay ahead. Here the rolling hills had a temporary look, as though they had just come visiting.

The motor hummed. It hummed, “Not long now, Mary, before you are in South Dakota. Not long! Not many hours before you glide down from the crest of a prairie billow, with the prairie wind in your hair, and the pasqueflowers arching blue and soft under the wind! Not long before the valley of Red Willow twinkles up at you from its girdle of new green!”

Mary had been forewarned, yet she could not credit what she saw. The ugly, slate-colored drifts beneath which snow fences were all but buried; the miles of ruin where a patch of spared green shocked the eye! The gray roof of a deserted farmhouse floating like a raft on that gray sea, and the windmill near by like a sinking arm thrust up for help!

But the prairie sunset was as gorgeous as ever, and it had pinioned the town in rosy gold when Mary drove down Main Street toward the Red Willow Hotel. She was grateful for the wide brim of her yellow felt swagger hat when she saw the proprietor, old Mr. Ramsey, in the doorway. What subject under the sun had he and James Hanks not wrangled over?

There was no vestige of the Blue Bird Restaurant across the street. A new hotel had risen on the site—the Grange.

The clerk turned out to be a slick, appraising young man, vaguely familiar. Young Ted Little? He still had the limp. That accident on the toboggan, on Bailey's Hill.

The girl who came to wait on her in the dining room—Sadie Engstrom! Mary lowered her head to consult the menu, which was written in indelible pencil. Pork steak, apple sauce, mashed potatoes. Sadie had been in grade school when Minella Hanks was in high. But in Sadie's eyes there was no glimmer of recognition, and Mary Hallard drew a sigh of relief.

On her way out through the lobby again, she blushed at the nod and the admiring smile of the young clerk.

In the pastel twilight, the Methodist church steeple still rose undaunted. Were the Nichols still there? she wondered.

Two or three young couples strolled arm in arm through the tiny park, where the trees had a strangely raddled look. But the lilacs were blooming, and the young people—on their way to the Dreamland Theater, perhaps—were smiling into each other's faces. A town, any little town, Minella Hanks' little town, anonymous little American town, had toughly survived one bludgeoning after another, and was going on!

Mary angrily whipped the tears from her eyes as she touched the accelerator. "You're going out there tonight, damn it, or you aren't—and that's all there is to that!"

Out there. Southward, under the violet cleanness of the sky where a young moon hung, remarkable furrows of purple mounted and sank, with an occasional studding of green.

Nothing here was familiar to Mary now. There should be a creek under this viaduct. Instead, the dry whips of willows rose pitifully above the choking drift of purplish sand and clay. The earth had flung itself in violent protest from west to east, and here it had deposited a part of its burden. No pasqueflowers on fallow slopes; no plowed, dark furrows, for this earth was still a stranger, a transient, with the intent perhaps to pass on to the oblivion of the Atlantic Ocean.

But presently the known emerged with a stab of pain from the unknown. How small the house looked now—the house that had once been home to Minella Hanks; how betrayed by time and merciless elements! A couple of lank cows stood near the sway-backed barn. A mournful horse looked over the pasture bars. There was a light in the kitchen window, but Mary could not believe that anyone lived there until she saw a little girl come down the path from the back yard. How forlorn the privy looked, stripped of its cloak of wild cucumber vine!

The mailbox at the gate was lettered, "Benj. Anderson."

Mary stopped her car and called to the little girl. When the child paused, Mary asked, "Are your folks at home, dear?"

The little girl stooped and scratched her bare knee. "Pa is, but Ma's in town helpin' with the costooms for the Decoration Day program in the Oddfellows' Hall. I'm stayin' home to take care of my brother. He's only three years old. It's goin' to be a big show, with the high-school kids, and the band, and it's goin' to cost fifty cents to get in, so's to help people."

"What people, dear?"

"Them that's worse off'n us, because of the dust storms."

Mary got out of the car as the front door of the house opened and Ben Anderson came out. He stopped incredulously and stared. Mary laughed. "I'm the girl you invited to visit you once, remember?"

"Well—God Almighty! Minella!"

His rough hands seized both hers. "Come right on up to the house. Dora'll be tickled to see you! She's gone to town, but she'll be back any minute."

Southward before her flowed York Clifford's land. Had she not known for a certainty that it *was* his, she would have been convinced that she was dreaming, so altered were its features. Pitted and hummocked and ridged, with patches of sparse grass, it had a certain fantastic, ravaged beauty under the veiling indigo of the dusk.

Now, on the left, were two plowed fields. Mary looked out over them. The furrows were parallel, but not the long straight lines she remembered, leading sheer into the horizon. They were curved, as though the man on the plow had sought some capriciously novel design. Contour plowing, Ben Anderson had told her. To prevent erosion; conserve moisture.

But there were other things Ben had told her. The story of Lucille Kellog, for instance. In Florida, that winter, she had met an oilman from Oklahoma. When she saw that York Clifford would not leave his farm, she married the oilman and took her mother to live in Oklahoma. It was a good thing, Ben judged. Lucille would never have lasted through the drought years on York's farm.

"She'd been too danged long shilly-shallyin' over it. She liked York a heap better'n she ever did the oilman, but whenever she said so her mother was like to throw a fit. The Kellogs didn't have much money left, so Lucille ups an' marries the Oklahoma feller. That was two years back. Funny part of

it was, York didn't take on bad about it. An' now there's this Maggie Toussaint, comin' out with fresh bread an' cakes for York, ever since his mother died."

Mary stared out over the strangely plowed land. Yes, that was another thing Ben had told her. "Never was quite right after the dust got in her lungs, Mrs. Clifford wasn't. She carried on real game, though, right up to the last—just after Christmas. Last thing she said to York, 'Don't quit now, boy,' she said. 'It's been good land, an' it'll be good land again.'"

York's mother! The strange pattern of the fields swam before Mary's eyes. Oh, York! You're not beaten. You're still fighting. And somehow, you're going to win. I know it!

She had come to the high gate that used to be painted white. New hinges revealed an effort at repair, but the gate was gray, and gaunt shoulders of gray earth heaved up along the fence on either side. The trunks of the tall cottonwoods that made an avenue to the big white house had the same chewed look she had noted on the willows along the creek bed. The driving dust had eaten much of the bark away, yet there was a thin whisper of new leaves on the lofty branches. She drove in through the gate and saw to the right of the house a pale bank of foam. The Cliffords' apple orchard!

In the yard near the gambrel-roofed barn, a bandy-legged little man was leading a team of work horses to the watering trough. He approached the car and doffed his hat.

"Evenin', miss," he said. "Something I can do for you?"

"Is Mr. Clifford at home?"

The hired man bobbed his head toward the house. "He's washin' up the supper dishes. Been no womenfolk to speak of about the place since his mother died. You a friend o' the boss?"

"Yes."

"Well, he'll be glad to see you. From New York too, I see! S'pose things is lookin' nice an' green back there. You should 'a' seen the mess we had here last fall before we started cleanin' up."

"It must have been dreadful," Mary said, getting out of the car.

"You said it, ma'am! We're plantin' a sort o' weed now to keep the soil down till next year. Well, go right in, miss. He'll be glad to see a visitor, I'm sure."

Perhaps not this one, Mary thought. She saw the screen door of the back porch flung open.

The bravado that had sustained her over all the miles of her journey whisked away. She felt only panic—and a conviction that she had yielded a second time to an impulse of monumental folly. She was stricken to a pause there on the path, but it was too late now. York’s voice, deep and resonant, spoke in brusque inquiry.

“How do you do? Are you looking for someone?” Then he caught his breath in sudden recognition.

“Yes.” She walked blindly forward against the wall of his forbidding silence. He had not moved, had not come down from the steps to meet her, but in the dusk she could see the startled widening of his eyes above cheekbones chiseled away from the youthfulness she remembered.

In the lamplit kitchen she laid her hat, gloves and purse on the oilcloth-covered table and faced him.

“You don’t seem very pleased to see me, York,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Minella. It’s just—I wasn’t expecting visitors. You, especially,” he added.

Mary felt the blood hot in her cheeks at the blunt sound of his laugh.

“Ernie Wade and I are batching it here now,” he said. “Having a girl as beautiful as you drop in unexpectedly must have just about taken Ernie’s breath away.”

“Not at all. He had plenty left to talk with, anyhow. I—I didn’t know about your mother, York. I’m so sorry. Ben Anderson told me when I stopped there a while ago. I—”

“Shall we go in and sit down?” he interrupted. “You won’t find the place exactly as it used to be.”

“I never did see it as it used to be. Remember?”

“That’s right. You were invited, but you never got round to it. I’d almost forgotten. Go on in. I’ll light a lamp. We had to cut out electricity this year. Couldn’t afford it.”

It was only then that Mary noticed how worn the kitchen linoleum was, and how the dotted-swiss curtains hung slack and frayed. The paint on the woodwork scaling and soiled. York Clifford’s home! A tautness came into her throat as she pictured what the house must once have been.

The tall lamp in the living room had a circular wick and a globed shade. The lamp was of white porcelain ornamented with bluebirds and pink roses.

“I got this down out of the attic,” York said. “My mother thought it was horrible. She did the painting on it just after she was married. I like it. Anyhow, it’s come in handy.”

“It’s quaint,” Mary said. “My mother always wanted to paint china, but she never had either the time or the money.”

York was kneeling in front of the fireplace, the supple strength of his shoulders visible under his colorless shirt.

Mary forced her eyes away from him. The living room was furnished in substantial comfort, shabby now from lack of care. It must once have been a pleasant room, reflecting the taste of a woman who had made a loved home here for the man she had married, and for their son. A woman who had died when the land turned against its violators. But to the last, the woman had had faith in the redemption of the land.

The fire was going, and York stood up. “I’ll get a couple of oak chunks from the woodshed. It turns cool here after sunset, even if it is May.”

The polite restraint between them now was worse than the clash of their meeting, yet she had depended upon that very restraint. She would do her part to maintain it.

When York was gone, she looked up at the mantelpiece, where a photograph of Mrs. Clifford stood in a silver frame. It must have been taken some years after Mary last saw her, for the softly waved hair was gray. But the smiling eyes; the gentle control of the mouth! York’s mother. Some time in the future York’s wife would surely have her photograph on that mantel. It was that sort of mantel. It was the symbol of the survival of people like the Cliffords: people who would not be defeated by dust storms and drought; people, moreover, who would never resort to violence to avenge a wrong done them. York would have a wife here in this solid house, and children, and happiness.

She heard his returning tread now in the kitchen. Someday some woman would be so familiar with that step that she would know just what mood to expect from him when he entered the room. It was on such small, eloquent things that people built their lives together. Or tore them down! Hurriedly she lighted a cigaret and smiled up at him.

“You’re going to a lot of trouble, York. I’m staying only a few minutes. If you have chores or anything—”

“Ernie will finish up. There, now, that ought to be a real fire in a minute.” He sat down opposite her.

“That’s a marvelous fireplace,” she said brightly. “You ought to see the excuse for one that I have in New York.”

“Mother always wanted a good fireplace. She kept after Dad until he finally put one in. We had trouble with it during the dust storms, but we

finally got it cleaned out, and it's working fine now." The match he put to his cigaret flared up across his face, deepening the lines of anxiety and grief.

The fire began to crackle with mocking cheer. If she could only find words of sympathy to offer York that would not sound trite! But surely he had not forgotten that she too had suffered an overwhelming loss, and before maturity had fortified her against it.

"I knew about your father, York," she said. "Spike Schofield told me. Do you remember the newspaperman who came out here to see you?"

"Schofield? Oh, yes, I remember him. Last fall. He had an article in some magazine. But I didn't know he knew you."

Mary laughed. "And Spike had no idea that you knew me."

York asked abruptly, "What brings you into this Godforsaken part of the world? Or is it any of my business? More story stuff?"

"Yes. I've got to do another book soon."

That was true, as far as it went. But what if she should burst out now and confess that she had really come because her longing to see him again had grown unbearable, after what Spike had told her about him? To *see* him again? It was far more than that. What if she should say: I've come across these years since our last meeting to prove to myself that you are only a dream; that I'm not in love with you still. That I've been in love with a memory only, and that my memory of you has cheated me of my fulfillment of myself as a woman? Or if she said: I've come to tell you that I, Minella Hanks, daughter of the man who killed George Kellog the banker, am still in love with you and always will be, even though you turn your face from me forever, after I've told you the truth?

If she could only find the courage to tell him that she had come out to put to rest forever the ghost of Minella Hanks.

But she said, "I was hoping that you might be willing to help me find what I want."

"I don't know what help I can be," York said quietly, "but I'll be glad to do anything I can. I won't have much time for chasing around the country, but—"

"I wouldn't ask you to do that, York. I'd like to spend the next two weeks or so talking to people in the country. I have my own car, and I know my way around. Ben is going to let me board at his place. He objected at first to being paid, but I wouldn't stay otherwise, so he finally agreed. I explained to him that I was doing some writing and didn't want to meet anybody in Red Willow who might remember me. It's the farmers I want to talk to, not the people in town."

“I suppose Ben gave you all the dope about me?”

“A little. He told me about Lucille.”

He grinned. “Well, Lucille was a nice kid. I always liked her, in spite of her funny ideas. She’d have been all right if it hadn’t been for her mother. Anyhow, she’s a darn sight better off where she is than she ever would have been here. By the way, I should have thanked you for entertaining her in New York that time, but I was busy and didn’t get around to writing you.”

“I didn’t expect that.”

“Let’s get straight on a few things before we go any further, Minella,” he said. “You don’t mind my calling you Minella here, do you? There’s nobody listening.”

“Minella is my name,” she said.

“I think I began to grow up a little after that night I saw you in Minneapolis,” he went on; “the night before you left for New York. I got a different slant on things, somehow. By the time I got home, I had it figured out. This was my place, just as New York seemed to be yours. We were taking separate roads, and that was that. You were going to be useful in your world—I knew that!—so I thought I’d better stop mooning around and be useful in mine. I really began to count for something around this place. Dad couldn’t believe it when he saw how I pitched in. I didn’t tell him it was really you who had brought about the change, of course. He’d have laughed at that. But I did a few things you might like to know about.

“I did a little work with wheat, and got a hybrid almost as good as your father perfected. I introduced a new strain into our herd. Oh, I was Little Johnny Jump-up, all right! I had everything under control. It was almost easy to write you that first autumn and ask you to get in touch with Lucille when she was in New York. And when Lucille finally decided she was also meant for something beyond Red Willow, I had to laugh. It made me think of those ads—‘Always a best man,’ or something. But I wished the kid luck, and I was too busy for any regrets after she left.”

“But you had really expected to marry her, hadn’t you?”

“So what? When the drought hit us, I was glad I hadn’t tried to do my duty toward posterity. What would I have done here with a wife and kids?”

Mary sat silent, looking into the fire.

In an altered voice, York went on, “Well, that just about clears the decks, so far as I am concerned. Now, if there’s anything I can do to help you while you’re here, let me know what it is. I know you’d help me out if I asked for it.”

“Thanks, York. And of course I’d be glad to do anything—” She stopped short, coloring.

“Sure!” he said hastily. “I’ve read your book. I don’t know much about literature, but I thought it was darned good.”

“I hope I’ll be able to do something a little more—”

“You know, I liked your magazine stories better, what I saw of them. They had more punch, to my way of thinking. But who in hell am I to judge? I just know I liked ’em. And I’ve been proud to think that I know the writer. You can take that too for what it’s worth. By the way, I haven’t told anybody that Mary Hallard is little Minella Hanks.”

To escape the impersonal, racking concentration of his eyes, Mary got up and went to the window. “Your orchard is beginning to bloom,” she said abstractedly.

“Yeah. We worked like hell to save it.” He got up and came toward her. “We won’t get much out of it this year, though.”

“I—I’m proud to know you, York,” she said. “Going on as you are—against such odds.”

His shoulders hunched indifferently. “Going on? What else is there to do? It happens to be my job, that’s all.”

“I know. But a lot of people would have given up. Well, I’d better be getting back. The Andersons will be wanting to go to bed. If I come around in a day or so—”

“Any time you like, Minella. I’ll be about the place.”

Chapter XII

IT was two days before she saw York again. He should not be permitted to think for a moment that she was any less in command of herself than he was of himself! Her feeling of pique at his cool rationalizing of his position was unreasonable, but was it not also human? She clung to the idea that coming West had been a measure of self-discipline, and at the same time reminded herself that she had work to do here.

And work she did. Avoiding Red Willow, she traveled many miles in the country round about, visiting towns, villages and farms, and returned to the Andersons' almost numb from the emotional impact of what she had seen and heard. Spiritual defeat in the heart of widespread ruin would have been a less moving thing to behold than the iron courage that shone from the faces of most of these people. They were going on; *there will be a tomorrow, a next year, or a next!* When she called on York Clifford again, it was on a Sunday afternoon, warm and overcast.

"Hello, York!" she cried gaily, getting out of her car as he came to meet her. He wore a clean white shirt and navy whipcord riding breeches frayed at the pockets.

"I was sort of expecting you today," he said, at ease. "Ben told me you'd been buzzing around the country."

"I've covered a lot of ground—and met a lot of people who've been very nice to me."

"And filled a dozen notebooks, eh?"

“Not quite that. Are you expecting any other visitors today?”

“My dear Miss Hallard, the white shirt is a habit. I dress on Sundays, as the Englishman dresses for dinner in the jungle. I’d like to flatter you to the extent of assuring you that I put it on because I expected you to call, but I’m an honest man. I have to tell the truth. But I did think that if you came along we might go on a picnic to a spot that ought to interest you as local color.”

“That would be fun, York! I’d love it.” She glanced up at the sky. “But doesn’t it look like rain?”

“What does?” he laughed. “Come in and help me make some sandwiches. Maggie Toussaint brought me a cake and three loaves of fresh bread yesterday. We’ve got some smoked ham, and some preserves and pickles left over from last fall. We can take coffee with us in a thermos bottle.”

“Maggie Toussaint,” Mary mused aloud. “She was one of the younger ones, wasn’t she? I scarcely remember her.”

“She’s twenty now. Redheaded. Nice kid. She went to Brookings last night to visit relatives for a week or so.”

A half-hour later, in Mary’s car, they drove up a dust-choked lane to the brow of a hill where a few cottonwoods made a meager enclosure for a score of wind-leveled graves.

A half-dozen wooden markers that had once been painted white with gilt lettering sagged back from their places at the head of the graves like gray shingles, utterly defaced.

“The dust storms?” Mary asked.

“No,” said York. “Grasshoppers.”

They drove back down into the valley, York at the wheel.

“I noticed the other day,” he said, “that the willows are in pretty good shape at that spot where you used to bathe in the creek. No water in the creek, of course, but there’s some grass there.”

“Really, York,” Mary said with an effort, “I think it’s going to rain.”

“A lot of people do.”

But it did rain, just as they had finished eating and were drinking a second cup of coffee under the willows beside the bend, where the creek used to be deepest, and where now there was no creek. The rain came in a solid, roaring sheet.

York laughed, threw the picnic things into the hamper, and with an arm about Mary, rushed her back to the car.

There had not been a personal exchange between them, nor was there in the days that followed, yet the same force that had drawn them together in the beginning was mastering them again, with increased power.

You had known from the first, Minella Hanks, that you should not have seen York so often during those two weeks, on the pretext of gaining a sound knowledge of the conditions under which he was toiling to reclaim his land. But above all, you should have resisted the impulse to go to him that tender night in late May, when a full moon was rising like a great burnished medallion over the black arches of the eastern hills. You knew he would be alone in his house, because Ernie Wade had gone to a cousin's wedding and would not be back until the next day. But you did not know how terribly, vulnerably alone you yourself were, until you looked up at him as you both stood on the porch in the moonlight.

His mouth and eyes were suddenly torn with somber anger. It was the only time since that first evening of her arrival that he had betrayed his feelings in word or look. She had told him that she meant to leave tomorrow.

"It would have been kinder of you not to have come here tonight, Minella," he said coldly. "It has been hard enough seeing you during the daytime. But in this light, you're more than I can stand. I've gone without beauty so long."

She had the sensation then of being swept up on a mighty, bruising wave, and her voice shook as she said, "Perhaps I've gone without beauty, too, York—for a long time."

It happened with such suddenness she would never be certain afterwards whether she had taken a step toward him or whether she had put out her arms before he caught her into his. The pounding of his heart was like a heavy surf against her bare throat. He lifted her chin and kissed her once, long and hard. Then, not with violence, but with slow care, he thrust her from him and dropped his arms.

"Thank you—for that much," he said. "I'll never forget it. And now, you'd better go."

His hand was on her arm, and he led her to her car.

"So long," he said, "and good luck." A faint smile lighted his face but did not soften the look in his eyes. "Little girls ought to be more careful, even when they're grown-up," he added, then closed the door and stepped back.

When she had turned the car and started toward the gate, she looked from the window and saw him leaning against the porch pillar, his right arm

thrown up across his head, the shirt sleeve folded back to the elbow. The moonlight laid a satiny patina on the bronzed skin of his forearm.

Odd, how at a moment like this the mind could keep two trains of thought going at the same time. On the drive back to the Andersons' although her consciousness was burning with York Clifford, with a tearing pain beyond the relief of tears, she said to herself, "Thank heaven, I haven't met a soul outside of Ben and York who recognized Minella Hanks!"

It was on that brief drive, too, that she decided that her next book could not, after all, be laid in this familiar scene. She would travel south, to the share-cropper country, and spend the summer there. Some time later, perhaps, she would be able to think dispassionately of Red Willow.

The next morning, as she was saying good-by to Ben and his wife and children, a car drove past and a girl leaned from it and called a jolly greeting. The girl had red hair.

"That's Maggie Toussaint," said Dora Anderson, smiling. "Going out to York's with fresh doughnuts or something, I bet. And she's no more'n got back from Brookings, too!"

"Well," said Ben, "you used to talk about how to find the way to a man's heart. Looks to me like Maggie's beginning to get her bearin's."

Chapter XIII

IT was mid-April, 1941, that the friendship of Mary Hallard and Medford Giles had survived the emotional crucible of their collaboration on "Hunger Dance." The play was finished. Moreover, it had survived those dangerous hours when sheer fatigue had thrown them together with a need for each other that cried out for capitulation; hours when complete weariness of mind left them desolate and lonely and hungry for love. She would be thirty-two next month—the years were wheeling, ever faster and faster, like a merry-go-round on which the golden ring was always just out of reach.

They had devoted themselves so intensely to their work that now when the final curtain line had been polished to perfection, the let-down was inevitable.

They had a play. The peculiar conduct of Morris Ransome, if nothing else, during these past few days had assured them of that. He had called in Dave Orth, his director, and had set about to find a cast to support Katherine Blaine.

"This time I do not wait!" he declared, when Mary and Medford went to see him. "If you two can do this in six weeks"—he tapped the script that lay on his desk—"I will have it in rehearsal in six days. Now you will see Morris Ransome at work. Dave says it is too bad to open the first week in May, but we shall see. We shall see if New York wants something in its theaters or would rather have them stand dark. We shall see if the theater is living—or dying."

Medford wasn't quite ready to agree. "You could try it out in one of the summer spots and work it over."

"I am not a weakling; I am not a mouse!" Morris Ransome declared. "Miss Blaine knows the book; she knows the play; she knows Bernice. Look, already she *is* Bernice! So we have a play. And now we give the public its chance."

"What do you expect to do, hypnotize the cast?" Medford asked grimly.

"With this play, yes!" Ransome replied. "Leave it to me. You two go to Mexico, take a rest, get married—anything! But do not make too much author nuisance at rehearsals, please! We are having a party at the Reads' tomorrow night, eh? I will drive out with Katherine and see you then. Now, I am busy. Oh, Miss Hallard, before you go—your little secretary—what's her name?"

"Susan Hastings?"

"Yes. I like her. Dave likes her. I think maybe she can have that Anna part. She cries easily." Ransome laughed. "We'll give her a chance. And now, good-by, my children."

The late Saturday afternoon was warm, with bland sunlight slanting hazily through the first green of the Connecticut woodland. The porch of the Reads' remodeled farmhouse was full of people who were eating canapés and drinking cocktails—conscientiously.

Susan Hastings had stayed close to Mary since their arrival in Medford's car. Her starry-eyed excitement was understandable enough; to have been given her first part in a play, and now actually to be meeting the other members of the cast—including Katherine Blaine herself!

Mary had said very little about Harry Tuke since the night he had come to see her. From what she had seen of the young man during that visit, she was convinced that he was capable of handling his own problems. It had been more than a week now since Susan had even mentioned his name, and Mary had begun to wonder. Harry had gone into partnership with a friend who had a shop of electrical appliances in Darien, Susan had reported. But that was all Mary knew. And she had asked no questions. If Susan was determined to take her chances in the theater . . .

In a corner of the porch remote from the babble of voices, Mary sat with Medford Giles, Katherine Blaine, Susan Hastings and a posturing young actor in tweeds who was telling Susan how lucky he was to be in the same cast with her. While Katherine Blaine was discussing certain salient points

in the play, Mary reserved half an ear for the talk between Susan and Hilary Baldwin. She found herself smiling drily and a little sadly at the girl's pretense of vivid interest. For pretense it was! There was no hiding that. Beneath her elation at finding herself at last among professionals, little Susan's heart was not in it.

The vivacious Caroline Reade brought a couple of new arrivals to be introduced to the group in the corner of the porch. They were the neurologist Dr. Calhoun and his wife Serena. Ted Reade's top-rank advertising agency was a dragnet for all kinds of celebrities, Mary knew.

After a blithe enumerating of names, Caroline wafted herself airily away to her duties elsewhere.

"I am highly honored, Miss Hallard," Dr. Calhoun was saying with a shy smile. His eyes sparkled under the gray hedges of his brows. "Your first novel was 'A Balcony in Heaven,' was it not?"

"That was my first," Mary said.

"It impressed me greatly. How young you are to have written that, and two books since. You wrote that first one out of a great loneliness, I think."

Mary felt her cheeks color under the shrewd eyes of the doctor. It *had* been written out of loneliness, that first novel of hers. It had been in loneliness that she had first known she must write. She had devoted to it almost every waking hour of her time away from her work in the tenement district. "A Balcony in Heaven," the reviewers had said, was a prelude in a minor key; a haunting cry from the mute heart of the meek; an unforgettable social document.

"I'm glad you liked the book, Dr. Calhoun," she said, "and felt something of what I tried to put into it. So many people who read novels—"

"I never read novels," Serena Calhoun proclaimed. "Why my husband does is a mystery to me, when he knows they are mostly preoccupied with young love."

"Even that can be important, my dear," the doctor said.

"As important as any other simple chemical reaction, I suppose," Serena admitted. "A book on chemical research is vastly more entertaining! But Richard practices what he preaches to his patients—mild forms of escape. In this case, I suspect the escape is from his adoring wife!"

A ripple of laughter went round the group.

"My adoring wife has a theory that all artists suffer from some form of frustration," Dr. Calhoun smiled. "When love comes in the window, art flies out the door. Or is it the other way round?"

“In one sentence, Dr. Calhoun,” Medford groaned, “you destroy all my efforts of years. I spend most of my spare time trying to convince Mary Hallard that marriage—with me, naturally—would solve everything for both of us!”

“I shouldn’t pay the slightest attention to anything these people say, if I were you,” Katherine Blaine said, her dark eyes glowing as she touched Mary’s hand. “They talk for the sake of talking. What they don’t know, these practical souls, is that an artist can take love or leave it alone.”

Morris Ransome appeared suddenly from a doorway behind them. “No, no, it is not so!” he declared. “Love, it is a wine in the blood. A little is never enough. One must have more and more. And when one has had too much—” He spread his palms upward in a gesture of hopelessness. “I have seen it work, many times. I know.”

Mary caught Susan Hastings staring at her with a wide, strained look.

There came suddenly from the graveled drive beyond Caroline Reade’s tulip beds the sound of screeching brakes. Everyone glanced across the porch railing. An automobile—a contraption whose dim ancestry still showed beneath its valiant home coat of black paint.

“A jalopy!” Hilary Baldwin exclaimed with delight. “Some college friend of the Reades, *sans doute!*”

Susan Hastings’ face was crimson. Brave in gray flannels, snapbrim hat and cherry tie, Harry Tuke had stepped from the jalopy and was approaching the house.

Mary heard Susan’s breathless whisper close to her ear.

“I had to tell him I was coming out here today. He said he’d come and drive me over to see the little cottage that’s right near his shop. But I—I didn’t think he’d really come. I told him not to. But he—what’ll I do?”

Mary grasped Susan’s hand. “Run and get your things.”

The incident of Susan’s departure with the grave-eyed young man created a stir among Caroline Reade’s guests. To Hilary Baldwin, it was an affront. Mary consoled him.

“She’ll probably be back soon,” she said.

But when Susan, an hour later, telephoned her profuse regret to Caroline and said she couldn’t possibly be present at her dinner, Caroline confessed to Mary that she wasn’t sure at once who the girl was. Mary laughed, but in her heart there was a joy for Susan that was strangely like an ache.

“I’m counting more on this play than I care to admit,” said Katherine Blaine that evening, when she and Mary were apart from the others in the

big living room. “My last two plays were—well, you know what they were. If I have no more luck this time, I may as well pack up and go back to Denver, where I came from.”

“We’re all hoping, of course,” Mary said.

“It *must* succeed, and I know it will. I’ve *been* Bernice for days on end, living her life, thinking her thoughts. I’ve spent hours in the library, reading about those horrible drought years in the Dakotas. If the conditions still existed, I’d go out and spend a couple of weeks on one of the farms and see it for myself. But they have recovered amazingly, of course. There was one article by a man named Schofield, a newspaperman, I believe . . .”

The buzz of the conversation in the room died away suddenly to a distant whisper. Even Katherine Blaine’s voice seemed strangely muffled and far away. Mary saw Medford leaning against the mantel, smiling at her questioningly. Katherine’s mention of Spike Schofield and the drought had brought a smothering sensation into her breast.

When, later, she strolled into the starlit garden, with Medford, her impulse was to tell him everything, at last.

There was a fragrance of dew-drenched young grass; of tender tree buds moistly opening; of the dark earth-stir of the spring night. Mary was conscious of Medford’s mood even before he took her hand. It was a mood of sadness.

“What sentimental fools we are!” he said. “I could almost read your mind, Mary, when Susan ran out with that young man of hers. You hoped she wouldn’t come back, didn’t you?”

“Of course. And I don’t believe she will.”

“Look here, Mary. You and I understand each other, at least. We’ve proved that. And real understanding is something that few people who marry ___”

“Wait a minute, Medford. I’ve thought of that, too. I’ve thought a great deal about us, lately. But how would you feel if you met Patricia again? Have you thought of that?”

“I’d be proof against it!” he declared. “I’d have to be!”

“I’m not so sure. Something Katherine said tonight reminded me of a meeting I had again, with the one person I’ve never forgotten. I thought I’d be proof against it, but—”

“Could you tell me about it?” he asked.

“I couldn’t tell you everything, but you’ll understand, I think . . .”

Chapter XIV

How quickly May seemed to come around now, each year! Or was it only to her, Mary Hallard, that it seemed so? Perhaps that was it. Memories trooped with intolerable vividness from the beginning of the month to its end.

But if she lived to be a hundred, she thought, this May of 1941 would remain the most exciting, the most fantastic and incredible May of all.

The weeks she and Medford Giles had spent together on the play had been stormy enough, what with Medford's temperamental outbursts and her own stubborn clinging to the integrity of the theme and its characters. But all that was as nothing compared to the feverish days and nights that brought "Hunger Dance" into rehearsal and drove it relentlessly toward its first showing on Forty-sixth Street.

Morris Ransome had refused to take the play out of town for a week's tryout. He refused to listen to any suggestion that it be held over until fall. And the rehearsals were in the fourth day when he told Medford to go home and rewrite the second act.

"I give you twenty-four hours—no more! One day now, it is ten years tomorrow!"

Mary and Medford had sat up all night, but the job had been done, somehow.

Somehow, too, what had seemed like hopeless confusion at first gradually gave way to a semblance of order, and Mary sat through the dress rehearsal at last with a strange feeling that the play was not hers at all, nor Medford's—nor anybody's! It was something that had taken shape mysteriously out of elements that had come together as if through some hidden affinity that made their union inevitable.

When she found herself weeping silently after the final curtain, she could account for it only in the knowledge that she was worn out physically, nervously, mentally. She could not trust her own feelings. She could not think. Morris Ransome was staring straight ahead of him, saying not a word. A minute later he went out of the theater alone.

Medford Giles spoke. "Come on, Mary. That's all—till tomorrow night. You can sleep till then."

She had slept—the sleep of almost utter exhaustion. It was noon before she wakened. This was the day—tonight was the night! Medford was to call for her at five. There would be cocktails before dinner—dinner before the theater—and after that . . .

Irma brought her breakfast tray and set it on the table beside the bed. "An' here's a letter fo' you, Miss Mary—special delivery. Came about an hour ago, but I didn't want to wake you up. So I jus' signed fo' it an' took it."

Mary opened the letter which had been addressed to her in care of her publishers. It read:

Red Willow Jct.

May 9

Dear Minella:

You will no doubt be surprised to receive this letter, but I hope not annoyed.

My cousin Philip Clifford is sending his two children out here to me from England. They are at present staying with a granduncle in New York, but the old man is an invalid and has only a doddering old housekeeper to look out for him. I should like to have the children see something of the city before they come out to me, and there is no one I can think of—except you—who could take them around. Jack is twelve, Lucy ten. Just the age when the zoo and the aquarium would be fascinating.

Could you spare an afternoon, Minella, for these youngsters? And could you see that they get off safely on the train after they have seen everything you have time to show them? I'd be very

grateful to you, too, if you would wire me when they leave, so that I can run over to Minneapolis and meet them with the car. Once they land here, everything will be all right. I have a very good housekeeper, a Mrs. Knowles. She's very capable, and the kids will be well cared for. In fact, things have taken on new life around the place during the past year or so. You wouldn't know the country now.

Your time is valuable, I know, but I am sure you would never regret giving a few hours of it to Jack and Lucy. Their mother, incidentally, was killed in an air raid two months ago.

The address is Horace Aldington, 241 East 77th Street.

Yours,

York Clifford

The letter in her hands, Mary looked at the open window. The soft wind belled the curtains, and she believed she caught the scent of new leaves on the ailanthus trees in the garden below. Tree of Heaven—valiant New York tree!

"Miss Mary!" Irma asked. "Has you got bad news?"

Mary straightened up. "No, Irma. Bring me the telephone book. Two children have been sent over here from England to stay with a friend of mine. Their mother was killed in an air raid. I've got to see them."

"Land sakes, Miss Mary!" Irma's ebon countenance radiated excitement. "We goin' to have chillun in the house?"

"They're going out West," Mary said.

The pasqueflowers, the prairie anemones, are a cloudy, furry blue now, on the rolling, sky wide land of South Dakota. And Minella Hanks is Mary Hallard, in the city of New York.

But a throatful of remembered spring cannot be borne for long. She was dressed and ready for Medford Giles when he rushed in at five and seized both her hands.

"Darling," he announced, "I've done it!"

"Well, you've done what?"

"Two things, as a matter of fact. While you've been sleeping, I've been working. First of all, Jessop is on here from the Coast. I didn't want to tell you last night, but I gave him a copy of the play to read. He called me this morning, and he wants to get an option on it. He smells a hit—only Morris refuses to talk business with him until after tonight. Jessop is coming up to

dinner with us. There's gold in them hills, darling, and some of it is for us. But play up to Jessop, won't you, dear? You can."

She drew a quick breath. "Haven't I always played up?"

"Of course! You're absolutely priceless! I mean it. And just to show you that I mean it—I did something else. I bought Harrington's little cruiser."

"Med! Not really!"

"Practically. I can get it for a song. Poor old Harrington is hard up. I won't tell you how much—not till you see it and tell me you like it. Because it's going to be for us—for you and me! I'm not going to go along this way forever, darling. We're going South for the winter. It'll read well: 'Mary Hallard, Mrs. Medford Giles in private life—' "

"One thing at a time, Mr. Giles!" Mary laughed unsteadily. "If I survive the opening tonight, and I don't expect to—"

"Will you promise to go with me tomorrow and have a look at the boat?" Medford interrupted.

"Oh, I can't, Med. I almost forgot. I have to show a couple of children around New York. Come along and I'll tell you all about it on the way. You know, I'm positively cold from head to foot!"

"You mean—the opening tonight?"

"It's an old story to you, of course."

"You're wrong, there, my dear. Every play is like your first-born. And this one means more to me than any of the others. Can you guess the reason?"

Mary did not reply to that. But later that evening Medford's words were to echo through her mind with a prescient significance beyond belief.

At a booth across the street from the theater, a glass of orange juice in her hand, Mary stood beside Medford and watched the curious throng of first-nighters crowding through the doors. Important openings on Broadway at this season were rare, but the names of Morris Ransome and Medford Giles and Katherine Blaine had been all that was necessary.

Mary watched as if she were in a dream. It might have been a perfect, unshadowed dream, had it not been for the letter that had come from York Clifford that afternoon.

The letter kept stealing into her excited suspense, reminding her that, whether of failure or success, this moment was a transient thing, while the letter stood for something that would never die so long as she drew breath.

Misreading her abstraction, Medford took her arm and grinned down at her. "Come on, Hallard! The guillotine waits. Three minutes to curtain time.

We'll stand near the fire escape in the balcony. It's practically traditional!"

In the brief interval before the lights went down, Mary's eyes swept the glittering audience below. She was startled by that kaleidoscopic view of her whole life which drowning persons are said to have. Had it not been for a tornado in Red Willow Junction, South Dakota, the curtain would not have been rising on this play tonight, in New York City.

Then—unbelievably—the curtain rose slowly on a kitchen that might have been—that *was*—the farm kitchen where she had once done her homework sitting with her feet in the oven. . . .

The end of the first act drew its measure of applause. The curtain came down on the second to a thunder of approval, and Medford's arm went suddenly about Mary's shoulders. "Come on—let's go down!"

In the lobby downstairs, Medford was set upon by women who embraced him. For a moment Mary stood apart and watched him as he received congratulations. Two or three times he looked around for her, but she kept herself hidden. She was startled by the sound of a familiar voice calling her by name.

She turned quickly and looked into the eyes of old Charles Britt.

"Why, this shrinking-violet act?" he demanded. "Come out into the open and let yourself be seen."

"Oh, no, Charles! Just stay here—with me. Did—did you like it? Tell me honestly, because I don't know whether it's good or simply terrible."

"I'll tell you what I think. You've done something you have every reason to be proud of, Mary. The scribes may treat it with reservation tomorrow morning, but the hell with them! The audience went for it. And audiences are going to go for it from now till this time next year, or I'll buy you a drink. In fact, I'll buy you one anyhow after the show, if you'll let me."

"I'll let you, Charles! Wait for me—right here."

She stood at the back of the theater, Medford beside her, during the third act, and knew before the final curtain came down that the play had taken hold. Medford planted a kiss on Mary's forehead.

"We've done it, Mary," he said gravely, his voice quick with feeling. "We've given old Morris another hit!"

It was then that the slender woman, very blond, with a thin face and full lips, caught Medford's arm.

"Meddo," she said with a husky laugh, "you've really done something at last. Something real; not just smart—and money! Good luck, best friend!" She slipped away and vanished in the crowds.

“God,” Medford said, “that was my—that was Patricia!”

Chapter XV

THE long black snout of the roadster rounded another sunset curve, and little Lucy clapped her hands in ecstasy.

“Ooh, Mary! This is the most beautifulest of all! The hills are like big green pillows, aren’t they? What are those pretty blue flowers, Mary? May we pick some?”

“Sit down, brat!” Jack commanded, giving the little girl’s skirt a stout tug. “You’re bothering Mary!”

“Those are pasqueflowers, dear. Prairie anemones. Some people call them Mayflowers.” Mary drew to the side of the road and stopped the car. The children got out, and gathered handfuls of the purplish flowers.

Jack shyly presented her with his bouquet, and thanking him, she bent her face down into the elusive fragrance that had always seemed to her the quintessence of spring.

“Do you think we really will be at Cousin York’s by dinner-time, Mary?” Lucy asked for the tenth time since lunch.

“It isn’t far now, and he’s expecting us.” She had telegraphed York again that morning.

When Lucy squirmed with impatience to see the “little calves and colts and everything,” Jack scornfully declared she meant she was hungry again. “Always eating!”

“Well, it’s fun to eat,” Lucy asserted, unabashed. “And I hope they make butter at Cousin York’s place. I’m going to eat a whole pound myself!”

Jack grunted his disgust.

“And so will you, Jackie,” Lucy told him. “Remember the time you stole my ration?”

The road ribboned up another green rise, and from the summit the early lights of Red Willow Junction could be seen twinkling in the valley. There were certain emotions, Mary thought at that instant, for which there simply was no vehicle of expression. Music, perhaps. Chopin’s “Homesick” prelude.

She winked the haziness from her eyes and fixed her mind on Medford Giles. His homesickness was over—she was confident of that. For he had found Patricia again. Or rather, Charles Britt had found her, when Mary had appealed to him at the penthouse supper party after the opening of the play—a party at which Medford ate nothing, drank too much and jeered loudly at two eminent critics. At half past one Patricia had appeared in the doorway of Medford’s living room, in a long black chiffon dress. With her pale, sleek hair, her pale face, she might have seemed substanceless, except for the vivid red of her mouth and her searching dark eyes. She did not smile as she came forward and extended her hand to Medford.

“Charles asked me to come,” she said. “Shall I stay?”

It was a sensation for the gossip columns, of course. But not one of them could have described Medford Giles’ face at the moment when he saw Patricia standing on the threshold of the penthouse living room which symbolized all he had won and lost—and won again.

That he had won it again, Mary learned two days later when she telephoned Medford to let him know of her decision to drive the children West. Patricia was with him, he said.

“Don’t let her go, this time!” Mary said.

Medford had laughed and replied, “Hurry back, Hallard! The town won’t seem the same without you.”

Now, as the car purred down the gentle slope into Red Willow, Mary recalled those words and had an odd feeling that she was bidding Medford still another good-by.

Mrs. Knowles, the middle-aged housekeeper, Ernie Wade and another hired man were out in the yard with York to welcome Mary and the children. In the confusion of greetings, Mary felt momentarily disintegrated and wished she had not come. For York, after a quick, firm handclasp, turned

from her to the children, hoisted Lucy to his shoulders, took Jack's hand and went indoors, leaving Mary to follow with Mrs. Knowles.

Over a transcendent chicken dinner, the children gave a rhapsodic account of all they had seen on their motor trip with Mary. While they talked, Mary kept smiling encouragingly at them so that she need not glance at York Clifford. How overwhelming it had been to these English youngsters, she thought steadily, to behold at last a world so wide, so free, so full of sky and roving earth!

Mrs. Knowles took the children up to bath and bed, and Mary was finally alone with York. Her hands were tight on the arms of her chair as she hazarded a look at him.

York was thinner, the flanges of his nose cut more deeply into his lean brown cheeks. But with that finely honed look, there was a resilient vitality even more stirring than before, as if now he might be living for the sheer sake of living, to satisfy his own curiosity about the experience, come what may. Or perhaps she was imagining all this! Perhaps his face showed only traces of his grueling battle with the land, and the irony of a triumph that would be forever empty unless he had someone with whom to share it.

He stared into the fire. "Maybe you've noticed the change around here since you were out four years ago."

"It's almost unbelievable," Mary said warmly.

"I'm glad the kids dragged you along with them. You'll see now how we're working our way back to a civilized existence."

"The kids were only an excuse for me to come out. You must have guessed that." The words escaped her almost before she was conscious of their meaning.

"No, I didn't," he said slowly. "Are you in any hurry to get back to New York?"

"No. In fact, I'm tired. I need a holiday. You couldn't have heard about it yet, but I'm co-author of a play that opened on Broadway last week. A dramatization of my last book. It—it was hard work."

"Congratulations!" There was simple sincerity in the word. "I don't pretend to know anything about such things, but it ought to make a fine play."

"You've read it?"

"Sure! It's over there on the top shelf, with your first two. I've read it and—it's good!"

Mary glanced across the room. Everything here was fresh and fine now: new paint, new wallpaper, new curtains and slip covers. And no thanks to her in any way whatever!

“It was sweet of you to buy the book, York,” she said faintly, “but I could have—”

“I didn’t buy it. Maggie Toussaint gave it to me for my birthday. She asked me what new book I’d like, and I chose yours.”

“Oh! What’s Maggie doing now?”

“Well, she took up nursing. She’s at the hospital now, but she comes out once in a while on her days off, or we go to a movie or a dance in town. She’s trying to get a place with an ambulance outfit to go to England. The girl has what it takes!”

“Little Maggie Toussaint!” But she wouldn’t be so little now. She’d be about twenty-four. And then, suddenly, it was unbearable. Mary had to know; she simply *had* to know! “You’ll be terribly anxious about her, won’t you, if she goes?”

“‘Terribly’?” He studied her face. “If you mean—there’s nothing between Maggie and me, if that’s what you mean.”

And that’s not Maggie’s fault, Mary thought. *No wonder she wants to go to England!*

It had to be now or not at all! York’s eyes, more deeply gray and quiet, were still fixed upon her face. “York,” she said, “it’s almost fifteen years since that terrible thing happened to us! The world has gone into a tailspin since then. What happened to me when I was seventeen doesn’t matter any more, except that I want to tell you what it was. It’s so unimportant now, in the face of what’s going on all over the world. I should have told you the truth that night here—four years ago. But I didn’t have the courage to tell you then.”

“The truth?”

“George Kellog didn’t die that day when the bank was wrecked by the tornado,” she hurried on. “Yes—he died, of course, but not—not in the way people think he died. He—my father killed him—just before the storm struck.”

York’s features altered only from astonishment to a puzzled, incredulous frown. “What—who the devil told you that?”

Mary folded her arms tightly across her breast. “My father told me himself, before he died in the hospital.”

Then, carefully, she went back to the day of the tornado and reconstructed the story, scene by scene.

York had got up while she talked. When she had finished, he stood above her, his eyes dark and intense. “And that was the reason you ran away from me?” he asked.

“Wasn’t it reason enough?” Her lips were dry and tight.

“And that was why you acted the way you did, that night in Minneapolis?”

“Yes.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “God, how young we were, and how damned foolish! Didn’t you know that I’d have married you even if your father had killed a dozen George Kellogs? Why in hell didn’t you tell me?”

“How could I tell you? You were York Clifford. I was Minella Hanks. And I was twenty-one, York.”

“You were only seventeen that day in the basement of Penhollow’s store,” he said, “but you were old enough to know that you loved me.”

He paused, and the memory of that day of violence and beauty and heartbreak stood between them as alive as this moment.

“Yes,” she said.

He leaned against the mantelpiece. Then, turning abruptly, he said, “Somewhere tonight the gods are having a good laugh to themselves. The laugh is on York Clifford and Minella Hanks. Your father didn’t kill George Kellog. He *should* have. But George died in the hospital, of a broken back. What your father started, something stronger finished. We picked that old nickel-pincher up in the street outside the bank, with a piece of timber across his middle.”

Mary stared up at him, her brain whirling, feeling entirely empty, unreal. “York! I—I can’t believe you!”

An angry red mantled his cheeks. “Why should I lie about it? It would be a waste of time, after fifteen years.”

“It would be,” she said with soft vehemence. Oh, she must be daring now; she must not permit him to draw up another barrier between them! “Oh, York, could any two people have wasted their best years more completely than—”

“Wasted? That isn’t true in your case, and perhaps not altogether in mine. Perhaps it all makes a pattern, if we only know how to look at it.”

Suddenly it was intolerable. Mary sprang up and went to the window that looked out upon the little orchard. The stars were heavy and white over

the bloom of the trees. She buried her face in her hands.

“Minella!” York spoke close to her shoulder, his voice rough with uncertainty.

“Let me alone!” She stamped her foot. “I—I’ve come all the way out here to—to be with you—hoping everything—and—”

He swung her about, leaned and cupped her face in his hands. “Darling, do you really mean that you’ll stay if I insist on it? You’ll do your writing here? You’ll marry me?”

“Are you asking me?” Her eyes shone wet.

He laughed huskily. “I kind of like your writing, Minella Hanks.”

She would have replied to that, but she found herself breathless in his arms.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook using the title page.

[The end of *Love Passed This Way* by Martha Ostenso]