Burning Beauty

TEMPLE BAILEY

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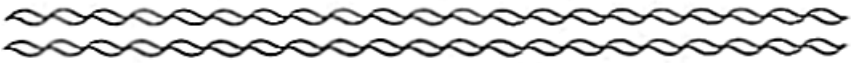


Burning Beauty

CHAPTER ONE

An Old Garden in an Ancient Town

THERE were three people besides the chauffeur in the great motor car which swept along the road from Baltimore, crossed the big bridge which spanned the Severn, and came at last into the streets of the ancient capital. Annapolis was steeped in the wine of an October day. The old town was, itself, like wine of excellent vintage—mellow and ripe, yet with something heady about it which sent a bit of wildness through one's veins.

Of the three people in the car, two were women. "Why in the world have you brought us here, Tony?" the older woman asked.

"I wanted to see you and Marty, Mother."

"That isn't your real reason."

The other woman demanded, "Is it a girl?"

He smiled at her—what a silvery thing Marty was in that gray coat and gray fur, and with the silver buckle of her little hat coming down against her silver-blonde hair. Not many women would have dared all that shine with such indefinite hair, but Marty dared anything, and with the violet of her eyes matching the violets pinned to her fur, she had achieved an effect impossible to a woman of less taste and discrimination.

"Why ask a thing like that, Marty?"

"Well, it's always a girl with you, isn't it?"

"I'm not so fickle. And why should I want anyone else when I can have you?"

She flickered her lashes at him: "The possessiveness of you, when you haven't even asked me!"

"Why risk failure?"

She knew he had not even risked success. Both of them knew it. Marty Van Duyne had never been sure whether if Tony had asked her to marry him she would have accepted. She was not sure, indeed, that she was in the least in love with him. But he amused and interested her. She liked his good looks—his tallness and fairness. She liked too, the sense of humor which carried him through life on a sort of rising tide of gaiety.

Marty's own sense of humor was limited, hence her need of Tony's. She was like some beautiful and sober-minded queen, who keeps a jester at her elbow. Marty was aware that when she was with Tony, she shone more brilliantly because her own great charms were linked with his laughter.

He was laughing now, as he swept his hand suddenly across his mother's eyes. "Don't look till I tell you, Midget," he cried.

His mother, a small person, whose girlish clothes gave her a false effect of youth, murmured, "Don't be stupid." Then as he removed his hand from her eyes, she gave an incredulous cry, "Tony, how wonderful!"

The car had stopped at a Georgian house of red brick, with white-painted and carved doors and windows whose beauty, as Tony expressed it, "put out your eye." The front of

the house faced on a narrow street, but the rear door looked out over a garden surrounded by a box hedge, and it was at the gate of this garden that the car had stopped.

Above the gate hung a placard. On it in huge black letters was proclaimed:

TO BE SOLD AT AUCTION
ALL THE CONTENTS OF THIS HOUSE
KNOWN AS THE KENT-OLIPHANT HOUSE
RARE FURNITURE AND SILVER NOT
HITHERTO OFFERED
SALE BEGINS AT TEN O'CLOCK

"There, Midget, isn't that reason enough for bringing you down?"

"More than reason." Mrs. Bleecker's face wore a look of ecstasy. She had two important concerns in life—her son and her collection of antiques. And she knew something of the Kent-Oliphant house, its inaccessibility to would-be purchasers, the value of its contents. She asked with eagerness, "How does it happen they are selling?"

"The father is ill. He has been sent to Colorado, and his wife has gone with him. They had to have money for the trip. I understand the house is mortgaged to the limit, so there was nothing to do but raise money on the old things."

Mrs. Bleecker's eyes were darting from one group to another. "There are a lot of dealers. You were a dear, Tony, to have me down." Her fingers rested lightly on the gold braid of his sleeve. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

People were already beginning to gather in the garden—all kinds of people: bargain hunters from the big cities, who knew what they wanted; motorists, staying over out of curiosity to see others buy; neighbors in the old town, stiff with indignation at a Fate which permitted such things to be—the neighbors who had for two generations resented the withdrawal of the Oliphants from the social life of the town, but who were none the less loyal to old associations and to old traditions.

There were, too, the dealers, keen, alert, knowing that here were treasures almost beyond price. "I've had my eye on this house for years," one of them was telling another, "but I never really hoped that the moment would come when I'd get a chance at it. There's an Adams fire-screen that's worth its weight in gold, and a pair of Empire pieces that would make your mouth water. They're the kind of people who would starve before they'd sell, but they've had to come to it."

The auctioneer was at hand. Several pieces of furniture had been brought out and set in the garden, other and smaller articles were still in the house, and the auctioneer's men were showing them. Tony's party attracted much attention—the tall young officer in his lieutenant's uniform, the small mother in coat and close helmet of orchid cloth, the silvery girl who shone in the morning sun.

"There's Michael McMillan," Marty said, suddenly. "I might have known he'd be here."

She went toward a table on which a slender, dark man sat swinging a foot. He turned at the sound of his name and got down.

"Marty, my dear girl, where did you come from?"

“Baltimore, with Mrs. Bleecker. We ran over from New York last night. Do you know Jane Bleecker? Well, come on and meet her.”

Presenting him, Marty said, “He’s a fiend for old things, Jane. You and he will probably be deadly enemies before you get through with the bidding.”

“I’m sure you’ll remember that satisfying slogan ‘ladies first,’ Mr. McMillan.” Mrs. Bleecker’s manner was appealing. She was a hard little person, but she had a melting way at certain moments.

But this time the appeal fell on barren ground. “I have absolutely no gallantry,” McMillan stated, “where my hobby is concerned. I have marked three things on my list. I intend to have them, unless you get them over my dead body.”

“Three things? What are they?”

He flashed an amused glance at her. “If you knew, you’d be prepared. Perhaps you won’t want them, so why borrow trouble?”

He left them to speak to one of the auctioneer’s men, and as Mrs. Bleecker moved toward the house, she asked Marty, “Who is he?”

“He is,” Marty explained, “the famous editor of a famous magazine. Young at that. In his early thirties. His wife died several years ago. They were not happy. I think she was a cold little cat. Since then he has had very little to do with women. He’d be lionized if he’d let himself be. But he keeps to himself and spends his spare time at sales like this. He is always in the hunt for old silver, and he has a lot of it. I met him on a Mediterranean cruise. And we got to be rather good friends.”

Mrs. Bleecker turned a little and took another look: “Rich?”

“He hasn’t millions, if that’s what you mean. He’s not a bloated plutocrat like you, Jane.”

“I’m not a bloated anything, Marty. And I’m not afraid of your McMillans.” She went on, smiling, “Let’s go into the house, Tony. And do get me a list.”

As they entered the drawing-room, they saw that it had been stripped of hangings and that its rugs were rolled up. The things that were to be sold were set about the floor, or laid out on tables. On the mantelpiece was a pair of silver candlesticks, somewhat ornate, but delightful with their rose-garlands and cupids, their floating ribbons.

Mrs. Bleecker at once went toward them. “Look those candlesticks up on the list, Tony,” she said, “I want them.”

At the sound of her voice, a girl who was the only other occupant of the room, turned her head slightly and listened. She evidently belonged to the house, for she wore no hat. Her hair thus revealed had copper lights in it and was wound about her head so that it made a close and burnished cap. Her skin was milk-white against the almond green of a shabby slip-on sweater.

Tony, studying the list, said, “They were a gift from Lafayette to a certain Peter Kent.”

“Who was Peter Kent?”

From the other side of the room the girl spoke: “He was my great-great-grandfather on my grandmother’s side.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Bleecker lifted her lorgnette, “are you one of the family?”

“I am Virginia Oliphant.”

“I’d like to hear more about the candlesticks. Do you mind telling me?”

“Not at all.”

She crossed the room and joined them, standing next to Marty Van Duyne, and Anthony, seeing her thus, was suddenly aware that her vivid beauty dulled Marty’s silver shine as the light of the sun dulls the moon.

So this was Virginia Oliphant. Anthony had heard of her. Who hadn’t in Annapolis? Men did not call on her. Midshipmen, officers, civilians, they were all shut out. She had, indeed, become a sort of legend in the town, like the sleeping princess in the fairy tale—someone to wonder about, a mystery maiden.

Yet the mystery was not hard to solve. It centered in an abnormally sensitive father who had been unwilling that his daughter should accept at the hands of society anything she could not return. There had been generations of Oliphants in Annapolis—beginning with those men of rank and title who had grants from the king. They had acquired wealth and held offices of distinction. Then had come gradually diminishing fortunes and the cataclysm of the Civil War. Kent Oliphant’s father had been killed at Appomattox, and his mother, poor and proud, had shut herself away from the world. Her son had, in his turn, followed her example. Virginia and her young brother had been educated at home, forbidden to mingle with those about them. “I will not have you condescended to by those who are less than your betters,” their father had told them, furiously.

Much of this was known to the people of the town. And they pitied Virginia. She did not look, at the moment, as if she needed their pity. She was so gloriously alive. Like a flame! Incandescent! Tony felt he had never seen anything like it. He wondered what Marty thought standing there beside her.

But Marty was troubled by nothing so unimportant as this girl in the shabby sweater. She moved closer to Tony and murmured, “She’d be a beauty if she were well dressed.”

“Do you think a woman like that needs—clothes?”

Marty wrinkled her nose at him in an enchanting way she had. “All women need clothes.”

“Don’t be absurd, Marty.”

He turned from her to listen to what Virginia was saying to his mother: “I am sorry. The candlesticks are withdrawn from the sale.”

Mrs. Bleecker protested. “But I want them more than anything.”

Virginia said again, “I’m sorry.” That was all. No yielding.

“They’ll bring a stiff price,” Jane Bleecker persisted, “and I understand you need the money.”

Tony said something under his breath. There were times when Midget was impossible!

A flush had come into Virginia's cheeks. "I do need it. But the candlesticks have associations."

"You won't reconsider?"

"No."

That was all. She went away, taking the candlesticks with her.

As she left the room, she met Michael McMillan. Tony saw him stop and speak to her. Heard his mother saying, maliciously, "I'll wager anything those candlesticks were one of the three things he wanted."

They were, of course, and Michael seeing them borne away, asked apprehensively, "They're not sold?"

"No, but they're withdrawn from the sale."

"Why? Oh, I beg pardon. It's none of my business. But you see I've a bowl that matches these—and I'm rather mad about old silver."

She liked his voice as much as she hated Mrs. Bleecker's. It was because of Mrs. Bleecker that she had withdrawn the candlesticks. She had known she could not, no, she *could* not think of those lovely garlands and darling cupids in the possession of a woman like that.

And, having once withdrawn them, she knew that she would never let them go. Not even to this man with the quick and thrilling voice. So she said again, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," he told her.

She hesitated for a moment, then explained: "I only consented to put them on sale because my brother insisted. And I shouldn't have consented. You see, they lighted all our little feasts." She stopped suddenly, unable to go on.

He said, sympathetically: "You are finding it—hard?"

"Oh, yes. This room is haunted."

For a moment he did not answer. He was, indeed, intensely moved by the sight of her girlish distress. It was as if some sorrow in himself went out to meet her sorrow. She was holding the candlesticks now against her, and they made a cross, as if she had laid a crucifix upon her breast.

At last he said, "Are you giving up the house?"

"Yes. It is mortgaged heavily. We can't save it. I shan't mind so much if only someone will buy it who will love it and understand it. I'd hate to have it go to people who'd make their money in pills or pork."

She was trying to speak lightly, to recover her poise. He helped her by shifting the conversation. "There were three things I wanted—the candlesticks, the Dutch spoons and the little Chippendale chair."

"The ladder-back? That was Mother's. She always sat in it."

"Is she—dead?"

"No. She's gone away with Daddy. He's very ill. This was his only chance. That's why we're selling."

She stopped as a young man appeared in the door. Michael knew at once it was her brother. They were much alike. Young Oliphant was taller than his sister, but there was the same grace and slenderness, and his head was topped by the same bright hair. Yet there was this difference, that Virginia carried herself more gallantly. Richard slouched a bit, and his features showed a blurring of the lines which gave strength to the girl's face. Only a keen observer would have noticed the difference. But Michael was a keen observer.

"The sale is beginning in a few minutes," the boy said; "I thought you'd like to get away from it."

She explained to Michael, "We're going to the attic and watch things from there."

At that moment, Richard saw the candlesticks in her arms. "Where are you taking them, Jinny?"

Her voice had a note of appeal in it. "Rickey, I'm not going to sell them."

"Why not?" sharply.

"Because—we must save something out of it all—"

"But they're the most valuable item in the lot. Grogan says so. He's not going to put them up until the last."

"He's not going to put them up at all."

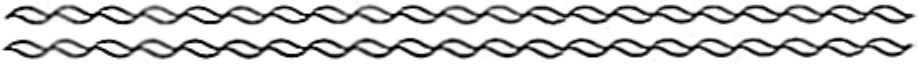
"Oh, you—that's sentimental rot!"

As he flung himself away, the girl's face went white. She spoke to McMillan. "Rickey isn't often like that."

"I'm sure he isn't," he said heartily.

Her face lighted. "I hope you'll get the things you want. If you do, I have a feeling that you'll be friendly to Mother's little chair."

Before he could answer, she turned and left him. He watched her as she went up the stairs, the silver crucifix still clasped to her breast. From across the room Anthony Bleecker also watched her. But he did not see the crucifix. He saw only her beauty, the vivid loveliness which put Marty's more delicate charms in the shade.



CHAPTER TWO

The Man on the Table

GOING up the stairs, Virginia shrank from the thought of facing Rickey. He'd probably keep on tormenting her about the candlesticks. And she did not mean to give in. Rickey had his way about most things. But he should not have it in this. Yet she dreaded his arguments. They were always so logical. And there was no logic in this feeling of hers. She had only sentiment to urge, and Rickey was done with sentiment. "We've been held back all our lives by the past. We've got to break away, Jinny, or go under."

And now she would hear it all over again!

But she did not hear it. As she came into the attic, Rickey was standing by the dormer window. "Come here, Jinny," he said, excitedly, "did you ever see anything like it? That last big car brought down a lot of New York dealers. One of the auctioneer's men told me. It seems they've had their eyes on us for years, hoping we'd have to sell."

She went and stood beside him. Gazing down from the window she saw the garden as a picture which might have been painted in the blazing colors of some modern brush. There was the black of the boxwood, the flame and fire of the chrysanthemums, the light and shade of the clustered crowds, the hard blue of the sky and of the river which rose to meet it.

Virginia had a curious sense that the whole thing was unreal. All her life this had been her house, her garden. A shabby old place; a shabby old prison, she had sometimes thought it. Yet now that it was hers no longer, it took on sudden importance. Her home. She had been born there. The furniture which the auctioneer was crying had been her furniture—the bed on which she had slept, the table from which she had eaten. She turned, suddenly, and hid her face against her brother's shoulder.

His arm tightened about her. "Jinny, Jinny," he said, soothingly, "we aren't going to cry about it, are we?"

That was like Rickey, doing the unexpected thing. She had looked for blame, and here he was loving her, making the best of things—dear Rickey!

Now they were putting up Dad's old secretary. The auctioneer's voice rose in eager exhortation: "The original brasses, ladies and gentlemen, and a spread eagle!"

Virginia lifted her head from Rickey's shoulder and listened. That old spread eagle, beloved of her little girlhood! Grogan could not tell the history of the secretary. Not as she could tell it. Oh, the times that she had seen her father sitting before it, his thin white hand traveling across the sheet of paper, an aristocratic hand with a seal ring on the third finger.

The secretary had known all of Daddy's wild exaltation in those first days when he had begun to write his verses. It had known, too, the death of his dreams. A generation ago he might have been acclaimed a great poet. In this day of new forms and stark realism, his fastidious phrasing, his delicate reticences had been scorned. And so the spread eagle which once seemed to Virginia to scream its triumph had become a sinister

symbol of failure. A vulture, waiting for its prey! Well, after today she would never see it again. Eagle or vulture, it would be gone forever!

The bidding was active. The man who had wanted the candlesticks was in the lead. Virginia watched him with interest. He was not, she told herself, handsome in any spectacular way. But there was about him a certain charm of boyishness, and the kind of good looks which one found in the pictures of the present Prince of Wales, the same smiling gaze, the alert lift of the head. As he sat there on the edge of the table and flung his bids back at Mrs. Bleecker, he had an air of distinction which set him apart from the other people in the garden as a leading man on the stage is set apart from the members of the chorus. His rough tweeds bore the marks of a good tailor, yet Virginia felt that stripped of conventional garments, he would have gone gladly in rags over the hills and far away, like the piper's son in the nursery rhyme, or Alan Breck in Stevenson's story.

As she looked down on him, he suddenly looked up and lifted his hand in an almost imperceptible salute. She liked that and showed her radiance as she leaned forward.

Mrs. Bleecker made her bids in a crisp, cool voice. Virginia knew something about the Bleeckers. The son, Anthony, was in the Navy. His family had multi-millions, but it was a tradition in the family that an Anthony Bleecker in each generation should sail the seas in his country's service. From midshipman to admiral there had been a string of them, since the days of the Revolution.

And this Anthony was a squire of dames. Even to Virginia in her seclusion had come whispers of his gallantry. Nothing scandalous or sordid, but rather a series of light-hearted adventures. In these his mother seemed to acquiesce, for she was always motoring down to Annapolis from Westchester or Easthampton in her big car to see her son, and she usually brought a girl with her as guest. Not always the same girl, but always a charming one. And for a few days the big car would go whirling through the town with Anthony in devoted attendance on his mother and her charming charge.

If Mrs. Bleecker wanted the secretary she would probably get it. "She has more money than she knows what to do with," said Virginia, pointing out the little lady to her brother.

Mrs. Bleecker did not get the secretary, however, for a girl in the crowd began suddenly to bid for it. She seemed to be alone, and stood with her hands in the pockets of her rough plaid coat. She was too plump to wear plaid and should have known it. But her lack of taste was redeemed by her prettiness. She was pink and white, and brown curls showed under her pull-on hat of pale blue. She evidently intended to get what she wanted, and calmly overtopped Michael's bids and those of Mrs. Bleecker. The dealers had dropped out early in the game. There were other secretaries in the world, and the price was going too high for their percentage of profit.

"Five hundred," called Michael.

"One thousand," from Mrs. Bleecker.

"Fifteen hundred," from the girl in the blue hat.

Rickey was breathless. "By jinks, Jinny, if things go like that, we'll have more money than we know what to do with."

The secretary was knocked down finally to the girl in the blue hat. Michael got a needle-point stool and the ladder-back chair, and Mrs. Bleecker came off triumphantly with the Dutch spoons!

Rickey in the dormer window was saying, “To think, Jinny, that we never dreamed of this—and now we’ll have enough to finance everything!”

His sister was not so optimistic. “There’ll be the expenses of two families, Rickey. And the debts.”

The debts! The night before she had sat late, going over papers, and the findings had appalled her. There were business matters which should have been looked after years ago by her father, which should be looked after now by Rickey. But the men of the family were not business-like. Neither for that matter was Virginia, but she had told herself that someone had to save the family fortunes from chaos. So she had set herself to find out how things stood. And she had found this, that if the furniture sold well, and if the house went for all it was worth as a relic of historic days, there would be money enough to meet the bulk of their obligations, and to set her parents’ minds at rest as they started out on their dreary journey—as for Rickey and herself, they were young and the world was before them.

All through the years she and her mother had been the rigid economists. The little mother who, in her girlhood, had never lifted a hand to domestic duties, had learned to manage with one clumsy maid. Virginia had learned to cook, to set the table, to dust the old mahogany, to polish the silver. The two women, daughters of a long line of leisurely beauties, who had flirted in the old garden, and danced at the Governors’ balls, and entertained and dined distinguished visitors to the old town, who had worn brocades brought in great ships from England, and jewels handed down through generations—these descendants of a chosen class, had used their hands, their brains, their inherited tastes in making a home, even in the midst of poverty, which should retain its charm of good breeding and exquisiteness.

And the men had taken all this easily, acquiescing, not aware of the sacrifices, the father, dreaming at his desk, the son no less a dreamer as he lounged through the days.

Mrs. Bleecker was bidding now for a small white-painted mirror. Grogan proclaimed it “Early-American.” “It shouldn’t have been painted, of course, but it has good lines.”

He ran up the price until the mirror came at last to Mrs. Bleecker for one hundred and fifty dollars. “Going . . . going . . . gone . . .” cried the auctioneer.

Virginia, waking suddenly to the situation, gasped, “Oh, my soul, Rickey, I can’t let her buy that mirror. It isn’t genuine.”

There was a slight roughness in Rickey’s voice. “You haven’t anything to do with it. She thinks she knows. Why undeceive her?”

“Rickey!”

“You needn’t look at me like that. She has money to burn. Don’t be an idiot, Virginia.”

“It isn’t idiotic to refuse to—cheat—”

She flung her scorn at him and fled. As she sped down the stairs passing the empty rooms she had a shivering sense of desolation. She had looked forward to her new life—she had not thought it would be like this to leave the old.

Reaching Mrs. Bleecker, she said, "I'm sorry. But the mirror you just bought isn't an antique. I picked it up in a department store, and paid seventy-five cents for it. I don't know how it got among the other things. It has good lines and I liked it. So I painted it white and hung it in my room."

Mrs. Bleecker looked the girl up and down. "Well," she said, "you're honest, at any rate." She had an air of condescending to a maid who has returned a pocket-book. She was irritated beyond expression to find she had been fooled. Some of the dealers were smiling.

"If the mirror isn't genuine," she demanded, "how can I be sure of the other things?"

"You have my word for it," Virginia's cheeks were flaming.

Anthony interposed, hastily, "Good joke on you, Midget." In his heart he was saying, "The girl's a duchess. And the way she took Midget's insolence—!"

Perhaps Mrs. Bleecker felt she had gone too far, for after a moment's silence, she said: "I'd like the history of everything I've bought, Miss Oliphant, especially of the Dutch spoons. Can you lunch with us? We're going to run around to the nearest tea-room."

"I'm afraid not," Virginia told her.

Then Anthony threw himself into the breach. "Miss Oliphant, please. All of us want to hear about the Dutch spoons."

Her quiet glance appraised him, but before she could answer, Marty Van Duyne came up with McMillan. "Jane, I've asked Michael to lunch with us. Do you mind?"

It was Michael's coming which did the trick. Virginia felt her heart beat faster. Her "yes" had in it a touch of breathlessness. She disliked Mrs. Bleecker intensely, but she could not forego the pleasure of again talking to Michael McMillan.

"There will be five," Jane Bleecker said. "Tony, you'd better go to the Inn and reserve a table."

Tony went. He had a feeling that Virginia had said "yes" because of his own persuasiveness. It did not for a moment occur to him that it was on account of Michael.

Rickey, upstairs, had watched his sister as she threaded her way through the crowd and came finally to the woman who had bought the mirror. He had seen her smiling, apologetic. It was like Jinny, he told himself, to insist on finespun theories of honor. From what he knew of the Bleeckers, it would not make much difference if they sunk thousands of dollars instead of hundreds in spurious antiques. And it was the way of the great world to let people be cheated if they didn't know any better.

However, trust Virginia for upholding outworn traditions! It was what he and she had been tied to all their lives. Dad and Mother had preached and practiced a code which would have done credit to the knights of King Arthur's court. Young Richard's reaction to it had been to throw over not only their quixotic extravagance but some very stable

and necessary standards. Rickey was yet to learn that "the honor of a gentleman" is not an empty phrase. As a matter of fact, it was Virginia who carried a sword and a shining shield. And if the sword was that of the spirit, and the shield that of her girlish faith in life, they were, none the less, a strong armor of defense against the encroachments of modern shallowness and skepticism.

Rickey did not realize that his sister was beautiful. He loved her and leaned on her, and as the children of impractical parents they had clung together. They, too, had dreamed together and were now going forth on a great adventure. To Rickey, Virginia was a good sport, a comforter in a time of storm, an outlet at odd moments for his irritations, but to him she was not a maiden of mystery, beauty hidden behind bars. She was not any of the things that Tony Bleecker thought of her, or Michael.

Beauty in Rickey's eyes had to do with women like the one down there in gray. By jinks, what a silver witch she was! The sun shone full upon her, but its heat did not seem to touch her. She was cool and pale, with a kind of shining paleness as if she were lighted from within.

He could not take his eyes from her, and drew in his head reluctantly from the window as he heard Virginia's voice behind him. "Rickey, what do you think, the Bleeckers want me to lunch with them."

He whirled around on her and saw her radiance.

"What do they want you for?"

She made a little curtsy. "My company—" Then aware of his frown, she added, "What they really want is a history of the things they've bought. Do you mind?"

"It's rather beastly being left out."

"But Rickey—"

"Oh, go ahead . . ." he turned back to the window. "Who's the girl?"

"Marty Van Duyne."

"She's a beauty, Jinny."

"I don't like her."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. And it's silly, of course, when I've never even spoken to her. But she makes me think of the Ice Maiden in the fairy tale."

"Some day I'm going to put her in a book."

"That's where she belongs, not in real life," his sister agreed, smiling. Then she kissed him. "Shall I look dreadfully shabby beside those women, Rickey?"

He slanted his eyes down over the green sweater and stubbed tan shoes. "You're nothing to brag about, Jinny, but they're the best you have."

She picked up a small green hat and drew it over her hair. "When our ship comes in, Rickey, I'll be grand and gorgeous."

He lighted up at that. “It’s sailing straight toward us, Jinny,” he exulted, “and some day we are going to show those people down there a thing or two.”

“You mean when you write your book?”

“Yes. There will come a time when everybody will want to know us.”

“They’ll want to know you, Rickey, when you are famous. I shall be simply the sister of a celebrity.”

He accepted that with some complacence. Jinny was always saying things like that and he lived on them.

As she started down the stairs, he leaned over the rail: “Jinny, did you mean what you said about not selling the candlesticks?”

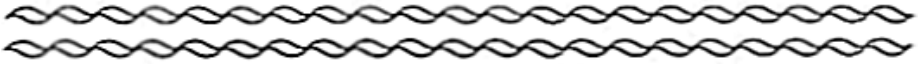
“Yes.”

“Do you know you are being quite—idiotic?”

“Oh, Rickey, let’s not quarrel about it.”

“I’m not quarreling.”

“Oh, well—” she did not finish her sentence. She went on, feeling a bit subdued. Rickey was, indeed, off with the old life and on with the new. But he was young and he had a future. He had been chained by the past. And now he was free. Rickey was to have his chance and how proud she would be to help him.



CHAPTER THREE

RICKEY, looking down from the dormer window, had a distinct sense of grievance. His face was dark as he surveyed the crowd below. Virginia had joined Mrs. Bleecker and the others, and they were all moving towards the gate, Marty Van Duyne glimmering in the midst of them like a silver pool set about with gorgeous bloom. Rickey leaned out and watched her as she went. He was a poet and a dreamer, and his dreams had to do with making a name for himself. He didn't intend to do as Dad had done—scribble sentimental stuff that nobody wanted. For him there must be, first, a big novel. Then with money in his pocket, he would pen the lilting lines that sang themselves in his head, and fame would be at his feet.

As for the glimmering girl, he intended to write at once a sonnet about her. It was beastly luck that he couldn't have gone with Jinny. He didn't care about the food, although it was a bit of a let-down to be limited to the bottle of milk and box of crackers which was all the larder afforded. To sit next to Marty Van Duyne would have been food and drink. But he was a fool to think of a thing like that—he need never expect to sit beside her.

Grogan was going on with the sale, and the plump girl in the plaid coat was still stating her bids in her soft Southern voice. Rickey, weighing her in the balance of his artist's mind, decided that she had a certain prettiness. But Heavens, what clothes! For the next few moments he became lost in a maze of conjecture as to how she would look if he could design her costumes. He'd put her in black tailored things, with a white blouse and a gardenia, and slim black pumps—her feet were good. Why didn't such women study themselves? He shuddered to think what Marty Van Duyne might have made of herself if she had lacked the fastidious sense of what belonged to her type.

The girl in the plaid coat was looking up, and as she caught Rickey's eyes, she beckoned. Then, as he stood uncertain, she made a little trumpet of her hands, and called, "Come down." Rickey wished she wouldn't. The eyes of the crowd were focussed on him. He waited a moment before he began to descend the stairs.

When he reached the lower hall, he found that the girl had entered the house. "Look here," she said, "what about those candlesticks?"

"They're withdrawn," stiffly.

"So the auctioneer told me. But why?"

"My sister hated to part with them."

"Where is your sister?"

"She's gone to lunch."

"Oh . . . couldn't you get her to reconsider?"

"I think not."

"But you'll get a smashing price for them."

"So Grogan said—"

"Sure your sister won't change her mind?"

"No."

Although his tone was abrupt, Rickey was melting. The girl's eyes were as blue as her hat, her glance clear and candid. As he talked to her, he had a sense of effervescent spirits, as if she loved life and laughter.

"Whose candlesticks *are* they?" she was asking.

"Mine as much as Jinny's."

"Oh—then why don't you let Grogan put them up and tell her afterwards—?"

Rickey's nervous right hand ruffled his hair. "Jinny usually has her way about such things."

"I don't believe it."

He was startled, "Why not?"

"Because you don't look weak-minded. I fancy when you really want a thing you get it."

The flattery was not subtle, but Rickey was young and it went to his head. He visioned himself at once as the conquering male. "Oh, now and then I tell Jinny where to get off."

They laughed together. "Look here," the girl said, suddenly, "have you had luncheon?"

"No."

"Won't you share mine? I had a box put up in Baltimore—Women's Exchange—I adore their food, and I hate to eat alone."

Rickey found himself stammering, "You're very kind—"

She turned on him her sparkling glance, "Don't tell me you're going to be conventional."

"But I don't even know—your name . . ." He felt he was being bromidic, but her technique was new to his experience.

"What difference does that make? We'll be comrades of the road, sharing pot luck."

Rickey had a sudden thrilling sense of adventure. "I'll go . . ."

"Splendid."

He caught up his cap and followed her. As they passed through the garden, Grogan stopped them. "I'm going home for dinner, Mr. Oliphant. Before I come back, you'd better see your sister and get her to change her mind about the candlesticks. Everybody is asking for them."

Rickey had only a half ear for him. "I'll talk to Jinny later."

The girl in the plaid coat led the way to a shining roadster as slim as the greyhound which leaped from its bonnet. "We'll run down to the waterside," she said. "You don't

know how glad I am I found you. It's rather ghastly to be alone in a crowd. I was getting fed up on it."

As she drove through the town and out into the open country, she vouchsafed the information which she had hitherto withheld. She was Mary Lee Logan of Memphis. She was buying antiques for the old house in which the Lee-Logans had lived for generations. Her people having been brought to poverty by one war had, quite equitably, been enriched by another.

"Mother has her mind set on having things look as they did in my grandfather's time. I am perfectly willing she should have a Colonial house, if she only wouldn't insist on our living in a mid-Victorian manner. She's adorable, but not up-to-date. All my sisters are cut from mother's pattern. They like to do the things she did when she was a girl. But I'm different. I belong to this generation. Mother's been sensible about it. She says I might as well try things out. She's sure I'll get tired and want to settle down and marry. But I don't intend to marry. I have a voice, and I'm on my way to New York to study music. Some day I'm going to be a great artist."

Rickey turned and looked at her, "I'm going to be a great artist, too."

"Really?"

"Yes. But I shall write."

They were kindled by the thought of mutual aspirations. As the little car flew along, they matched their dreams. The wind sang in the pines. The road between the dark trees was a path to glory. Before they knew it they had reached the Bay.

There they stopped and Mary Lee's glance swept the wide waters—"Did you ever see such color—shall we eat here?"

They descended from the car. Rickey spread the rug, and arranged the cushions, while Mary Lee set forth the feast. Rickey had never seen such a lunch box. Of the finest leather, it was fitted with everything needful in the way of plate and linen and china. And for food there were sandwiches wrapped delicately in waxed paper, a jar of salad, crackers and cheese, fresh fruit, a bottle of coffee, and for dessert, a box of Dutch chocolates tied up in silver and blue.

Rickey ate with an appetite and smiled with content. The girl was charming. He forgot her plaid coat and her plumpness. She was gay, audacious, irresponsible, perhaps a bit sophisticated, but he was having a gorgeous time with her. If now and then there swept across his mind the vision of Marty Van Duyne, whose beauty was food and drink, it was presently forgotten in his enjoyment of real food and of the flatteries of Mary Lee Logan.

Mary Lee's content matched his own. It was not every day that one met a lad like this —slim as a page, poetic as a troubadour, handsome as a Greek god. Her mind dwelt in superlatives as she considered him—that ruffled hair with the wind blowing, and back of him all the blue and white of the Bay.

She made him talk of his book, "Is it written?"

"No. When our things are sold, Jinny and I are going to New York. I shall have a studio. One can do a lot in the right surroundings."

He told her, after that, about himself. He had always been, he said, in a sense, held down. It was like that when you had a father who lived in the past and wouldn't face the facts of today. "You see he wants me to be a gentleman of the old school, the kind who wore swords, and rode to hounds, and put women on a pedestal. He has idealized the men of that time until you'd think they were Knights of the Round Table. And everything I try my hand at seems to him futile. He doesn't want me to write because he made a failure of it and he hates the editors and critics. But I've written a bit and I know what I can do. And Jinny knows it. It was she who made me send things out, and sent them out again when I had rejections. But I've had some acceptances, and a few good checks. Jinny's got a bit of literary talent herself. Once or twice we've collaborated. That's why we are going to New York. We think we can make good. We'll be new to it all at first, for we've never been far from home. But we need just what we'll get, contacts and all that."

"Shall you hate leaving Annapolis?"

"No. I want to be free—to try my wings."

There was a pause while Mary Lee looked out over the blueness of the Bay. In Rickey's eyes she seemed placid and happy. And how could he know that she was not placid. That her busy mind was at work. Mary Lee wanted her own way. She had always had it. And she hated to be thwarted.

So presently she said, her blue eyes as cloudless as the sky, "You talk about being free. But aren't you a bit tied—to apron strings?"

He was amazed at her change of front, "I thought you said I wasn't weak-minded."

"I did. But I am wondering if your sister doesn't boss you a bit."

He flung up his head, "Boss me . . . ?"

"Well, there are the candlesticks, you won't sell them if she doesn't want you to."

She stopped and let that sink in, and presently Rickey said, with a touch of sullenness, "You needn't think it's always like that. Or that I'm afraid . . ."

Her eyes met his steadily, "You're not afraid, of course. But I'd like to see you assert yourself. Not that I'm free from ulterior motives," she had a charming laugh, and her eyes were laughing, "but why not do it? You'll please me, and please yourself, and we'll live happy ever after."

He found himself laughing with her. "Why not? I'll tell Grogan when we get back."

She glanced at her watch with an effect of calmness, but her heart was beating wildly. "We'd better be going."

He helped her with the rugs, the cushions, the lunch box, and when at last he sat beside her in the car, he said, "By jinks, it will be a joke on Jinny."

Mary Lee had a moment of compunction. "It may be more than a joke," she said, soberly, then, with a sudden reaction, "but 'do as you please' is my motto, 'and reap the whirlwind.' "

A little later, Grogan receiving his instructions, asked, "Has your sister changed her mind?"

With Mary Lee's eyes upon him Rickey swaggered, "No, but I'll change it for her."

"I see," the auctioneer had a shrewd sense of what had happened. "Are you bidding for them, Miss Logan?"

"Yes. And if the price isn't too high I mean to get them."

But the price was too high. For before the candlesticks were offered, Michael McMillan came into the garden with Marty Van Duyne. And it was Michael who got the candlesticks.

Mary Lee did her best. She had the dealers against her, and more than that she had Michael. He bid doggedly and they were knocked down to him finally at a price much larger than he could afford. He took it philosophically. He wanted them not only for their historic value, but because they had belonged to Virginia. He had been surprised when Grogan offered them. He wondered if Virginia knew. If not, she should have them back.

Marty, congratulating him, said, "You've paid a fortune for them, Michael."

"Well, I wanted them."

"Do you always pay so high for the things you want—"

He shrugged his shoulders, "I want so little, Marty," and that was all.

It was when Marty went up with Michael to settle for his purchases that Rickey saw her. He was standing in the doorway, and so looked down on her, and as he looked everything else fell away, there was only that glimmering figure. Mary Lee Logan was forgotten, everything was forgotten, except that he seemed to float in endless space illumined by a silver light.

Marty was accustomed to admiration, but as she caught the boy's glance, she was aware of something more than admiration, a sort of breathless wonder that, quite strangely, shook her soul.

"Who is he?" she asked Michael in a low voice.

"Virginia Oliphant's brother."

"Do you know him?"

"I've talked with him, if you mean that."

"I'd like to—meet him."

Michael made the presentation carelessly, and Marty said, "How can you let all these lovely things go—"

"Because I am looking for lovelier things—"

She was puzzled, "What do you mean?"

"Well, I want to live. Down in this old town I've just—existed."

She found herself stirred by the emotion in his voice, the excitement, "Don't expect too much of life."

"Why not?"

"It never gives us all we expect."

"I shall—make it."

Again she was shaken. But she was silent. And presently she went away with Michael. When she reached the gate, she looked back, Rickey's eyes were still upon her. Such burning eyes under that bright thatch of hair. "He's different," she found herself thinking, "I've known so many men—but not one—like this—"

Rickey, still staring after Marty had gone through the gate, felt a touch on his arm. He turned to find Mary Lee Logan. "Who is that girl?" she demanded.

"What girl?"

"The one you have been staring at for the last fifteen minutes."

He seemed to wake from a dream. "Was I staring?"

"Yes. Who is she?"

"Miss Van Duyne of New York."

"How long have you known her?"

"About ten minutes."

"Ten minutes! Quick work, I'd say."

Rickey's face darkened, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you've fallen for her hard . . ." there was a touch of sharpness in her voice.

Rickey turned away, but was stopped by her exclamation: "Oh, look here, I'm sorry."

"That's all right."

She held out her hand, "If I don't see you again, will you hunt me up in New York?"

"Are you leaving?"

"Tonight." A shadow had fallen upon her, she was less gay, less irresponsible. She gave Rickey her address and he wrote it down. Then he shook hands with her again, and promptly forgot her.

Grogan came up, a tin box under his arm. "By the way, Oliphant," he said, "I've got a lot of cash these people have left with me. I'll give you that, and put the checks through in the morning. I don't want to motor up to Baltimore with a bunch of money on me."

He counted out the bills—something over a thousand dollars. "Put it in a safe place," he advised.

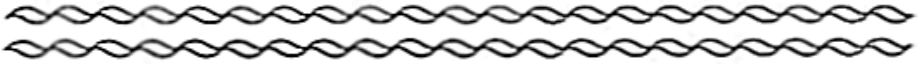
Rickey laughed, "I'll keep it safe, don't worry." He stuck it in an inside pocket, and swung down from the platform. A man standing near spoke to him—a loose-jointed, lanky creature.

"Come on out to the shack tonight, Oliphant. There's going to be some good fun."

"I can't, Lute, not tonight."

"Tomorrow then?"

“I’ll see.”



CHAPTER FOUR

An Answer to Arrogance

THE inn to which Mrs. Bleecker took her guests was a cozy place. The food was delicious. But the company! Mrs. Bleecker, artificial as the orchids she affected; Marty Van Duyne, exquisite and utterly at her ease; Lieutenant Bleecker, all gold and glitter; and Michael McMillan!

It was Michael who swayed things level for Virginia. He had a quality of friendliness which drew her to him as she had not been drawn to any of the others. She decided that she liked him even more than she had thought when she met him in the drawing-room.

She sat beside Mrs. Bleecker, with Michael on her left. Beyond that Marty, beyond that Tony Bleecker. By all rights, Tony should not have been on the other side of his mother. But Jane had instinctively separated him from Virginia. She could never have explained her instinct. But in the months that followed, she was to recognize the correctness of her intuitions.

Marty, between the two men, was at her best. Her world was their world, she swept the conversation on to subjects entirely out of the range of the girl in the green sweater; she talked of sports in Florida, in Westchester, in England. She was, it seemed, a tennis player of some note, and horsewoman of skill and expertness. She did not say these things, but they were self-evident. Then, too, there were the new plays, the people in whose houses and on whose yachts she had been entertained, and whom she had entertained in her own house and on her father's yacht. The men talked her language and so did Jane. But Virginia could not talk it. So she sat smiling, interested. And Michael, looking down at her, thought her charming, and Tony looking across the table had no eyes for Marty.

It was Michael who brought the conversation back finally to where Virginia could share it. "Some day, I'm coming to Derekdale and steal your Dutch spoons," he told his hostess.

"You must come, but not to steal the spoons." Jane found herself liking Michael, the flashing quickness of his smile, his wit and gaiety balanced by moments of somberness in which he seemed to draw within himself, and which piqued her into a desire to bring him out of the shadows into brightness again and brilliance.

Not that Jane analyzed it that way. Jane rarely analyzed. But she made up her mind she would see more of Michael, hence the emphasis on her invitation.

Michael was saying to Virginia. "What about the spoons? I fancy they have a history."

"They have. I am not sure that it is all true as it has come down to us. But it sounds well—you see there was a certain Richard Oliphant—"

Jane on the other side of her, broke in, "Tell it so we can all hear it."

So Virginia told it and told it well. She was absolutely without self-consciousness. She saw no difference between these people and herself. She was of their class and kind. And an Oliphant was an Oliphant.

It had to do with a gambling ancestor, a certain Richard Oliphant, who having lost everything at cards came one rainy night to a wayside inn without money for bed or board. By his wit and gallantry he won an invitation to supper from a dazzling young beauty just out from Holland. She was being served by her maid at a small table set apart from the others and supplied with her own linen and silver. When young Richard sat down he was handed a carved and heavy spoon with which to eat his soup—"One of the spoons you have, Mrs. Bleecker," Virginia explained.—He knew its value, and that it would pay for his bed. So he asked for a pen and wrote a verse which he offered to the lady in exchange for the spoon which he declared he would hold as hostage for her beauty. The lady read the verse, blushed, presented him with the token, and presently fared forth. Young Richard slept well, and in the morning gave the spoon to the land-lord as security for what he owed, galloped to the house of a friend, borrowed a purse, played high again that night, won back what he had lost, and later won the lady! The spoons had been handed down through five generations, and the young Holland beauty was responsible for the red hair in the Oliphant family.

"There's a full dozen of them," Virginia supplemented, "but no one knows which spoon is the one which won a bride for Richard Oliphant."

She was flushed and a little breathless, but as beautiful as the dazzling lady who had given her her red hair. Michael's smiling eyes had encouraged her as she talked; they smiled at her now. "I hope they lived happy ever after," he said.

"Tradition has it that he drank himself under the table every night and died of it. And since then there has been in every generation a gambling and a drinking Oliphant."

Laughter greeted that. But in some subtle way Michael knew it was not a laughing matter. It was as if Virginia had flung out a bitter truth to counteract such romantic glamour as might attach itself to the history of the rackety and roistering Richard!

"Your story seems to have no moral," he told her smiling.

"Except that a gentleman who loses may win."

"Is there, by any chance," Mrs. Bleecker asked, "a copy of the verse that Richard Oliphant wrote?"

"Yes. We have a sampler with the verse in cross-stitch. The Dutch beauty did it in the early days of her marriage, undoubtedly before her husband drank himself under the table. Would you like to hear it?"

She gave it, charmingly, her chin lifted a little, the graceful words falling limpid from her lips.

"*If east or west,*
Or north or south
Be my direction,
This silver toy will show me Dian's face,
And thy reflection."

"Great stuff," Tony applauded, but Michael said only, "Will you say it over for me, so that I may write it down?"

He took out a note-book and pencil, and she repeated the lines, slowly, leaning her head towards him as she sat beside him. Her bright hair brushed his cheek. He had a mad desire to cut off a lock of it, and imprison it in the book!

He rose. “I must get back to the sale. There’s a set of Sheffield porringers. Shall you bid on those, Mrs. Bleecker?”

“I have all the porringers I want, thank you. And there are some things I must talk over with Miss Oliphant.”

“I’m going with Michael,” Marty announced.

“You might as well go, too, Tony,” his mother suggested, “then Miss Oliphant and I can have a comfy chat.”

“You’d be entirely too comfy, Midget. I’ll stay and see that you don’t wheedle Miss Oliphant into selling that sampler. I know all your tricks.”

So Tony sat with his mother and Virginia on an old sofa which was drawn in front of a smouldering wood fire. Mrs. Bleecker and Anthony smoked cigarettes. Virginia did not smoke, and Anthony was glad of it, not because he disapproved, but that it seemed to set her apart from the smart and sophisticated girls who were his friends.

As Virginia talked, Mrs. Bleecker became increasingly aware of her charm. She saw, too, that Tony was aware of it. He seemed utterly satisfied simply to be near her. And Mrs. Bleecker didn’t want him to be utterly satisfied to be near anybody but herself. Not yet. Time enough when he could link his millions with those of some woman whose fortunes equaled his own—someone like Marty Van Duyne. And in the meantime he belonged to his mother in a sense he would never belong after he was married. He was always her attentive cavalier and did the things she wanted him to do. She intended to keep him heart whole if possible. To help him to avoid entangling alliances until she said the word.

And here he was being swept off his feet by Beauty in a shabby green sweater and shabby green hat. There was no doubt about it. Tony, who was usually bored was not bored. He was exerting himself to please Virginia Oliphant as he had never exerted himself to please any other woman.

He was asking Virginia: “What will you do now that you’ve sold your house?”

“We’re to live in New York—my brother and I. He is going to write a book.”

“You don’t mean it? You ought to talk that over with McMillan. I understand he’s an editor.” He named the magazine.

A flame flew up in Virginia’s cheek. “An editor—how wonderful!”

Tony laughed, “Don’t say it like that, or I shall be jealous. McMillan isn’t any more wonderful than the rest of us.” He turned to his mother. “Midget, Miss Oliphant is to live in New York. We must have her up to Derekdale, and let her see her things there.”

“I may not send them at once to Derekdale.”

“Oh, you might as well. I’ll tell Grogan. And then I can motor down and get you, Miss Oliphant, for a week-end, and you can come and eat with your own Dutch spoons!”

Mrs. Bleecker did not second the invitation. She glanced at her watch. “Tony, it is after three. And we’re dining in Baltimore.”

She rose and held out her hand to Virginia. “Will you mind if we say good-by now?” It was, Virginia knew, a dismissal. As far as Mrs. Bleecker was concerned Virginia Oliphant was done for! In the discard! Not to be considered, under the circumstances, as a social asset!

And who were the Bleeckers after all, but Hollanders of a burgher strain? The Oliphants could do better than that with their grants from the king, and with a ducal device on their coat of arms. Virginia’s head went up. She had a fighting sense of wanting to show Mrs. Bleecker that she couldn’t put things over in that autocratic manner.

But it was Anthony who did the fighting! “I am going to walk home with Miss Oliphant, Mother.”

Mrs. Bleecker made then a mistake she was afterwards to regret. “I need you here, Tony.”

“Sorry, Mother.” And away he went, opening the door for Virginia as if he served a queen.

Left alone, Mrs. Bleecker stood very still. There were sharp lights in her eyes. And quite strangely as she stood there, she did not seem small. She seemed as tall as her towering fury.

Anthony, careless for the first time in his life of his mother’s disapproval, was saying to Virginia, “I’ve got to see you again.”

“Have you?”

“Yes. When?”

Virginia had a sudden sense of excitement. She was not sure that she wanted him. She was not even certain that he attracted her. Yet to let him come to her would be an answer to his mother’s arrogance. He should come to her shabby old house and be glad to do it!

So she said: “Why not have supper with Rickey and me tomorrow night?”

“Sunday?”

“Yes. At seven. We’ll have to eat in the kitchen. But it’s a nice old place. All the rest of the house is torn up.”

“I’ll eat anywhere—with you.”

“Then I’ll expect you.”

“You’re a—oh, I don’t dare say it,” he laughed triumphantly, and held out his hand. “It has been a great day, hasn’t it? Meeting each other?”

She parried that. “It has been a great day in more ways than one.”

He left her then, and she went on into the garden. Grogan, the auctioneer, stood in the open door talking to Rickey. He said, as Virginia came up, “You are to be congratulated

on the results of the sale. I didn't dream we'd get such prices. But people went crazy. I never saw such bidding as there was for those candlesticks."

The blood all seemed drained from Virginia's body. She faced her brother. "Rickey, you didn't!"

He was sullen. "Yes, I did. Everybody was clamoring for them. It would have been a shame to lose the money."

"Who got them?"

"Michael McMillan."

Virginia was conscious of a sudden sense of hurt, as if someone had struck a blow at her heart. Oh, he had seemed so kind! Yet he had robbed her of the only thing she wanted. He was a Judas—selling his soul for—candlesticks.

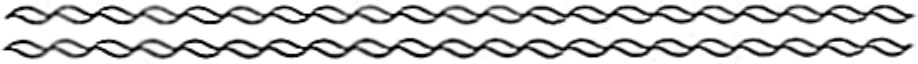
She pushed by the two men and went into the house. Rickey followed her. Seeing his sister's white face he made a stammering defense. "Grogan insisted. He said—"

"I don't care what he said. Oh, Rickey, how could you . . ."

She put her hands up to her eyes, pressing the lids to keep the tears back. Richard was at once by her side. "Oh, Jinny, don't," he cried. "You mustn't. I didn't know you cared —"

She could not tell him of her wild sense of disappointment in Michael McMillan. She sobbed with her face hidden against her brother's coat. "It isn't just the candlesticks—it's —everything—"

"I know," his lips were against her hair. He loved her when she was like this, leaning on him. It was only when she tried to dominate him that he resented her.



CHAPTER FIVE

In the meantime, Michael, utterly unaware of his offense, had been carried off by Marty for a walk through the Yard. "It's a heavenly day," she said, "and I need the exercise. It's all right for Jane to motor eternally, she's the type to stay slim forever. But I'm not."

Michael said the obvious thing. "You're lovely enough as you are. Why worry?"

"Worry is the price of beauty," Marty told him, "in these days."

"Not any more in these days than in other days—look at the old portraits—elaborate hairdressing—powder and patches—backboards to straighten figures—corsets to confine them—"

"Yes," Marty agreed abstractedly. It was apparent she was not listening. "What do you think of Virginia Oliphant?" she demanded, suddenly.

Michael dared not tell her what he thought. His pulses pounded at the sound of her name, but his voice held no hint of his inner excitement. "She seems rather unusual."

"She's amazingly attractive," Marty admitted, "I didn't realize it at first. But when she recited that verse—she was startling—"

They walked along the sea wall. "Tony's fallen for her," Marty vouchsafed, presently.

"Do you think so? How long has he known her?"

"He met her this morning."

Michael laughed. "The chances are he'll forget her tomorrow."

"One can never tell," Marty's answering laugh was lazy. "If he keeps it up, I wish you'd cut him out. Tony's my property."

It was lightly said, but he knew she meant it. Marty would brook no rivals. And when she wanted a thing, she was ruthless in her methods.

"Who am I to cut Tony out?" he asked her. "What chance has a civilian against brass buttons?"

She turned and looked at him, "Every chance, and you know it. Don't be so modest, Michael."

"My dear girl, aren't you drawing on your imagination?"

"No. And she's the kind of woman you ought to marry."

Dead silence for a moment, out of which Michael said, "I'm done with marriage." And that was the end of it.

When finally they reached the Inn, they found the big car standing in front of the door, and Mrs. Bleecker and Tony waiting. "Where in the world have you been, Marty?" the little woman inquired, tersely. "Tony has been looking everywhere for you."

"It does him good to look." Marty smiled at Anthony as he helped her into the car.

Michael was urged to join the party. “We are dining with friends in Baltimore,” Jane told him. “They’d be delighted to include you, and you could go on with us to New York in the morning.”

“I’m staying over here,” Michael said, “for the week-end. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll see you again, old chap,” Tony informed him. “When I get back, I’ll hunt you up at the hotel.”

Michael did not care in the least whether Tony hunted him up at the hotel. He cared only about Virginia Oliphant. He meant to see her before he left Annapolis. Why not? One might at least grasp the happiness of the moment.

When at last the Bleeckers drove off, he went to his room and telephoned long distance to his secretary, stating his change of plans. There was no one else to whom he could telephone. Since his wife’s death he had lived alone. In his apartment in Gramercy Park there were two impassive Japanese servants. Nobody would care whether he came or went. It had been years since anybody had cared, even when Helen was alive.

It was in the late afternoon that he left the hotel and made his way to the Oliphant house. He found the garden deserted, the house empty. A note, stuck in the door, stated that the occupants of the house would return at seven. Michael, sauntering through the rustling garden, came upon a sundial, its pedestal overgrown with ivy. It was ancient and interesting, of old brass, green as the ivy about it. A cross slanted across the dial, threw its shadow and marked the hours. At its base in old English letters were the words —“Post tenebras lux—”

“After the shadows light—” Michael translating mentally, had a thrilled sense that this might be an augury for the future. Would the day ever break—for him? He touched the cross with the tips of his fingers, and the gesture had in his mind a significance. It was as if he kept faith with himself in some mystic fashion.

Leaving the garden, he passed through the town, went over a long, low bridge which spanned the east branch of the river, and came to a path which led through sun-lighted fields, and shaded groves of pine and oak. Following the path, he reached at last a secluded spot which gave a view of the river.

Here he laid himself down to rest, stretching at full length on the dry sweet grass, and pillowing his head on his arm.

He loved the out-of-doors with a passion which was second to none in his nature. Yet for ten years he had been caged. First in an apartment on Park Avenue with Helen, now in his own smaller apartment in Gramercy Park. And when he had not been shut up in apartments he had been shut up in his office. Such holidays as he had allowed himself had been shared, perforce, with Helen. And Helen had chosen fashionable resorts to which she had carried with her trunks of charming clothes. She had been very lovely to look upon when she wore the clothes. That was why he had married her—because she had been so very beautiful, and he thought her beauty more than skin deep.

His boyhood had been spent away from cities. His father had died when he was six, his mother when he was nine. He had divided his time after his mother’s death, between one grandfather’s somewhat depleted acres in Virginia and another grandfather’s seemingly inexhaustible forests in Maine. There had been school-days in Switzerland,

with winter sports; summer holidays in rural England with cousins who had cows and bees and orchards; and when he had gone to college, it had been to his rich grandfather's alma mater in Maine, set around with hills and far from the haunts of men.

And then, finding at college that he wielded a facile pen, Michael had sought New York as the mecca for aspiring authors. But he had given up his own writing to edit a magazine. Then he had married, and in all those years Pan had piped among the rushes and Michael had shut his ears to the sound. Yet it had been, perhaps, the reason for his great success that he had opened the pages of his magazine not to those who wrote of degeneracy and despair, but to those who wrested romance from life—the romance of sea and of prairie, of mountain and of plain. All that he had hoped for, he bought for his magazine.

His wife had had no sympathy with his success. He was letting himself be, she had told him, unpardonably provincial. He had refused to argue with her. How could one argue a thing like that? Pan had never piped for Helen. That would have been his answer if he had cared to make it.

And now Pan was piping! The river swept by, and up from the sedges came a thin, fluting sound. There were those who might have said it was the wind among the rushes. But Michael knew better. It was Pan.

There were other sounds—the call and twitter of flocking birds, getting ready for the great enterprise of migration; the mewing note of gulls as they dipped towards the shining waters, or poised above on pointed wings; the far-away roar of a Navy plane, its course set for the Chesapeake.

Then, all at once, breaking in, the sound of voices. Michael, peering through the screen of pines, saw walking toward him across the fields, Virginia Oliphant and her brother.

The sun was setting and lighting the world like a conflagration. The fence rails and tree trunks were laced with the wine-red of Virginia creeper and the vermillion of poison ivy. The ground was carpeted with dried grass and fallen leaves, amber and jade and scarlet. The needles of the pines had a glittering quality as if they were coated with ice, and as the two young people came at last to the water's edge, sky and river shone with an almost unearthly radiance. And of this radiance Virginia Oliphant seemed the center and the source. To Michael, raising himself on his arm to look, she was like a splendid young goddess, her face uplifted to the sun.

She spoke to her brother, her words coming clear and vibrant through the still air: "Oh, Rickey, if you could get all this in your book!"

"All what?"

"This beauty, this burning beauty. Use your pen as you would a brush—so that the pages would be as gorgeous as some old painting."

She had turned towards her brother, eager, ecstatic. "Our lives have been so drab—we've lacked flame and color. You could write all that we have dreamed—all we have missed—"

He seemed to catch her idea, “Like the old Florentines? A modern story, yet gorgeous as old brocade—or painted Spanish leather.”

Virginia’s hand was at her throat. Michael could almost see the flutter of her heart. “Could we call it—*Burning Beauty*, Rickey? Could we?”

Michael checked a quick exclamation. He knew a good title when he heard one. The name began to swing back and forth in his mind.

Young Oliphant dropped down on a log, “It might do. But I’ll have to think about it. Of course you know it won’t be your book but mine, Jinny.”

There was a smugness about his statement which made Michael furious. The young cub! As if the girl wasn’t worth a dozen of him!

But the girl did not seem to resent it. “I know it will be your book, darling,” she said, soothingly, and sat down on the log beside him. Then in silence the two of them watched the radiance die. The girl’s hand crept into her brother’s, and the boy drew her to him so that her head rested on his shoulder. There seemed to be great affection between them, in spite of the boy’s intense egotism. Perhaps Virginia understood him as no one else could understand. Her tenderness was like that of a mother, asking nothing, forgiving all.

When she spoke again it was of Rickey’s future. “Daddy has always lived too much in the past. He wanted us to keep to the old ways. But we must find the best in the new. Sometimes I feel as if we were starting out on unknown seas, with our sails set for favoring winds. I believe they are going to blow you straight towards success.”

The boy’s voice had a note of impatience. “I shall be a success when I am—free—”

The sun dropped below the horizon. The world was amethyst and gray. The air was clear with the illumination which comes before the dark. Virginia rose. “It’s getting late, Rickey. We must go.”

As they passed Michael’s hiding place, he heard her say, “How much money did Grogan give you?”

“A thousand in cash.”

“Where is it?”

Rickey slapped his chest. “In here.”

“Oh—you oughtn’t to be carrying so much money.”

“It was too late to put it in the bank.”

“When you get back to the house you’d better hide it in a safe place.”

“You worry too much, Jinny.”

They walked on, their voices growing fainter and fainter. The wind sighed in the rushes. The pipes of Pan played a plaintive tune. Darkness had fallen on the waters, and one burning star hung high in the purple heavens.

It was time to go, but Michael still lay there, looking out into the darkening night. Suddenly he was aware of a rustle near him which was not made by the wind or the wings of some late homing bird. A man was rising up from a flat boat which had been

hidden among the rushes at the edge of the river, and presently the dark form went padding along the path the two young people had taken. It came to Michael that he was on their trail—that he knew Rickey had a thousand dollars in his pocket.

Michael jumped to his feet. As he, too, took the path, he saw the golden arc of the moon spanning the horizon. It gave light to the little grove as he went through it, and when he came again into the open, it showed Virginia and her brother walking slowly across a stretch of pasture.

Even as he looked, they entered the second grove, and Michael's cry rang out as the man came up behind Rickey.

Turning at Michael's shout, Rickey grappled with his assailant. The two men struggled, and Michael arrived just in time to hear Rickey say, disgustedly, "It's Lute Carney."

"Well," the man's tone was insolent, "what you goin' to do about it?"

Rickey gave an embarrassed laugh, "Let you go, I suppose."

Michael interposed, "Surely not."

"He's drunk," Rickey said, "he wouldn't have hurt me."

"He knew you had money."

"I tell you he's drunk. Lute's not a thug."

Virginia had not spoken. She said, very low, to Michael, "Don't let him go. Don't."

Rickey's voice was sharp. "This is my affair, Jinny. I'll manage it."

"Oh!" The exclamation was one of smothered distress. She began to walk on and Michael followed her.

"What does your brother mean by it?" he demanded.

"Don't ask me—"

"If I can help—"

"You can't."

Michael stopped and looked back to where the two men stood. "Is it safe for us to leave them?"

"Rickey won't like it if we don't."

"He is making a great mistake."

She spoke suddenly and rapidly: "Mr. McMillan, do you remember the story of the spoons? How that old Richard Oliphant gambled and drank, and that in every generation there had been a drinking and a gambling Oliphant? It is picturesque and romantic in the past, but in the present it's hateful and horrid. That's why I am trying to get Rickey away from here. He plays cards with a lot of older men—Lute is one, and he has a dreadful influence."

He saw that she was at the end of her self-control. "Is there anything I can do? Let me be your friend."

She hesitated, then said very low, “How can you be my friend? When you can’t keep faith with me?”

He stopped and looked at her in surprise. “What have I done?”

“Oh, why did you buy the candlesticks when I told you I wanted to keep them?”

“I bought them to save them. Don’t you realize that when they were put up, they’d go to the highest bidder? And I knew you wouldn’t want just anybody to have them. They are yours now, if you will take them.”

She drew a quick breath of relief, “Oh—I am stupid. Do you know what I was calling you?”

“What?”

“Judas.”

They laughed together, the eager laughter of two people who have found each other out of a world of men and women. Their laughter was stilled, however, as Rickey joined them. “Lute was eating from my hand before I left him,” he said with a touch of boastfulness. “He was drunk as a lord.”

“Rather a dangerous sort of friend, I should say,” Michael remarked.

Rickey blazed, “He’s not my friend—he’s not a gentleman!”

“I see,” drily.

“No, you don’t see,” Rickey’s tone was insolent, “but I don’t know that it is any of your affair.”

“Rickey,” his sister protested.

“Oh, well,” the boy plunged on ahead of them, walking alone.

“You must forgive him,” Virginia apologized, “he isn’t himself. He’s a dear, usually. Things have upset him.”

“Don’t weaken him by being sorry for him,” Michael advised.

“But I love him,” she said simply yet with a passion which silenced his arguments.

“It is something,” Michael said in a moved voice, “to be loved like that.”

They had come to the edge of the grove to where the river stretched before them in a shining flood. Rickey was so far ahead that he was hidden by the curve of the shore.

Michael stopped and looked down at Virginia. “No one,” he said, “has ever loved my weakness as well as my strength.”

Her eyes raised to his, “Not your mother?”

“She died when I was a child.”

“Was there never anyone else?”

“There was my wife. She never loved me.”

"Oh—" In the white moonlight he saw her face with a sort of divine pity on it. "I'm sorry—"

He lifted her hand and kissed it. And he knew in that moment what in all the years he had yearned for—someone to be sorry.

He held himself from further demonstration. He must not go too fast. She had drawn back a little when he had caught up her hand. Yet he had not offended her. He was sure of that. He glanced down at her and saw that her face was turned up to the sky. Aware of his glance she said, with quick-drawn breath, "I love these nights—with the river singing—do you ever hear the river sing—?"

"I hear Pan—pipe—"

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Wonderful."

He told her then a little of his boyhood. "I'm always telling myself that I'll get away from cities. It's strange that men who love the sea, the mountains, the desert, are content to shut themselves up in offices. Think of what life might be out-of-doors, if one dared risk it? Yet I spend my days being looked after by my secretaries and my Japanese servants, and going from my desk in a sky-scraper to my desk in a cliff-dweller apartment. If one only had the courage . . ."

He stopped there. He must not—he must not. Why, he would be asking her before he knew it to sail the wide seas with him, to go out into the desert . . . !

Out of a long pause, he said, "What shall we do about the candlesticks? I am afraid if I keep them you will still be thinking of me as—Judas."

"Oh, no . . . And you'd better not give them back. Rickey would hate that."

"Rickey," he said, with a note of impatience, "do you ever think of anyone but Rickey?" Then as he caught her little cry of protest, he added: "Forgive me."

Yet often in the months to follow he was to ask that question: "Do you ever think of anyone but Rickey?" Sometimes he was to ask it with the desperation of despair. He was yet to learn that strength is always at the mercy of weakness. That Virginia Oliphant was of the stuff which braves storm and wind at the cry of a child or the bleat of a lamb.

When they reached the house Rickey stood waiting for them on the steps. "I think," he said, his head high, "that I owe you an apology, Mr. McMillan. I was in a beastly mood."

Michael knew then, as he was often to know afterward, the disarming effect of Rickey's charm. The boy had his arm on his sister's shoulder, and as he spoke he drew her toward him. Standing there together in the moonlight, they seemed to embody all that was youthful and inspiring. Michael felt old and world-weary beside them.

"Why remember anything," he said smiling, "that is unpleasant?"

He hoped Virginia would invite him to come in but she did not. So he said good-by and walked away in a tumult of emotion. Why hadn't he asked if he might see her

tomorrow night? How could he endure the dragging hours which must intervene until another meeting?

The next morning Michael went to service in the Navy Chapel. He had not been to church for years—not since the day of Helen's funeral. The affair of the funeral had been one of great pomp and ceremony. Helen's family had insisted that it should be so, and nothing had been omitted which would add to the effect. The casket had been covered with a pall of pink roses, there had been candles on the altar, a surpliced choir singing celestial music. And Michael had looked on and had not shed a tear. He had been called cold-hearted. But what he felt had been too deep for tears. He could not weep for that which he had lost. For he had lost Helen long before the passing of her physical presence. Their married life had been a failure. It had been, perhaps, as much his fault as hers. She was born to dominate, and he would not be dominated. From the beginning the battle had been that of strong personality against strong personality. Several times they had faced the chaos of separation, but had been held together by their mutual distaste for publicity. Then Death had given them their divorce. And that had seemed the end of it. But it had not been the end, for Michael had known himself disillusioned. If not a hater of women, at least indifferent. He felt that he could not bear a second time the hurt which had come to him through Helen.

That morning in the Chapel, however, his thoughts went forward to the days before he had known his wife. To the days when he had sat in church beside his mother—that little lady-mother of his, poor in worldly goods, but rich in spirit-possessions. A beautiful, beautiful lady-mother. He rarely thought of her without an ache in the throat and a tearing at his heart. Helen's family boasted of its blue blood, but it was blood which ran thin and cold. His mother's forbears had been Huguenots—gallant and God-fearing gentlemen, sons of gentlemen, but not afraid to work with their hands in the new country which had given them refuge from persecution.

And who was he to come after them? A money-getter. Material-minded. A sophisticate. In the eyes, indeed, of these gallant and God-fearing gentlemen, a sinner? Yet he felt that his mother would have found excuse for him. She would have known the stress of soul of the child he once had been.

A visiting bishop spoke and what he said was soul-stirring. Gathered in the pews were the midshipmen, slender, steel-strong youths, who were some day to lead the men who would defend their country's honor. The great window above the chancel showed an illumined Christ walking on the sea—on the windows to the right and left in memory of famous admirals, triumphant angels lifted golden wings. The whole atmosphere was one of faith in an unseen world. But Michael had lost faith in everything. He asked nothing of life except the day's work, the right for place on the ladder of success. He had won his place, yet he had not followed the light which had guided his boyhood. His mother had held aloft a torch, and he had thrown it down.

Yet with Virginia Oliphant—might he not lift again the torch? It seemed to him as if in the golden space about him, Virginia's spirit hovered. He remembered the things which yesterday, when he had listened from behind his screen of vines, he had heard her say to her brother. So his mother had talked to him. So such women spoke to the men they loved.

He left the church in a mood of exaltation, and came back to his hotel for luncheon. He had resolved to see Virginia that afternoon, or perhaps that night. Surely she would let him come—

It was a bit early, and he sat for a moment in the lounge of his hotel before going to the dining-room. And while he sat there, he saw Anthony Bleecker come down the wide steps which led to an outer entrance, stopping here and there to speak to people he knew. At last he reached Michael. "Still here, McMillan?"

"Yes."

Tony dropped down in a chair and lighted a cigarette. "Great old sale, wasn't it? Mother sent word that you're to come to Derekdale for a week-end. She's got a lot of things to show you."

"I'm a busy man."

"Oh, well, you'll find Midget's things worth looking at. She's a decided little person. She'll have that sampler from Virginia Oliphant. You'll see—"

Michael's heart jumped at the name but he said nothing.

"Beauty, isn't she?"

"Who?"

"Virginia Oliphant."

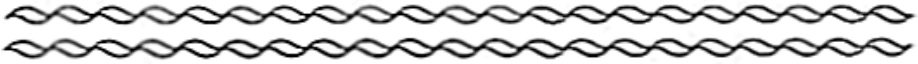
Michael didn't want to discuss her.

Tony went rambling on—"I'm to have supper with her tonight in the old kitchen. I'm rather keen about it."

Michael sat there with an impassive face, but he knew that he hated Tony, hated all his glory and glitter.

He did not go into the dining-room. He went out again and walked for miles, coming to the place where last night he had seen Virginia Oliphant lift her arms to the sun. Oh, all women were alike. They looked like saints, but they gave their favors to men indiscriminately. Until yesterday morning Virginia had never seen Anthony Bleecker, and here he was discussing her beauty, lightly, with laughter. Michael could not speak of her without a sense of her sacredness.

He was a fool, of course. He had told himself that before. The sun shone brightly on the river, the gulls flashed against the blue. But for Michael the glory of the day had departed. His heart was dead.



CHAPTER SIX

Rickey Fails to Come to Supper

To Anthony Bleecker the thought of his rendezvous with Virginia Oliphant held a piquant tang of anticipation. He called it that to himself—a rendezvous. The presence of the brother might be, in a way, a sop to propriety but the whole thing was unconventional—the invitation on such short acquaintance, the lack of chaperonage. The girl was a lady, of course, but there was in it all the promise of gallant enterprise.

He went forth, therefore, on Sunday, keen for new experience, light-heartedly expectant. The wind blew and the rain poured, but Anthony striding up the street, was glad of the wind and rain. They added to his anticipation a sense of contrast. These would be the warmth of the old house, the light of the fire, the radiance of Virginia Oliphant's red-gold crown.

He came to the garden gate, opened it, walked up the gravel path and stopped suddenly before a lighted window on a level with the ground. It framed a picture which filled him with astonishment. The room into which he looked was undoubtedly the kitchen. It had been changed little in the two centuries since it had been built. There were the low ceiling, the heavy beams overhead, the brick fireplace, filled with glowing logs. Except for the fire, the room was illumined only by a hanging iron lantern, and by candles on a table which was set against the wall, and which had as a centerpiece a bunch of coppery chrysanthemums in a silver bowl.

But it was neither the table nor the fire nor the hanging lantern on which Anthony's attention was focussed, but on an old lady whose chair was drawn up to the hearth, and who had for company an infinitesimal and engaging cat. The old lady wore black, with a lace fichu and a cameo brooch. Her gray hair was arranged in what might be called the Queen Alexandra style, with a curled bang held down securely on her forehead by an invisible net. There was a band of black velvet about her throat, lace ruffles fell over hands fragile and heavy with rings.

The kitten was yellow. It lay at the old lady's feet like a bright gold coin. Its paws were tucked in and it was steeped, as it were, in self-satisfaction. In fact the pair on the hearth fairly exuded smugness. Anthony was aware of a distinct sense of disappointment. Here was decorum personified! A chaperone provided to balance his oversanguine expectations! He had thought to see Virginia alone, with the color coming and going in her cheeks, himself playing cavalier—and she had checkmated him in this subtle fashion!

Yet when he rang the bell and the door was opened by his young hostess, his irritation fled. The hall was lighted like the kitchen, by an iron lantern, and amid the shadows of the immense spaces Virginia seemed to glow and shine. She was dressed in a straight frock of dull green linen. She wore an absurd little apron with white ruffles, and white cuffs and collar. Her hair was beautiful—even more beautiful than he remembered.

"Am I early?" he demanded.

"On the minute. And the only other guest is here."

"The old lady? I saw her through the window. Who is she? Mrs. Grundy?"

She flashed a glance at him, read his thought. “She’s from the Home,” she elucidated. “One of the darling gentlewomen who lives there. And she adores little suppers.”

“And you had her because she—adores little suppers?”

Her eyes met his squarely. “I had her because Mother is away.”

So she gave her reason frankly, and he found himself quite unaccountably respecting her for it. He followed her downstairs and was presented to the old lady—Mrs. Montgomery.

Mrs. Montgomery had known past grandeurs. She had lived in one of the big old houses on the shore of the Bay, had been educated abroad, had made a brilliant marriage, had been presented at four courts, and had after her husband’s death, been brought to poverty by a rackety son who had dispersed her fortune. Yet she still had her pride and bore herself usually as one who belonged in high places. There were times, however, when she bore herself simply as a doddering old crone who had forgotten her manners. She loved good things to eat, and now, waiting for her supper, was in a state bordering on greediness.

She was very deaf, and most of the time sat smiling amid her silences. But the preparations for the feast called forth a running fire of remarks, some of them thrown as it were, into the air, some of them flung at Anthony on the other side of the hearth, some of them addressed to Virginia, who had lighted the flame beneath the chafing-dish. “My father always liked a dash of sherry with his oysters,” or “those look like chicken sandwiches,” or “we always had two kinds of wine in the old days, Lieutenant Bleecker.”

She was as alert as the kitten when the oysters began to curl at the edges. “They’re done,” she said sharply, “why don’t we eat them?”

“We are waiting for Rickey,” Virginia raised her voice to reach the old ears, “he is to be back at seven.”

But the clock struck seven and Rickey did not come. So the three of them sat down, Virginia presiding over the chafing-dish, at one end, Anthony opposite, and the old lady sitting at Virginia’s right.

It seemed to Anthony incredible that he should be in such astounding company. He wondered what his mother would think if she could see him. It was like something out of the fairy stories he had read as a child. The shadowy interior; Virginia at the head of the table, seeming to gather all the light to her, like a saint with a nimbus; Mrs. Montgomery, bent over her place, oblivious to everything but the enjoyment of her food.

He smiled at Virginia. “Mrs. Grundy,” he said, “is deaf. I shall say what I please to you.”

The color flamed in her cheeks. Then she accepted his challenge. “Say it.”

“*Mademoiselle, vous êtes très jolie.*”

“Monsieur flatters,” never before had Virginia played the game, but all the belles and beauties of her family had played it, and so she came to it with ease and charm.

“Other men have told you that, of course?”

“I don’t know any other men.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that?”

“It’s true.”

Her honesty delighted him. He leaned across the table. “Other men don’t know what they are missing.”

She wasn’t sure that she liked his manner. She found herself a little frightened. She wished her brother would come. She glanced at the clock. “Rickey’s late.”

“Why worry? I am perfectly happy without him. And now—when am I going to see you again?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you mean you don’t want to see me?”

“Aren’t you putting it rather seriously?”

“It is serious. If you didn’t care to go on with it, why did you let me come tonight?”

She gave him the truth squarely. “Because your mother was so—high-hat.”

“What do you mean?”

“She didn’t want you to go with me and she showed it. She thought I didn’t belong. It hurt my pride, so I tossed conventionalities to the wind and let you come.”

It was a hard blow to his vanity. But he took it standing. He stared at her for a moment then gave a shout of laughter. “Well, I’m here,” he said, “and now please be good to me and don’t visit my mother’s sins on me.”

“I really shouldn’t have let you come. I don’t know anything about you except that you are Anthony Bleecker and an officer in the Navy.”

“I’m not a wolf in sheep’s clothing, if that’s what you mean.”

Mrs. Grundy suddenly came to life. “What are you talking about, Virginia?”

It was Anthony who answered, “Lambs, dear lady,” and Virginia hastened to proclaim, “It’s time to cut the cake.”

The old eyes glistened, “What kind of cake?”

“Coconut.”

And Mrs. Grundy was satisfied.

It was while Virginia cut the cake that Anthony noticed her hands. They were graceful and delicate. “You should play the harp,” he said, “you have the hands for it—they are wonderful. Hold them up to the light.”

She obeyed, flushing a bit. Out-spread in front of the candles her fingers showed transparent like rosy, fragile glass.

Mrs. Grundy demanded suspiciously, “What are you doing that for?”

“Warming them,” Anthony shouted, and then, aside, “Poor soul, has she forgotten her youth?”

“Does anybody forget—youth?” Virginia asked dreamily, then suddenly she turned her head and listened. “That’s Rickey,” as the bell rang, “he’s forgotten his key.”

But it was not Rickey. It was the girl in the plaid coat. “You may not remember me,” she said, as Virginia opened the door, “but I was at the sale yesterday and bought a lot of your lovely old things, and I met your brother.”

“Rickey?”

“Yes. I want to ask him some questions about the secretary.”

“He’s not here—”

“Perhaps you can tell me. Would you mind my coming in?”

Virginia hesitated. “Tomorrow would be better.”

“But I’m leaving in the morning—” there was such keen disappointment in the blue eyes that Virginia relented.

“We’re just at supper, but you won’t mind—?”

“I won’t mind anything,” Mary Lee emphasized, “if I can only sit for a moment in this adorable house.”

But she stayed more than a moment. She knew that she was waiting for Rickey—that her heart was tight in her chest when she thought of him. She had remained in Annapolis overnight because of him. She had felt she must see again that bright head, win him once more to gayety and laughter as she had won him before he met Marty Van Duyne.

She took off her hat and coat and made herself at home. The gold-colored kitten came and curled up in the curve of her arm. She smiled across at deaf old Mrs. Montgomery. She ate the sandwiches and the superlative cake that Virginia offered, and drank a cup of coffee.

Anthony resented her presence and showed it by a sulky silence. Virginia, on the other hand, was glad to have her. She had found herself a bit disturbed about her glittering guest. She knew now that she should never have let him come. She liked him well enough, but why should she have tried to square accounts with his mother? Anthony had laughed it off lightly, as if that ended it. But Virginia had felt that it was not ended.

Mary Lee talked to Virginia of antiques and to Anthony of his brass buttons. “You’re Navy of course? I adore uniforms.”

“You’ll get over that if you stay here long enough. Wait until you see the midshipmen—millions of ’em.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “They flow through the town in a rushing tide.”

“Oh, I should love it.”

“Don’t ever love them.”

"Why not?"

"Let them love you."

"But what if they shouldn't—?" She flashed a glance at him, and Anthony was aware of a sudden illumination. The little devil had charm and knew it. It was not the sort of thing he cared about, but she was using it for his benefit, deliberately, and in the modern fashion.

She could not know, of course, how tired he was of youthful sophistication, and that he had sought out Virginia Oliphant because she was so utterly without affectation, so untrained apparently in the arts of coquetry, yet possessing a quality of withdrawal which made men want to follow.

Mary Lee was saying to Virginia, "Your brother told me you are planning to live in New York. I hope you'll let me hunt you up."

"We won't have much time for social engagements. Rickey has to write."

"I'm not a Social Engagement—please say that you'll be glad to see me—"

She laid her hand on Virginia's, and Virginia found herself giving the plump fingers a responsive clasp. There was something friendly and frank about Mary Lee which drew her in spite of herself. "Of course, we'll be glad," she said, with heartiness.

Mary Lee talking against time, told of her life in Memphis, her mid-Victorian mother, her voice, her urge to adventure—all the things she had told Rickey. Anthony listened without interest. He wished she would go—he wished . . .

But suddenly Mary Lee did a thing which jogged him out of his apathy. Idly, as it were, while she talked, she had set three glasses together, and now she tinkled the tines of her silver fork against them, producing a thin melodious chime, and to this accompaniment she sang softly and as if she were alone, a strange little song of a Chinese maiden who went one night to meet her lover, but found herself keeping instead a tryst with death. Mary Lee had a clear and beautiful voice, and so perfectly did she create the illusion, that she ceased to be, in the eyes of her listeners, simply a plump and rather badly dressed little person, and became for the moment, the girl of whom she sang, slender and tragic against a background of willow trees, ivory towers and cloud-swept moons.

When she finished Anthony demanded, "Where did you find a thing like that?"

"In China. Dad took me around the world when I was seventeen."

Anthony had been around the world and said so. They talked for a bit about it. Virginia said little. She was worried about Rickey. Why was he so late? And why had he not come to supper? He had known she expected him and had promised.

Virginia hardly knew what they were saying. She wished that her guests would go home. What in the world was keeping Rickey?

Mrs. Montgomery was nodding in her chair. Every now and then she waked, and took a momentary part in the conversation. There were traces of an old coquetry, an old charm in her efforts. She addressed most of her remarks to Anthony. In the days long gone by, she had been the toast of the officers in the Yard. She remembered a dinner-party in this

same house, given by Virginia's great-grandmother. "I was a girl then," she said, with the sparkle of youth sweeping back upon her, "and I flirted with your grandfather. And he gave me a rose, and your grandmother hated me. They weren't married then, but the wedding was announced. And I went to your grandmother the next morning, and told her I had lied when I said your grandfather had given me the rose. But I hadn't—lied—"

It could be seen she was proud of her falsehood and of her sporting spirit. She kept awake for several moments on the strength of it, then went suddenly to sleep, like an old baby.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take her home," Virginia told Anthony, "it's just across the street. . . ."

He rose at once. "Sure you aren't doing it to get rid of me?"

She met that lightly. "I think I'm sure."

Mary Lee looked from one to the other. She had a rather shrewd understanding of the situation. The girl hadn't waked up yet to what that man could do for her. He was a stunning type. Mary Lee had a feeling that if she hadn't met Rickey, she would give Virginia Oliphant a run for her money.

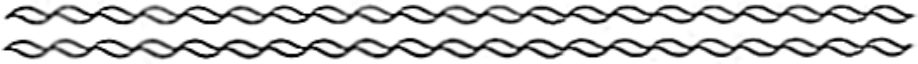
Before Anthony left he had a moment alone with Virginia. "You might as well tell me your address. I've simply got to see you."

She told him the number. "You'll find us in a shabby old house in Washington Square."

"Nothing will seem shabby if you shine there."

She had no blushes for him, no hint of interest in their future meeting. And how could he know that no sooner had the front door closed behind him than she forgot him. Mary Lee had gone with the others, and Virginia left at last alone, ran upstairs to the second floor, all the echoes of the old house thundering after her. When she reached Rickey's room, she unlocked the desk where he kept his papers. The money Grogan had given him was not there! She searched everywhere, pulling out dresser drawers frantically, going through the pockets of Rickey's clothes in the closet. At last she stood very still in the middle of the room. The truth had come to her. Rickey had a thousand dollars with him, and he was probably at that very moment matching his poor skill against the cunning and sharp practice of Lute Carney.

She rushed back again to the kitchen and blew out the candles. The fire lighted the room and its confusion. The gold kitten was on the table lapping at the cream. But Virginia felt there was no time for anything but her quest of Rickey. Every moment might count. He had all that money . . . all that money. . . ! Her fingers trembled as she buttoned her raincoat. Her heart was beating almost to suffocation. She wanted to cry, but she mustn't. She must go out into the night and find her brother. He needed her, she knew it. She had to go to save him!



CHAPTER SEVEN

Wild Geese Fly Against the Moon

OUT in the windy night Virginia found that the rain was over and that the moon sailed high against ragged clouds. She hurried through the dark streets and came at last to the long bridge which spans the Severn. It had lamps strung along the side, but the lights only deepened the darkness beyond. A motor car went whirling by, seeming to stare at her with golden eyes. After that she met neither motor cars nor pedestrians until she was within a few feet of the opposite shore. A man was leaning against the stone coping, gazing down into the water. As he heard her step, he turned and looked at her. Then as she came under the lamp, he spoke her name in a startled way.

She felt a great surge of relief. "Oh, Michael McMillan!" Her lifted face was illumined, "I am so glad—it's you!"

She was breathless, beautiful, in the shining night. He took a step toward her. "You should not be out alone as late as this."

She hesitated. "I had to come to find—Rickey. He went away this afternoon and he hasn't come back. He had a lot of money with him—all the cash we got from the sale. I'm afraid he's with Lute Carney."

"The man we saw yesterday?"

"Yes. Rickey promised to come home for supper. We had guests, and I wanted him to be there."

Guests? Anthony Bleecker? Anger flamed in Michael's breast. Yet there was about Virginia something so childlike, so troubled, that he found himself ashamed of his doubts, and set himself to help her.

"Where is this Lute Carney?"

"There's a place in the woods by the river, where the men meet. Rickey has never told me—but I went there—once. Mother was with me—but we didn't find him. We just looked through the window and came away. I know I can find it again if I follow the path. . . ."

His voice was sharp. "You don't mean you were going alone."

"Yes. What else could I do? Lute and the other men will get him to playing cards, and he will lose the money. And then he will hate himself—and nobody knows what will happen."

"What could happen—?"

"Oh, I've seen him before, Mr. McMillan. He was desperate."

He felt a raging sense of anger but did not show it. "You must let me look for him. It's no place for you. . . ."

"Rickey would be furious if he thought I'd sent you."

"He need not know. Anyone can walk by the river, and chance upon a friend. I'll work the thing out. Don't worry."

She seemed uncertain. “I might go with you.”

“Better leave it to me,” he spoke with decision.

So it was settled. There wasn’t any time to lose, she told him, breathlessly. It was so very late—anything might have happened. “Perhaps I’m silly to imagine things. But I can’t help it.”

He offered to go home with her, but she wouldn’t have it. “I am all right, really.”

“And you’re not to worry. Remember I shall bring your brother back, or if not, I’ll brings news of him.”

She laid her hand lightly on his coat sleeve, “Do you know you are being rather wonderful to me, Michael McMillan?”

“Am I?”

“Yes.” She turned quickly and left him, and he watched her until she was lost in the shadows on the other side of the bridge. His heart ran after her. There was something significant to him in this meeting. It had given him a chance to serve her. And he would see her again that night. His pulses pounded as he thought of it. Whether he brought Rickey back again or not, he meant to see her.

Leaving the bridge, he followed a path through the pine woods, across which the trees cast black shadows against the brightness of the moon. There was hardly a sound, a little lapping of the water, a little rustle of dry leaves under his feet, the low note of some wild thing awake and hunting.

On and on he went, making his way swiftly, aware in the midst of his anxiety of the beauty of the night. Then, suddenly, breaking the silence, voices, Rickey’s high and shrill with a hint of despair. “Well, you’ve cleaned me out, Lute, and that’s the end of it.”

“End—nothing. You’ll have more when Grogan gives it to you. And better luck next time.”

“There’ll be no next time. And how do you think I can face Jinny?”

“Oh, you ain’t tied to your sister’s apron string like that, Oliphant.”

“I’m not tied to anything but my own darned foolishness! I’m done with you, Lute, and if anything happens you’ve got only yourself to blame for it.”

Michael drew back into the bushes. Lute was drunk again, he could tell by his voice, and the two men were angry. There might be need for him to jump into it. But he’d keep out until forced to interfere.

“What’s going to happen? You’re too white-livered to hurt yourself.”

“Take that back—”

“Who are you talkin’ to?” There was a snarl in the coarse voice which changed to an oath as Rickey struck him. He went down like a shot, and Rickey stood over him. “Get back to your hut, and learn how to speak to a gentleman,” the boy raged, and Carney got to his feet and walked away muttering. It was the triumph of caste, Michael decided. Carney was a bigger man than young Oliphant. But when Rickey took that tone the bully was cowed by it as the generations back of him had been cowed.

Rickey stood quite still until Carney entered the hut, then he began to run, and Michael followed him. And so they came presently to a rickety pier which went out between rows of tall rushes to where the deeper waters spread their sheen. The moon hung low, and a flock of wild geese flew dark against it.

Rickey left the path and made his way to the end of the pier. There he stopped and stood looking down into the water. His face in the moonlight was white and staring. Michael went to him at once. At his step Rickey raised his head and spoke in a startled voice: "Who's there?"

"Michael McMillan."

"McMillan?"

"Yes, it's a marvelous night, isn't it? Did you see those geese flying against the moon?"

Rickey broke out with, "How did you get here?"

"I was out for a walk. I followed the river path." He was standing now beside Rickey. There was a moment's silence then Michael laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and spoke earnestly. "Look here—I heard you talking to Lute Carney. You seem to be in a bit of a hole. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Rickey wrenched himself away. "Why should you help?"

"Why shouldn't I? You and your sister seem to be a pair of babes in the woods. I heard you say you hated to face her."

"I'm not going to face her."

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill myself or—run away."

"Nonsense," sternly, "you must think of yourself in some other terms than that of melodrama."

Rickey blazed, "It's none of your business how I think of myself."

"Perhaps not. But I'm making it my business."

"I wish you'd let me alone."

The boy seemed dazed and Michael was aware of his quick breathing. "The money's gone," he said, "and there's no way to get it back. But I can't help it. Gambling is in my blood."

"Stop that," again Michael's voice was stern. "We'll try to find a way out. But don't pity yourself."

"There isn't any way out."

"I think there is."

His tone was so sure that Rickey asked quickly, "What do you mean?"

"Your sister says you are writing a book. I'm an editor, Oliphant. I'm looking for young authors. I'd like to read your manuscript."

He interrupted himself, “How much did Carney win from you?”

“A thousand dollars.”

“Well, I’ll give you a thousand dollars advance on the chance of my liking your story. I’ll get the money to you tomorrow.”

The boy turned and looked at him, then cried with a touch of wildness, “What chance is there that you’ll like what I write? If I fall down I’ll have your money, and you’ll be out of it.”

Michael gave a little laugh. “I’ve a bit of sporting blood myself, and now and then I gamble on my authors.”

“But why on me?”

“Your sister says some of your short stories have found a place in the big magazines. That shows you have it in you. And now, what about it?”

“I accept, of course. But I don’t see why you’re doing it.”

Michael shrugged. “Oh, well, I hate to see people go under when they’ve got it in them to make good.”

He stood up, “I make only one stipulation. That the whole thing shall be between the two of us. There is no reason why your sister should learn that you lost at cards. When the manuscript is ready you can let me have it. After that, you can tell her what you please. But I wouldn’t trouble her with it at this time.”

Rickey tried to thank him. “You needn’t,” Michael protested, “only keep away from Lute Carney. You don’t belong to his crowd, and you know it.”

Rickey lifted his face to the sky—“If I could really do a book—” He drew a sobbing breath—

“You can,” Michael’s arm went about the heaving shoulders, then, after a moment, “Shall we move on? The wind is getting sharp.”

The world wore a white pallor as the moon dropped back of the clouds. The woods were dark as they went through them. Rickey, in an excited reaction from his depression, asked eager questions. Michael’s magazine? That? Oh, Gosh, he didn’t really mean it? Oh, there wasn’t anything to beat it!

They shook hands when they parted. Michael stood back in the shadows while Rickey opened the door with his key. He heard Virginia’s voice, “Rickey, darling. . . .” Then the door was shut and through the uncurtained window he saw them going up the stairway.

Michael leaned on the sundial. The street lamp shone on him faintly, so that he was a gray shadow among darker ones. And presently he saw Virginia and her brother come down. Rickey descended to the kitchen, but Virginia opened the front door, closed it behind her, softly, and came towards him. “I saw you,” she said, in a hushed voice, “how can I ever thank you?”

“I need no thanks.”

"Yes . . . you brought Rickey home . . . Mr. McMillan, I don't dare stay a minute, or he'll miss me. He wants his supper."

"Won't you come back? . . . I must see you."

"I may be late."

"You'll find me on the stone seat."

The stone seat was set between two great box trees which boiled up about it in green luxuriance so that it was hidden from the street, and indeed from the sight of those in the house. Michael, shut in by it, thought of the lovers who had found it a retreat. The smell of the box was aromatic, delicious. He picked a leaf or two and stuck them in his note-book. He was aware all at once of a sense of romance, foreign to the habit of these arid days, as if something unexpected might happen this night under the moon.

Through the low window where Anthony had first glimpsed Mrs. Montgomery and the gold-colored kitten, Michael now saw Virginia busy with Rickey's repast. It was like a moving picture, and the high lights were Virginia's green gown and the leaping yellow flames of the new-built fire, for Rickey had brought wood, and was sitting now on the hearthstone, staring at the flames as he talked to his sister. The yellow kitten had leaped to his knee, and lay flattened out, her tail waving.

When the coffee boiled, they sat at the table and Rickey ate and drank. Virginia ate nothing. She leaned her chin on her hand and listened, while Rickey talked to her. After Rickey had finished his meal, the two of them straightened the room, then again they went together up the stairs.

It was a long time before the door again opened stealthily, and Virginia's shadowy form flitted along the path. "Did you think I was never coming?"

"I knew you would come."

She sat down beside him. She was wrapped in a warm cape. "Rickey's asleep, I think. Anyhow he won't dream I'm out here, but if he should miss me, I can say I was hunting the kitten."

The kitten had followed her, and came now, purring, to sit on the arm of the bench and look, round-eyed, at the moon.

"How much did he tell you?" Michael asked.

"Nothing, really, but I am sure the money is safe. I asked him and he said, 'as safe as the bank.' "

He was aware of her relief and happiness. "I can't add much to it," he said, "except that I'm glad I went. He and Carney were having words and Oliphant knocked him down."

"Oh!" Virginia's tone was startled.

"I shouldn't have told you except I wanted you to know that your brother isn't likely to go with that gang again."

"I shall be glad when we get away," her voice showed stress and strain. "You mustn't blame Rickey too much. He's had a lot of handicaps—father's handicaps, and his

shutting us away from everything."

He laid his hand over hers for a moment. "Things are going to be better—I'm sure of it." There was a moment's silence, then he withdrew his hand and stood up. "You're going to let me come and see you in New York?"

Her voice had a touch of shyness. "If you'd like it."

"I should like it. I'm a rather lonely fellow. Somehow of late I haven't made—friends." He stopped and went on: "What about Bleecker, he's a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"I shouldn't call him that exactly. I've known him only two days."

"You've known him as long as you've known me."

"That's different."

His heart leaped. "Why?"

"Oh, tonight you've been—so kind."

The moon shone full upon her earnest face. He met her earnestness with his own. "My dear child, I have done very little—"

"You have done a great deal. If I hadn't met you on the bridge—" her voice broke.

"It's rather remarkable, isn't it," he said, after a moment, "that two people meet. And the world is never quite the same."

She did not answer. Glancing across at her, he wondered if he had said too much. When he spoke again it was in a matter-of-fact manner: "You'll see the Bleeckers in New York."

"I'm not sure. I—oh, I wonder what you'll think of me, Mr. McMillan, when I tell you why I had Captain Bleecker to supper. . . ."

She was leaning on the sundial, and he could see her smiling. "Tell me. . . ."

She portrayed the scene with Jane graphically, "She condescended, and I hated it. And I knew she'd hate my having him, so I did it. But I was sorry afterwards. . . ."

"Why be sorry about anything. It's too wonderful here in the moonlight."

"I know."

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "What about this sundial? Are you going to sell it?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Will you let me buy it? I haven't a garden, but I've a sun-room in my apartment—with flowers, and a pool and goldfish swimming. The sundial could mark the hours for me there. . . ."

She was wistful, "It would miss the garden."

"How long has it stood here?"

"Over two hundred years—"

“How much it has seen. . . .” He traced the letters idly with his finger, then lifted his head and looked at her. “Here in this old garden men and women have lived and loved and—died. As we shall live—and love—and die—”

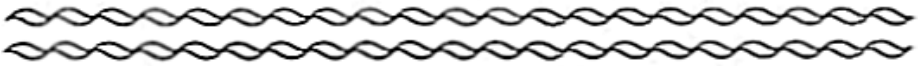
He hardly knew what he saying. He was aware of her closeness, her beauty. He would be her friend, but he wanted more than that—

He held out his hand—“It isn’t ‘good-by,’ is it?”

“No.”

He was gone in another moment—lost in the shadows beyond the brick wall. But she did not resent his abruptness. His voice still rang in her ears. “As we shall live—and love—and die—”

The words from the lips of another man might have sounded stupid—commonplace—But Michael’s emotion had transmuted them into something sacred and significant. Virginia, going into the house and up the stairs, was swept by a feeling that the moments by the sundial were to mark a crisis in her life’s history.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Days of Departure

Anthony Bleecker came more than once to the old house before the young Oliphants left Annapolis. Virginia found herself liking him. His gayety and good nature were a relief from the depression which had fallen upon her. In these last days she felt that the things of little girlhood were slipping from her, and that she was entering an unknown world of strange adventures. What if Rickey didn't make good? What if in New York he was no more dependable than he had been in Annapolis? What would she do alone in a big city. Terrors loomed ahead.

Anthony, coming in, would dispel her fears. And he was always coming in, and making himself useful. He packed all of Rickey's books, having arrived one morning to find Virginia at her wit's end as to what to do with them, and Rickey standing helpless.

"You're a pair of babes in the wood," Anthony told them, "let me do it. After a man's been in the service as long as I, he can squeeze an elephant into a teacup."

With his coat off, he went to work, and Virginia, sitting on an empty box, watched him. His white shirt was open at the neck, and the informal effect suited him. He worked with skill, and she was amazed at his strength. Among the trunks and boxes he was like a young giant set to easy tasks.

He saw her eyes upon him and said, "You didn't think I could do it?"

"Do what?"

"Work like this."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, we're not lilies of the field, if you mean that."

He went into the next room for more nails, and coming back, said, "When I get through this you're going out with me on the river."

"Am I?"

"Yes. It's a gorgeous day. And when you get to New York there won't be any river."

She was wistful, "I shall miss it."

"Why not stay here then?"

She shook her head. "We've burned our bridges."

"Sold the house? Oh, you could find smaller quarters. And your brother could write here as well as in the city."

"He thinks not. He wants a different atmosphere."

She did not tell him as she had told Michael, that she was anxious to get Rickey away from old associations—away from everything which had hitherto bound him. She had a feeling that Anthony would not understand. Michael had understood—but then Michael was—different.

Tony, lighting a cigarette, said, “Snap out of it.”

She looked at him in surprise, “Out of what?”

“Your mind isn’t on me. It’s miles away.”

She laughed, “Not so many miles.”

“Far enough anyhow. And you haven’t accepted my invitation. Do we go on the river or do we not?”

“Oh, I’d love it. . . .”

“I hope you mean it.”

“I do, of course.”

“Not ‘of course,’ but we’ll let it go at that. Do you know, young lady, that you’ve been a dreadful blow to my vanity?”

“Why?”

“I’ve never worked so hard in my life to get a few kind words out of a woman.”

“You’re spoiled.”

“Perhaps.”

He went back to his packing, and presently Rickey came in with the mail. “Three letters for you, Jinny.”

The script on two of the letters was known to her, but the third was written in a strange hand. It was post-marked, “New York,” and some instinct told her it was from Michael. She did not open it. She laid the letters aside, except the one from her mother which she read to Rickey while Anthony hammered.

She was able a little later, to escape from the kitchen. She found herself trembling as she tore open Michael’s letter. Oh, how silly to let herself be moved like this! But she couldn’t help it.

When, however, she had read the letter, she found her pulses stilled. She had a stunned feeling, a sense of shock. For the Michael of the letter was not the Michael of the moonlighted garden. The written words were cordial, pleasant, but some barrier had been raised which had not been there when she had talked with him beside the sundial. He wanted the sundial, and asked if she could have it packed for him. He was setting a price, after he had conferred with several dealers. If she felt it was worth more, he would be glad to add to the check. He hoped she was not finding it hard to leave Annapolis, and he would see her in New York. And he was most sincerely—Michael McMillan.

She did not know what she had expected. But she had expected more than this. Perhaps he had not said all that he felt, and if he were here, he would speak of friendship as he had spoken in the garden.

But he was not here, and already he might be regretting the things he had said to her, the things she had dreamed of in the night, and had waked to hear his voice—“*as we shall live—and love—and die—*”

Oh, what a fool she had been to lay such stress upon it. . . . When she went back to Tony, a clear spot of red burned in her cheeks. “I’m going to get lunch for you and Rickey. What shall it be? You deserve a reward for all your hard work—and Rickey can run around to the shop.”

“I thought the two of you might lunch with me.”

She shook her head. “If you don’t mind eating with the cook—” she flung him a challenging glance.

With the hammer in his hand he surveyed her. “You’ve come to life. What’s happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re not telling the truth. But we’ll let it go. And I accept your invitation. Let’s take a vote, Rickey, on the eats.”

“Oysters . . .”

“Good.”

“Anything else?”

“Crackers and coffee and some little pickles.”

Rickey went off with the order, and Virginia left Tony to finish the boxes while she cut flowers for the table. “There won’t be any linen, but paper napkins,” she told him as she departed.

Alone in the garden it seemed to her that every leaf and bloom shouted, “Michael, Michael—!” How wonderful it had been that night—She had not known how she had counted on seeing him again, and now she was not sure she wanted to see him. Not if he was like his letter.

By the time she had gathered an armful of golden chrysanthemums, pride had come to her rescue. She would put him out of her thoughts, and take the immediate good the gods gave. Anthony was the immediate good. He wanted to play the game, so why not? He was not in earnest, and neither was she. No one would be hurt, and she would forget. . . .

She carried her flowers in and Tony helped her set the table. When the oysters were bubbling in the chafing dish, he put on his coat. She took off her apron, and sat down opposite him. “I feel,” Anthony said, “incredibly domestic.”

“Do you? Then I’ll let you wash the dishes.”

“I will not, that’s Rickey’s job.”

“Rickey’s a Southern gentleman. They never wash dishes.”

Tony was immensely amused, “But you’d let me do it?”

“That’s different. Your Dutch traditions aren’t against it.”

“I wish Jane could hear you say that.”

She flashed a glance at him, “I wonder what she’d say if she could see you here?”

“She could say what she pleased. I’ve never been in better company.”

Rickey looked from one to the other, “Who’s Jane?”

“Tony’s mother, darling. And she’s a very charming person.”

“You’ll find that out for yourself, Rickey,” Anthony told him, “when you and your sister come to Derekdale.”

“Derekdale?”

“That’s our place on the Hudson. Both of you are invited to the Christmas dance. Your sister doesn’t know she is going. But she is.”

Rickey was eager. “Look here, if I go, shall I meet Miss Van Duyne?”

“Marty? Yes, she’s always there. Why?”

“Oh, I want to put her in a book. I’ve never seen anything to match her—she’s like something supernatural—a nymph in a pool, an oread on the mountains.”

“Rickey,” Virginia warned, “do come down to earth.”

He flushed, “I can’t help it if I’m a poet.”

Anthony laughed. “Go on, Oliphant, and write verses to her eyebrows. She’ll adore it, even if she doesn’t understand it. . . .”

“Why shouldn’t she understand?” Rickey demanded hotly.

Anthony shrugged, “Oh, see for yourself. She hasn’t time to think a lot. She’s too busy living. . . .”

All through the day Virginia played the game with Anthony, and it was while they were in his boat, sweeping out from the river into the Bay that he said to her, “Think of all the years we’ve lost in not knowing each other.”

Leaning back against the cushions she said, doubtfully, “I’m not sure that you’re good for me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, there’s a glamour—”

“In what?” eagerly.

“Oh, in gold braid and brass buttons—”

He was disappointed: “Wait until you see me without them.”

She surveyed him with level gaze. “Are you as nice without them as with them?”

“Much nicer.”

“Could you be—nicer—?”

He met her eyes squarely, “How much are you in earnest when you say things like that?”

“I don’t know. But I meant it when I said I was not sure you are good for me. You’re too disgracefully rich, and I’m too disgracefully poor. I always have the feeling that

you're extravagant when you shower so much on me—all those lovely flowers yesterday from Baltimore, and the books this morning, and the sweets."

"Did you like them?"

"Loved them. But you shouldn't."

"I should and I shall. You belong among lovely things—Virginia."

It was the first time he had used her name. She flushed, "Please don't."

"Why not? Aren't we friends?"

"Oh, yes, but I'm old-fashioned. And I've known you such a short while."

"I feel as if I had known you for a thousand years—"

She sat up and spoke with decision, "Well, you haven't. And isn't it time we were getting back—"

He laughed, "Suppose I should make up my mind not to take you back. To sail and sail and sail with you to the end of the world?"

"Don't be silly."

He laughed again, "Silly or not, there are things you don't know, little lady."

"What things?"

"Oh," his blue eyes were lighted, "things I shall teach you."

The boat reached the pier. He jumped out and held a hand to help her. When she stood beside him, he did not let her go. "I'm going to give you your first lesson now," he lifted her hand and kissed it, "some day it will be your lips!"

She told herself, when at last she got away, that she had deserved it. She wanted nothing of Anthony Bleecker. She had known that, yet she had led him on, letting him think her light-minded. And she had done it because she wanted to get away from the thought of Michael McMillan.

The next day Tony wrote an apology: "I shouldn't have said what I did on the pier. But you are such a charming scholar, and it was great temptation. But when the color went out of your cheeks, and you looked up at me with your little girl's eyes, I knew I had—transgressed. You're such a darling innocent, Virginia. Do you mind my calling you that—on paper? If you do, I'll ask you again to forgive me."

What could she do but forgive him? And when he asked her, on the night before her departure, to dine with him, and included Rickey, she accepted.

Rickey was thrilled by the invitation. "Bleecker's an awfully good sort," he said, "and he has loads of money."

"I wish he hadn't," Virginia said.

"Why?"

"Oh, things would be much simpler."

"I don't know what you mean."

"We can't afford to have rich friends, Rickey."

"I don't see it that way, Jinny."

Smiling up into his frowning face, she said, "Perhaps you are right." She told herself that Anthony Bleecker was surely better company for Rickey than Lute Carney and his crowd. So why worry?

She had shopped a bit in Baltimore, and had bought a brown tweed suit to travel in. It was simple and inexpensive, but there was fur on the collar, and the color was becoming. She had bought a little hat, too, which fitted her head like a helmet and showed her hair at the sides. As she surveyed herself anxiously in her scrap of a mirror she decided that in the right clothes she really was not so bad.

"What do you think of me, Rickey?" she asked her brother.

"You're better-looking than I ever believed you could be," was his brotherly response. "I like that white silk shirt and the brown shoes—and you carry yourself well, I'll say that, Jinny."

"Oh, Rickey—if only some day I could have lovely things—I want a rose-colored taffeta with gold lace, and rose satin slippers, and a little gold fan—"

"Where'd you wear them if you had them—?"

"I want a place to wear them, Rickey."

He stood leaning back against an old chest of drawers, his hands in his pockets. "Did you ever think, Jinny," he said, "that Tony Bleecker might . . . give you a place to wear them?"

They stood staring at each other, then Virginia said slowly, "I shouldn't want to think it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I couldn't ever—love him—"

"If I were a girl, I'd think myself lucky—"

She held up her hand, "Oh, don't, *please*, Rickey."

He was sulky, "I don't see why you're acting this way about it. Most girls would know on which side their bread was buttered—"

"I don't want butter on my bread," she said, with some spirit, "if I have to take it at Tony Bleecker's hands."

"But what have you against him, Jinny?"

"Nothing. And you're making a mountain out of a molehill," and for a time that was the end of it.

Anthony took them to a place near Marlborough, kept by two delightful ladies of the old school who were alive to modern methods. They had preserved the atmosphere of the house, and had reproduced as far as possible the background of the leisure and luxury which had once prevailed. Dinner was served in the great dining-room, with mahogany

and Sheffield and with ancient paintings on the walls. A fire crackled on the hearth, there were tall white candles, and the food was delicious.

Virginia's manner to Anthony throughout the meal was one of serene detachment. "You haven't forgiven me," he said when Rickey left them for a moment.

"There's really nothing to forgive," she said, slowly. "It was my fault. I hadn't known you long enough to let you say such things to me—"

He found her naïveté charming, "How long must I know you to say them?"

Before she could answer, Rickey came back, and the three of them went out together into the crisp darkness. There was a hunter's moon—a gold disc in a purple sky. The wind sang in their ears as the car sped along. "Tomorrow night," Tony reminded Virginia as they crossed a bridge and came into Annapolis, "tomorrow night you'll be in New York and this old town will be empty."

She did not answer. She was not thinking of the old town and its emptiness. She was thinking of Michael. He would be there in the big city—even though she did not see him, he would be there.

Hours later, after Rickey had gone to bed, Virginia went alone into the garden. The friendly box trees seemed to enfold her as she sat on the stone bench, where she had sat with Michael. How near he had seemed to her in mind and spirit! The change in him was incredible. Were men like that, she asked the moon, were they?

The next morning she went over to see old Mrs. Montgomery, taking with her the box of sweets that Tony had brought. The old lady sat in a room furnished with her own ancient belongings. There were things which would have turned Jane Bleecker green with envy. But Mrs. Montgomery would not have looked at Jane. She cared not at all for women who dressed like Jane and acted like her, and who did not wear their years with dignity. "When trains went out," said this last remnant of a prideful race, "manners went with them. No woman can look the *grande dame* in an abbreviated skirt and smoking a cigarette. And after fifty a woman should cultivate the grand manner. It's the only thing left in which youth can't surpass her."

Mrs. Montgomery was fifty plus forty, and she still had the grand manner, except, as has been said, in the moments when her old body and her old mind went back on her, and made her like any other old woman with primeval instincts.

She welcomed Virginia with affection, tinged with melancholy, "I hate to think it's your last visit."

"It isn't my last," Virginia said, her lips close to Mrs. Montgomery's ear, "I shall be coming back from time to time."

The old lady sat very straight in her high-backed chair. " 'From time to time' means nothing when one comes to my years," she said, in the hollow tone of the very deaf, "I may not be here tomorrow. Young people don't think of such things. They think only of living. As if that were the end of it. Let them think of dying. I'm ninety, and every day is a throw of the dice—"

Virginia stared at her in astonishment. Never before had Mrs. Montgomery said things like this. Had they been locked up always in that old breast? "Does it make you—

unhappy?"

"Death?" Mrs. Montgomery's blue-veined hands went out in a gesture of disdain. "Why be afraid? Do you think it would be better to live on forever—?"

Virginia shrank from something fierce and defiant in the old eyes. "I don't—know."

"Everybody's dead," the inexorable voice proceeded, "the girls who envied me, the men who loved. My beauty's dead—and beauty meant so much in the old days. We were belles then, and the world heard of us. Now nobody knows or cares that I am living on—yet I was once the toast of two States. You're beautiful, but some day you won't be. . . . Everything changes—"

Virginia leaned a little forward, "Does love—change?"

"Love—?" The old lady, too, leaned forward.

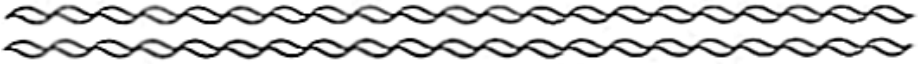
"Yes."

The old eyes held the young eyes, "Love lasts until eternity," whispered the old lips, "don't you ever believe anything else, Virginia."

They clung together for a moment, then, all at once, the fire died out of the old eyes. "You mustn't listen to me, my dear, when I am in moods like this. And now what have you brought me?"

Virginia opened the box and showed the contents—"See all the little compartments, and there are the things you love—almonds, and crystallized fruits, and bonbons—" She stopped suddenly as she caught a glimpse of the two of them in the mirror. Youth and age! Her own bright hair, the flame in her cheeks, the light in her eyes—oh, would she, could she ever be like this old creature bent over the box?

On the way home, she told herself that she was morbid,—that men and women might change outwardly, but within they were the same. She must put her trust not in things of the earth but in God. As she went along the street, she lifted her face to the sky, as if she asked a question of One who had made these things come to pass, and knew the reason for them.



CHAPTER NINE

New Quarters

It was Mary Lee Logan who met the Oliphants at the station. She had called them up long distance to find the time of their arrival, and she had her car waiting. "Why take a taxi, when I'm simply thrilled to have you here?" She was shaking Virginia's hand but she looked at Rickey. "I've been dead lonesome. And I'm living not far away from you. Isn't it grand and glorious?"

Virginia, startled and stunned by the noise and the confusion, said: "Oh, it *is* good of you . . . it doesn't make everything seem so—so strange."

Rickey, vivid as a flame, laughed excitedly, "I believe Jinny's a bit scared but I—I'm mad about it."

Mary Lee met his excitement with her own. "It's all so stimulating—as if the air we breathed were a kind of—elixir—You'll do wonderful things here, Rickey. I know it."

"I know it, too," his tone was complacent.

As they drove through the lighted streets Virginia was silent. She had not thought it would be like this—overwhelming, ominous, with its glittering gigantic signs, its black moving masses, the dull roar of hidden trains, the shrill whistles of traffic officers, the crash of the elevated. Coming at last to Fifth Avenue, however, the glamour of it gripped her. There was a strange beauty; things which caught the imagination—thousands of shops, their windows like great paintings against the night, thousands of motor cars drifting down a golden river, thousands of pleasure-seekers moving towards mysterious ends.

When they arrived at Washington Square, Mary Lee drew her car up in front of a shabby brown-stone house. It was the last outpost of the life which had once been lived on this side of the Square. The old mansion had seen grandeur—at this hour in former days there would have been men and women going up the stairs, the women in trains and tiaras, and wearing long white gloves. They would have been received by stately servants, and other stately servants would have served them in the dining-room. They would have eaten oysters in deep shells, terrapin and canvas-backs, and a different wine would have been served with each course. It would have been a long and heavy dinner, and afterwards there would have been whist or the opera. All the windows from the top floor to the basement would have gleamed with yellow gaslight, and the door, when opened, would have poured its light into the street.

But now when the young Oliphants and Mary Lee entered the hall it was dimly illumined—just a tiny spark in the torch upheld by a Bronze Knight who ornamented the newel post. Behind the Knight a stairway stretched up and up—to end amid the shadows. Virginia shivered a little as she gazed. She was glad their rooms were on the first floor, she would have hated to meet the shadows on those stairs.

The landlady who came up from below spoke broken English and wore a black shawl about her shoulders. She gave them the key. "The lady paid for a fire . . ."

"What lady?" Virginia demanded.

"Oh, I did it," Mary Lee explained. "I wanted it to—welcome you—"

"It was dear of you," Virginia said, and stood looking about her.

It was not so bad—a big old-fashioned drawing-room and a little room behind it, both partly furnished, and clean. Screens and a curtain made it possible to divide the big room into three. "It will have to be living-room, dining-room, bedroom, and kitchen," Virginia explained. "Rickey will have the small room—he'll need the quiet to write."

When the landlady had left them, Virginia set down a small basket, which until then she had carried carefully, and lifted the cover. Out of it stepped at once the gold-colored kitten, mewing plaintively.

Mary Lee exclaimed, "You don't mean that you brought her?"

"We couldn't leave her, could we?" Virginia demanded. "She's such a darling."

They were, Mary Lee informed them, to dine with her at once at a place she had found around the corner, "There's a lot of atmosphere, girls in berets and blouses. You'll adore it, Rickey."

He did adore it. He found a certain fascination in the low-ceiled room with its lantern light, its women smoking, its men lounging across its tables, its foreign food, its coffee in tall glasses. Here was Life as he had dreamed of it. He thought, suddenly, of Lute Carney and his crowd, and the shanty beside the river. He wondered what he had found to like in a place like that, and the people. The allurement of it all had left him. He blushed to think that it had ever held him.

Virginia, on the other hand, was repelled by the tiny crowded tables, the queer tasting food, the heavy haze of smoke, the cheap theatricalism. How different from the room in which they had dined with Anthony—the wide shining mahogany, the silver and cut crystal, the familiar, satisfying food.

She wondered if Michael came often to such places. And would he like them? She wondered, too, about his home life . . . would he tell her if she should see him? But why should she expect to see him? She had answered his letter about the sundial, and he had acknowledged it. Since then there had been silence.

Getting settled in new quarters was a matter of much work and planning. Gradually, however, the shabby drawing-room was transformed into a cheerful and charming habitation. There were honey-colored curtains at the windows, and the chintz which covered the chairs and couch was of pale mauve with primroses. At night, Virginia, made a bed of the couch, and drew the screens around her. She missed the seclusion and spaciousness of the house in which she had spent her days. But there was nothing to do but make the best of it, and to do it without whining.

> "It's like one of Balzac's books," she wrote to her mother, "with prosperity on the first floor and poverty at the top, Rickey and I are kings and queens to the other tenants—there's a little boy who lives aloft and who comes down the stairway now and then and looks wistfully in if our door is open. So I ask him to sit by our fire and play with the kitten, and he loves it. To him our yellow curtains and flowered chintzes are very grand and gorgeous. His mother is a widow, and has to go out a part of the day to work. I never dreamed, dearest,

that lives could be so barren of everything—some of them haven't a book or a picture, nothing to make life beautiful—and some of them wouldn't know beauty if they saw it. There are people from all kinds of places, but in the main they are respectable. Our landlady sees to that. She is a devout Italian, and as kind as you please. She came up the other day with a great steaming dish of spaghetti flavored with garlic, and Rickey adored it. He takes to new things better than I. You should see him! He wears a blue blouse and his hair ruffled up and smokes cigarettes in a long holder. He thinks I am hopelessly old-fashioned because I won't cut my hair and smoke with him! Now, don't worry, mother, it is just a phase with Rickey, and he is really not going around with anyone but Mary Lee Logan, and she is good for him. She manages him better than I ever could. She seems to give in, and yet she doesn't. And you know Rickey. He plays the masterful, and she feeds him on flattery. Yet, I am not sure it is flattery, for she believes all that she says about him. And she is very modern. She buys tickets to concerts and plays and takes Rickey with her. At first he wouldn't do it. He said he'd pay his way or not go at all. And she said, 'Well, that would mean that you wouldn't go, wouldn't it?' and when he admitted it, she said, 'Oh, don't be stupid. I'm getting a thousand times more out of it than you—if you knew what it means to me to have your friendship and Virginia's, and to come here and be at home.' And there were tears in her eyes, and we knew she meant it. She is really great fun and Rickey treats her as he would a boy—and as I have said, I think it is good for him. He is working hard, and while he won't let me read what he has written, he says he is sure it is the best he's done.

"He is great friends, too, with Captain Bleecker, who comes up now and then from Annapolis. The four of us go about quite a bit together, and are as gay as possible. We've been to a lot of interesting places to dine, and have seen several musical shows. Your two children are quite content and comfortable, and you are to think of them that way and not have them on your mind."

When Virginia had written that last sentence she sat and looked at it, then she tore up the sheet and rewrote it. She couldn't lie to Mumsie. She was not "content", so she left that out and made it that they were "comfortable," which was true. She did not speak in the letter of Michael McMillan. She had never spoken of him to her mother. There was no reason why she should. He had come into her life for a moment and had gone out of it. She had been in New York for a month, and he had not come to see her. She felt a deep sense of hurt. He needn't have dropped her quite so suddenly after that scene in the garden.

And how could she know that Michael was by sheer strength of will keeping away from her. After he left Annapolis, he had thought of her constantly. He had been carried away by emotion that night in the moonlight. If he saw her again he might not be master of himself. He was even afraid to think of her, because when he did his soul was shaken. He knew now that he could love her. But who was he that she should love him in return? He was disillusioned, fearful of another experience such as he had had with Helen. He had given her all the fire of his young manhood, and she had had ice in her veins. He had

given her tenderness and she had not wanted it. He would have worshipped but she had stepped down from her pedestal. He could not go through with it again.

Yet in time he found himself at Virginia's door. He had telephoned asking if he might bring her a book—tomorrow, and her answer thrilling along the wires had set his pulses pounding. She had said "Yes" in an unemotional manner, and he had not guessed that her pulses, too, were pounding.

When Virginia hung up the receiver, she looked about the room, and it seemed to her transformed. The honey-colored curtains were golden banners, the shabby screens were snug walls to set about the coziness with which she would encompass him. She caught up the little cat. "He's coming," she whispered, "he's coming," ecstatically.

To Rickey, however, arriving a little later, she showed no signs of agitation. She did not speak of Michael's message until he had told her of his evening with a half dozen young intellectuals who had imposed on him their opinions.

"I said a few things to them, Jinny," his tone was triumphant, "not half of them have any background for their literary tastes. Most of them came to the classics in the high school—never heard of them before, while you and I are the products of generations of culture."

"Rickey, surely you didn't tell them that?"

"Yes. Why not?"

Yet as he proceeded with his tale, she saw signs about him of the influence of these new friends—a tendency to affectation, an absence of the old simplicity. But she consoled herself with the thought that anything was better than Lute Carney.

When at last her brother had settled down to a cigarette and a book, she said, with an effect of casualness, "Michael McMillan telephoned."

Rickey's book dropped to the floor. His voice was startled. "McMillan?"

"Yes, you remember him, Rickey?"

Rickey remembered—a night when wild geese had flown dark against the moon. He remembered a bargain made beside the shining river. He had intended to go and see McMillan in his office. But he had shrunk from it. When the book was finished would be time enough.

Out of his thoughts he demanded, "What does he—want?"

She laughed, "To see us, what else?"

Rickey went on reading, but between the page and his eyes came a vision of that night on the pier—at last he flung away his book and went into his office. He wished McMillan would stay away and not come snooping around.

The next day, however, when Michael came, Rickey received him in his most winning manner. Indeed, he took the center of the stage, and sat on the hearth-rug and talked about himself. He was a picturesque figure and he knew it. He liked this way of sitting on the rug in his blue blouse. He had never done it in Annapolis, but it suited his type and swung him away from the commonplace.

He boasted a bit of what he was doing. “I’m trying to show the world that what we need is imagination, greater creative power. We’ve got to get away from sex and sophistication. All the books are alike. No wonder people are not reading them. No one but the kind who read what they are told to read, and they do it as a duty and not because they like it.”

And so on and on. . . . Michael listened politely, but Virginia’s cheeks burned. She wished Rickey wouldn’t. She gave Michael his tea and tried to switch the conversation. “I made the cake myself,” she said, as Rickey passed them.

“You have made more than the cakes,” he told her smiling, “this room is delightful —” His eyes swept it, taking in the harmony of the honey-colored curtains, the amethystine chintz, the yellow roses in a bowl of dull blue pottery.

“Tony Bleecker sent the roses,” Rickey vouchsafed, “he’s here a lot.”

Again Virginia wished he wouldn’t. But Rickey went on: “He’s taking us to a play tomorrow night—Jinny and me and Mary Lee Logan. She’s the girl who was at the sale, who bought the secretary.”

Michael remembered her.

“She’s great fun,” Rickey further elucidated, “I’m trying experiments with her—sartorial—” he blew cigarette rings in a knowing manner.

“Oh, say clothes, Rickey,” Virginia begged.—“He’s getting so sophisticated, Mr. McMillan—and once upon a time he was such a simple lad.”

They all laughed together, and Rickey said, “Mary Lee likes it. She says before I get through she won’t know herself.”

He proceeded after that to expound his theories as to the metamorphosis of Mary Lee. But Michael scarcely heard him. His eyes were on Virginia, his thoughts on that significant sentence, “Tony Bleecker sent the roses.”

Of course Bleecker had sent roses. Who wouldn’t? Myriads of them to make of this great room a garden? But he, Michael, had brought books—and did it matter if the books were thin little volumes of verse? A book was a book. Roses were romance. And Bleecker knew it!

Well, he had known it, too. But he had not—dared. He could go as far as friendship—but no farther—. This lovely child was not for him. Love was not for him. Helen had taught him that.

When at last he left her, Virginia’s eyes said more than her lips. “You will come again?” were the words she spoke. But her eyes said, “*Please.* . . .”

Michael dropped her hand and turned away. “Look here, Oliphant,” he said, with an effect of heartiness, “You know I want a look-in on the book.”

There flashed a glance between them of understanding. “When I’ve finished it I’ll bring it over,” Rickey said.

“The sooner the better.”

When their guest had gone, Rickey threw himself in a big chair to talk things over. “It would be great to have my first serial in his magazine.”

“Indeed it would, darling.”

Her voice was listless. Rickey sat up and surveyed her. “I must say you’re taking a keen interest in it.”

“In what—”

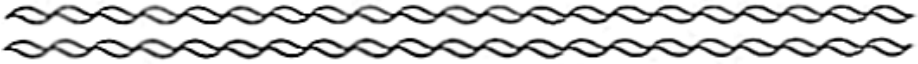
“My book, Jinny. Great guns, but you’re lukewarm about it. Young authors like I am don’t have a call every day from a great editor.”

So Rickey had taken Michael’s call to himself! Well, why shouldn’t he? Michael had had no word of answer to her invitation. What did it mean? She sat late by the fire, her troubled eyes upon it. Michael had been gay and kind and interested, but he had not been the Michael of the garden.

In the weeks that followed he sent her a book or two, but he did not come. And so she tried to make up her life without him. She was lonely but she refused to yield to it. She built up a little group of interests. There was a church where she went early in the morning and again at vespers. It was a great church with all kinds of people coming and going, and there was marvelous work done in the parish. She found that she could help a little. And when things pressed upon her she sought strength and tranquillity in the dim edifice which seemed so far removed from the beating noise and bustle of city streets.

It was in the church, too, that she found an answer to some of the questions she had asked herself that day when she had talked with Mrs. Montgomery. Love *was* eternal. There was the love of man for God and the love of God for man, and the love of man for his brother. And one must not be thinking always of happiness. One must be good and do good, and the rest would follow. Rickey’s friends laughed at all the old-fashioned virtues, but going about the great city, Virginia saw what sin could do to little babies, to young womanhood and young manhood, to the middle-aged who drugged themselves with excitement, to the old who died, despairing.

As for herself she walked through it all, like Jeanne D’Arc awaiting a crusade. She dreamed of the great things she would like to do—yet all the time she yearned for Michael.



CHAPTER TEN

Rickey Accepts an Invitation

It was on a gray day late in November that Tony Bleecker came to press an invitation. "You've got to come to Derekdale at Christmas."

"I've told you we can't."

"But my dear girl."

"I'm not your dear girl."

"I wish you were."

"*Please*, Anthony!" They were "Virginia" and "Anthony" now to each other. It seemed to be the way of this new world in which Virginia found herself, so she had acquiesced. "Let's not talk about it."

"But tell me your real reason."

She said, slowly, "Your mother."

"But you have a note, writ in her own hand, asking you. What more do you need than that?"

"Her note really doesn't mean anything. She doesn't really want me. You know that, Tony."

He did know it. He and his mother had fought a wordy battle over the invitation. "Why should I have them, Tony?" his mother had demanded.

"Because if you don't ask them, I shan't be there, Midget."

There had been a startled silence out of which Mrs. Bleecker had said: "You mean that you won't come on for the ball?"

"I shall have important duties at Annapolis."

Jane had known that he meant it. That he was defying her absolutely. So she had capitulated and had written the note, and now Anthony by Virginia's fireside was faced by a woman more obstinate than his mother. Virginia was smiling, but she showed no signs of yielding as she reiterated, "Your mother doesn't really want me. She is only asking me because you made a point of it."

"I don't care what Mother wants. She has it in for any woman she thinks I might fall in love with. As a rule I give way to her. But this time I shall do as I please."

"I shall do as *I* please," Virginia emphasized, "and now let's stop arguing and talk of something else."

Rickey joined them later at tea. He was white-faced, nervous. For the last few days the story had been going badly. He greeted Anthony with enthusiasm and complained to Virginia, "Why didn't you tell me Tony was here?"

"I was afraid I might interrupt your train of thought."

"I haven't any train of thought. And I can't pound a typewriter forever."

She ignored his irritation. “You and Tony will have to toast your own muffins, and there’s marmalade.”

Rickey stuck a muffin on the long brass toasting fork and knelt in front of the fire. “I’ll do this one for Tony and another for myself.”

Anthony stretched out in a chintz-covered chair, picked up the kitten and set it on his knee. “Your sister says she won’t come to Derekdale for our Christmas party.”

Rickey turned quickly and the muffin dropped from the fork into the fire. “She won’t?”

“No.”

“Oh, why not, Jinny?”

“I’ve told you.”

“Well, if you don’t go, I shall,” Rickey said, blazing, and in the silence which followed he dug the scorched muffin out of the coals and flung it in the firebox.

Then he stuck another muffin on the fork and issued his ultimatum: “You can stick around this place forever if you wish. But I shan’t. I’m stale on my story and I need a change.”

And that was the end of it as far as Anthony was concerned, but after he had gone, Virginia and her brother had it out together.

“We simply can’t afford it,” Virginia stated, “and we don’t belong with Tony’s plutocrats.”

“I’m not afraid of Tony’s plutocrats. You might think of me a little. Things are going wrong with the story. I’m half wild about it. . . .”

She went up to him and laid a hand on his shoulder, “Really, Rickey?”

“Yes. What I’ve written is all right. But I’ve come to a dead stop. I must get away from it for a time if I can. And this seems to be the perfect opportunity. And then you balk . . .” He drew away from her, “there’s no real reason why you can’t go.”

“Yes. There is. Oh, Rickey, can’t you see . . . ?”

“I can see you are acting like a—fool. . . .”

Her hand went to her heart, “Rickey are you—mad, to say such things to me?”

“No, I’m not mad. I know what you mean. Tony’s in love with you—Well, what difference does that make? You needn’t promise him anything. We can go and have a good time—and perhaps if you know him better—” His arm went around her, “Be a good sport, Jinny, and come.”

It was hard when he was in that mood, to resist him, and at last Virginia gave in. Having capitulated, she found herself anticipating the event. She was young and loved a good time, “And you must have some clothes,” Rickey assured her. “It will pay in the end. We can dip a bit into our principal. When the story gets over I can pay it back.”

She knew she was not wise to let him do it. She knew too that she had yielded her strength to his weakness.

Since the thing was done, however, she resolved to make the best of it, and the next morning she went shopping. At first she tried the less expensive places, then entering, half-fearfully, a smart salon, she saw on one of the lovely models a gold lace gown. It was extravagantly expensive but she tried it on, and when she saw herself in the mirror she hardly dared look again it was so wonderful.

But she would not buy it.

"May I lay it aside?" the saleswoman asked her.

Virginia shook her head. "I can't afford it."

Yet all the way home she had a vision of herself in that gown dancing with Tony at the Bleeckers' ball, and of Tony's mother looking on!

It was snowing when she got out of the bus, a sluggish November snowfall, and it was very cold. Virginia walked rapidly down one of the side streets to her favorite market shop. She had purchases to make, and planned her list as she went along.

Out of her absorption she became aware suddenly of a small dog trotting on ahead of her. He was shaggy and Scotch and with the lines of a thoroughbred, but he was dirty and draggled and he went on his way with an anxious air, running up to this person and that, then falling back in dreary disappointment. Virginia's heart was touched by his desolation, and as she entered the shop she found herself hoping that somewhere in the hurrying crowd the little lost dog would discover his master.

When she came out, however, the little dog was still there. He sat in front of a stand where frankfurters sizzled on an iron plate and where brown rolls were hot as hot in a glass compartment. A red-faced man was in charge of the stand. He was protected from the cold by a window which let down in front of him and shut him in comfortably with his wares. When a customer stopped in front of the window, the red-faced man raised it, stuck a fork in a sizzling sausage, slapped it between a roll, added a dash of mustard, handed it out, took the customer's money, closed the window, folded his hands across his white apron and again waited.

Whenever the window went up, delicious fragrances came forth on the frosty air. The little dog sniffed the fragrances, but did not find them filling. As one customer after another was served, the hungry animal watched hot sausages and hot rolls disappear before his eager eyes and his short tail beat an agonized entreaty.

Virginia lingering on the step could stand it no longer. She crossed the street swiftly, bought two rolls and two sausages, and fed them to the starving dog. A crowd gathered about them. They thought it a strange and touching sight to see the pretty lady with the pink cheeks and the green hat, on her knees in the snow. Not one of them would have done it, but they liked to see her do it. They enjoyed vicariously the effect of philanthropy.

When at last Virginia rose to her feet and went on, the little dog followed her, keeping his distance, but not letting her out of his sight. When finally they reached the old house in Washington Square, he climbed the steps on his short legs and stood in the hall while Virginia considered him. "Oh, dear little dog," she demanded, "what am I going to do with you?"

He wagged a slow and wistful tail. As she opened the door of her apartment and shut it behind her, the tail was suddenly still. Like a peri outside the gates, the little dog stood and waited.

People kept coming into the hall from the street and going up and up the stairs. It was dark outside, and the hall was dimly lighted by the torch upheld by the Bronze Knight who ornamented the newel post. The Bronze Knight was a reminder of other days in the old house. On his shield was blazoned what had been, perhaps, the motto of the fine family of which three generations had lived under this roof—*verité sans peur*—truth without fear.

The light from the Bronze Knight's torch shone on Virginia's hair as she opened the door and came out with her brother and Mary Lee Logan. "We've got to keep him," Virginia was saying, "I couldn't sleep tonight if we left him out in the snow."

Through the open door the little dog saw the room with its honey-colored lights, its grate with the glowing coals, its bright coin of a kitten. The short tail fluttered—then, with a sigh, the tired little beast dropped at Virginia's feet and laid his head on her shoe.

"You poor darling—oh, Rickey, look at him!"

It was Rickey who carried him off to a warm bath and a bowl of bread and milk, and as he left them, Mary Lee announced, "I'm inviting myself to dinner. Will you have enough for me? If not, I'll go out. I've tickets for a play, and I am going to take Rickey. You won't mind staying alone, will you?"

Virginia knew that the question was perfunctory. Mary Lee wanted Rickey and no one else. So she acquiesced cheerfully.

Dinner was served on a little table set in front of the fire. And while they ate they talked of the ball at Derekdale. Virginia told the history of her shopping, of the lovely gown. "But the price was beyond anything, Mary Lee."

"Oh, my dear, why not? You'll put it all over the rest of the women, and carry Tony Bleecker off under their noses."

Virginia flushed, "Don't say things like that?"

"I'll say them because they are true. And my dear child when you marry Tony Bleecker you can have all the gold lace gowns in the world."

"But I'm not going to marry Tony."

A light flamed in Rickey's eyes. "Listen to her, Mary Lee. Any girl but Jinny would be off her head to have a man like that in love with her. But Jinny's as cool as you please about it. Turns him off as if she had a dozen lovers."

"Perhaps there's somebody else." Mary Lee's shrewd eyes were on Virginia's hot cheeks.

Rickey laughed, "There isn't anyone else." He rose from the table. "I'll go and make myself pretty for tonight, Mary Lee . . ." he smiled at her, and she smiled back. But she was not smiling when she again spoke to Virginia. "So you're really going?"

"Yes, Rickey wanted it so much. But it isn't wise."

"Oh, why be wise—" Mary Lee questioned, "there are years enough ahead to be solemn and staid." She paused, then said slowly, "I shall miss you . . . and Rickey."

"We shan't stay long," Virginia consoled her.

"Long enough for him to fall in love with Marty Van Duyne."

Virginia was startled and showed it. "Marty Van Duyne?"

"Yes."

"But he has seen her but once."

"Once is enough for a poet like your brother. He says she is the only woman he knows who is true to her type. It's her clothes, of course. He's always criticising mine."

"Oh, that's Rickey's way. If I were you I'd wear what I liked and snap my fingers at Rickey."

"But you see," Mary Lee said, slowly, "I can't snap my fingers at Rickey because I love him."

Virginia had no words for that. And Mary Lee went on after a moment, stormily, "Girls like you don't admit they are in love with men who aren't in love with them. But I am proud that I care for Rickey, and I'm willing to tell the world. And I know I'm the kind of woman he ought to marry. I understand him, which is more than Marty Van Duyne would ever do. You've always made it too easy for him, Virginia. Rickey needs praise, but he needs prodding. You're too self-sacrificing. I love him, but I wouldn't let him tyrannize over me." She broke off, "What rot I'm talking. Please forget it."

She rose, crossed the room to the window and peered out. "It's snowing. We'll have to take a taxi." She came back and telephoned, then again moved about restlessly.

Suddenly she stopped, "Oh, I hate the thought of Christmas."

"Why don't you go home?"

"Because I want to be here when Rickey comes back," she stopped in front of Virginia and smiled at her. "You see how brazen I am?"

Virginia smiled back at her, "I don't believe you mean half you say."

"I do. Oh, well, tonight I'll eat, drink and be merry—"

She changed the subject as Rickey arrived. "Have you named the pup?" she asked, as the small dog greeted his master.

"No."

"Then I'll christen him." She insisted on making a ceremony of it, and sprinkled his head with water. She called him "Weenie-Wurst" in memory of the sausage stand. It was all very gay and rollicking, and Rickey and Mary Lee went away in a gale of laughter.

Left alone, Virginia was conscious of a deep sense of loneliness. She put everything in order and then with the dog and cat for company she sat by the fire with her book. She was depressed and anxious. She had come to New York with such high hopes and now already Rickey was restless, worried about his book, running away from hard work. For

that was it—he was tired of intensive labor. He had talked of freedom in Annapolis, and now again he talked of it. Yet no artist found freedom until he achieved what he sought.

If only she knew what he had written. She might help and suggest. But Rickey had shut her out. He would do alone what he had to do, and owe nothing to anyone for his success. That had been his attitude and she had acquiesced.

Yet—if it should not be success? She dared not think what failure would mean to her brother. He would be overwhelmed, beaten, bitter. She had seen him in such moods in lesser matters than this big task to which he had set himself.

He must not fail! Some strange propulsion drove her suddenly from the fireside to Rickey's room. His manuscript lay piled neatly on a little table. There was the title—*Burning Beauty*—staring up at her.

As she reached out her hand to touch it, she felt like Fatima in Bluebeard's chamber. She had no right to look, but she did look, lifting the title page, and reading the first lines.

For a long time she stood there—reading, then all at once, she gathered up the sheets and carried them with her to the front room. For an hour she pored over the pages, trying to find some hint of what she had expected of Rickey's genius and finding—nothing.

Oh, this couldn't be Rickey's beautiful story. The plot was there, the idea as she had outlined it that day by the river. But the treatment was commonplace, the style utterly without distinction. Not a word glowed or sparkled. She was too good a critic to be deceived. Rickey's manuscript was worthless. No editor would look at it.

The white sheets fluttered to the floor and lay piled about her. The fire died down. The little dog and the pussy cat were fast asleep. Outside the snow fell heavily. The night was very still.

Oh, what was she going to do about it? For something must be done. Rickey must not go on. Yet how keep him from it? He would not listen to her. He would rage and storm, and tell her she didn't believe in him. He must be helped from the outside. By whom? Mary Lee? Better not bring her into it. . . .

Michael McMillan—!

His name came to her as if it had been shouted. It seemed to crash against the echoes of the great room. He, more than any other, could advise, suggest. She glanced at the clock. It was not late as New Yorkers knew it. Would she dare ask him to come—tonight? Rickey was away—there would be time before he returned. There might not soon be another opportunity when she could have Michael to herself.

She went to the telephone, holding herself steady. When Michael's own voice answered, she put her question quietly. Could he come? It was very important.

He would come—gladly. In a half hour he would be there.

She changed her simple frock for one of deep blue, which had a touch of gold at throat and wrists so that it gave her the look of a Fra Angelico angel. She put fresh wood on the fire, drew the two deep chairs closer to the hearth.

When Michael came he brought flowers—a leaf from Tony's book! But they were not roses. He had filled a bowl of ivory pottery with violets. He had found the bowl in

Italy. “Ever since I met you I have wanted you to have it,” he told Virginia.

She had been breathless when he entered, but his manner put her at her ease. “It was good of you to call me up. I was bored to extinction, with nothing in the world I wanted to do.”

The old room seemed filled with sunshine and fragrance. “I hardly dared call you. You are such a busy man.”

“I am never too busy when you need me,” he, too, was aware of sunshine, fragrance.

At first they talked about the place where he had found the jar—a villa above Naples. “I was motoring through on the day the house was sold, and everything in it. I bought the house, for a song . . . and kept the servants. This vase is the only thing I brought back. But I like to think that over there all those lovely things are—waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps I shall never go back. Yet there the house stands, ready if I need it. It gives me a sense of permanence which an apartment can never give.”

He described it all, the tangle of flowers on the terraces, the view of the Bay, the vineyards with the warm, winey odor of grapes. The house itself—the long low rooms, its pergola, its pool, its fountain—its marble figures. “One can’t transplant such things,” he finished, “some people do, but we Americans should stick to our own background and belongings.”

He stopped there. “I’ve talked enough. You had something to ask me?”

She told him, “It’s about Rickey. I have just read his book. He doesn’t know I have read it, and I wouldn’t dare tell him. But Mr. McMillan, he mustn’t go on with it—”

“Why not?”

“It’s—commonplace—confused. And he has such high hopes for it. I dread disappointment for him. Yet I know that as it is no editor will take it.”

He tried to cheer her, “Perhaps it isn’t as bad as you think.”

She shook her head, “I am sure I am not mistaken. Someone will have to help him to see what he is doing—and I thought it might be—you—”

“I’ll do anything I can. But how?”

“Could you call him up—say that you were in need of a serial, and ask to read a bit of his to see if you could use it. Then he wouldn’t plod through to the end on the wrong path. It isn’t that he can’t write, it’s only that he’s making a false start.”

Michael was not so sure of it. Often these young critics failed when it came to creative work. Rickey could talk glibly enough of the way a thing should be done, but it did not follow that he could do it. However, he would do his best, for Virginia’s sake if for no other reason. She was so wistfully dependent on him, so in need of advice and co-operation. In that moment he threw all doubts to the wind. He would be her friend. Why look beyond friendship?

The next morning when the telephone rang, Rickey answered and turned from it, radiant. “It’s McMillan. He’s asked if he can come over. He needs a serial and he wants

to look at mine."

"You will let him?"

"Why not? I told him you'd give us tea this afternoon, and then we could talk about it __"

She planned eagerly, "You shall have him all to yourself. I'll go up after tea and sit with little Roger. He isn't well, and his mother has work to carry home."

So exultant and eager was Rickey that he sent her off that very morning to buy the gold lace gown. She protested, but he insisted. "For the moment we are kings and queens, Jinny. The world is before us."

As she rode uptown, Virginia had a sense of panic. What if Rickey refused to listen to advice? What if he blamed Michael, blazed out at him, as he had when others found fault with him. But surely, he *wouldn't*. It would mean so much to him to have Michael's opinion, his advice. She tried to console herself with that.

When the lovely gown arrived late that afternoon, Tony Bleecker was there, and insisted that the box should be opened.

"Try it on," he said, as she held it up in all its gorgeousness and glitter.

"Not now. You'll see me in it later."

But when Rickey added his entreaties, she went into his little room to change, calling back over her shoulder: "You'd better have all the lamps lighted. Evening things look awful in the daytime."

When at last she appeared, the two men stared at her. She was like some delicate figure in gold and ivory. Anthony on his feet proclaimed, "A princess passes!"

Rickey was less poetic. "Great guns, Jinny, you're a raving beauty. Money can do anything."

"Money plus your sister's loveliness—"

Rickey flashed a glance at the older man. And presently he said, "You two won't mind if I leave you. I've got to earn money to pay for all this—affluence. And I haven't written a word since yesterday."

When the boy was gone, Anthony spoke with assurance, "Some day I am going to buy your gowns for you.

"You're not, of course."

"Oh, yes, I am. I'm going to buy everything. You're going to marry me, Virginia. You can't escape."

She had a feeling that a net was being drawn about her. But she braved it out. "I'm not going to marry anybody."

He laughed, "I'll let you say it—but I'll prove you wrong."

He was standing beside her, and now he put his finger under her chin and forced her to look up at him. "Don't you love me a little bit?"

“No,” her clear glance was unwavering.

“I don’t believe it . . . you are blushing, Virginia.”

“I know. But it isn’t what you think. It’s only—that this is my first proposal.”

He laughed. “I commend your honesty. Only a beautiful woman would dare make that admission.”

“Why not make it if it is true?”

“All the better then—for me . . .”

She drew away from him. “Let’s not talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I belong to myself and not to you.”

Yet even as she said it, she knew that she did not belong to herself. For now there was —Michael.

Late that night she said to her brother, “Rickey, Anthony asked me this afternoon to marry him. If I go to Derekdale, he’ll keep on asking me.”

He said in an incredulous voice, “You refused him?”

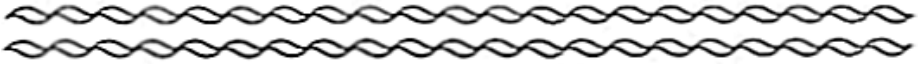
“Yes.”

Dead silence, out of which Rickey cried at last, “Jinny, can’t you see what you’re throwing away? He’s a gentleman and a stunning fellow. All the girls are mad about him.”

“I can’t marry him because other women want him.”

“Then marry him for what he can give you—give us. Think what it would mean to all of us—to Dad and Mums—to my future—”

She was very white. “Don’t, Rickey. You can’t know what you are saying. I’ll go to Derekdale, if you feel that way about it. But it mustn’t bind me to anything. You understand that, Rickey. I won’t be bound.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Michael Muddles Things Up

VIRGINIA did not find it easy when tea was over, to leave Michael alone with Rickey. She wanted to stay, but Rickey was impatient.

"Jinny's playing Lady Bountiful," was his tactful hint soon after Michael's arrival. "She is taking care of a little chap on the top floor. He is ill and his mother goes out to work. He simply adores Jinny."

Who wouldn't adore her? Michael asked himself. She wore the blue gown with its touches of gold, and there was a knot of the violets he had brought her pinned where they lay against the ivory of her throat. She had said to him the night before, "I'll have to hide the jar or Rickey will know you've been here. But I needn't hide the flowers. He'll think they came from Tony."

"I'd hate to have you mistake my flowers for Bleecker's."

For a moment she had not spoken, then she had said—"I shan't mistake them—ever —"

Before she went upstairs, Virginia brought from behind one of the screens a little tray on which was a fat pink pitcher covered by a napkin. "It's chicken broth," she explained, "for the small boy. His appetite has been fickle."

She did not say, what was the truth, that the small boy's mother had no money for chicken, and that for the past week little Roger had been sustained and strengthened by the food Virginia had brought him.

Michael opened the door for her, and closing it, was loth to shut her out. But the smile she gave him stayed with him and helped him through the somewhat trying hour that followed.

For Rickey was, to say the least, difficult. Running his fingers through his hair, he proclaimed, "The manuscript is in the rough, so I'll read it to you if you don't mind." He was flushed and excited.

"You haven't finished it?"

"No. But it won't take me long if you find anything to like in it."

Michael felt a twinge of discomfort. He knew he was not going to like it, and it seemed traitorous to lead the lad on, to turn, as it were, the knife in his breast. Yet one had to be a surgeon at times—to save.

Rickey read well, but all his art of elocution was lost on the young editor. Michael instinctively got down to the bare bones of the story. He knew how it would look to the eyes of his readers—of the appeal it would have to the thousands who turned the pages of his magazines. Would it be thumbs up—or down?

When Rickey finished, there was a moment's silence, then Michael said, slowly, "Do you mind if I make a few suggestions—?"

The light went out of Rickey's face. "No—but do you mean you don't—care for it?"

Michael was honest. “It’s good, Oliphant, but not good enough. I think you can do it in a bigger way.”

Rickey’s voice was hoarse. “Bigger?”

Michael hesitated, “Yes, your characters—they don’t move of themselves—your hand can be seen pulling the wires.”

“Anything else?” Rickey’s tone was ominously quiet.

“Your conception is masterful, but your treatment doesn’t measure up to your theme —”

Rickey’s face darkened. “Of course it was a mistake to let you see it—”

“My dear fellow!”

“I hate to show things to people. But you insisted.”

Michael kept his temper. “You’re taking it the wrong way, Oliphant. I want to help you. The fault seems to be that you haven’t the right focus . . .”

“I don’t need anyone to tell me—my faults. Heaven knows, I have enough of them. The book is weak in parts, I realize it. But you’ve damned the whole thing. . . . And it isn’t as bad as that. And you needn’t think you have to worry about me or what I am doing. Of course, I’m in your debt. But I’ll meet all that if you’ll give me time. And in the meantime it’s a bit of a burden to feel that because I owe you money you have some sort of claim on me. You see there are—other editors. . . .”

It was a childish outburst, born of nerves and excessive egotism. Michael waited a moment before he answered, “You mean other editors who will see things differently? By all means take it to them. And don’t feel that for a moment you are under the slightest obligation to me. You’ll be having another story, some day, and perhaps you’ll let me see it. Or reconsider not letting me see this. You have great promise, Oliphant.”

But Rickey was not to be stopped in his wild orgy of indignation. In the next few moments he said things to Michael that were unforgivable, but Michael forgave him. He had made a muddle of the whole thing. He was aware of it now. He hadn’t comprehended the slant of the boy’s mind—his abnormal self-esteem. If he had, he would have got at the thing differently, but now the harm was done. He wished Virginia would come, yet dreaded to see her. He wondered if he ought to go, leave Rickey high and dry as it were on the shores of his own indignation.

Virginia, when she left them, had not anticipated failure. She had great faith in Michael, and so secure had she felt of his handling of this matter, that her heart was light as she ascended the stairs. She sang softly under her breath, and passing the Bronze Knight on the newel post she smiled at him. It was, indeed, a smiling world in which she moved at the moment.

When she reached at last the dim dark hall at the top of the house and tapped on a door at the end, it was opened by a pale-faced woman. “Oh,” she said, eagerly, “Roger has been so anxious—”

“A guest detained me. But here I am at last, and I’ve brought Roger some broth, Mrs. Barlow. It is made after an old Maryland recipe—it has rice in it and celery, and parsley,

and a wee, wee bit of onion—" She was in the room now, and choosing her words to delight the ears of the lad who lay on a narrow bed, "and I made some little, little dumplings, and they went bobbing about when the kettle boiled."

"You know how to talk to him," Mrs. Barlow said, as she pulled on her shabby black hat, "he says it is always like a fairy tale to hear you."

"Well, life is a sort of fairy tale isn't it?" Virginia was willing to believe almost anything at the moment, but when she saw that Mrs. Barlow's eyes were full of tears, she modified her ecstasies. "Oh, I know that sometimes the fairies seem to be evil spirits. But somehow I believe that the best comes to us in the end."

"Do you really believe that, Miss Oliphant?"

"I try to believe it."

Virginia was pouring the broth into a small bowl. "I brought two square crackers to eat with it, Roger, and two round ones, and there's a cup of custard under the napkin."

She set the tray down and arranged the pillows. "If you'll sit up and eat everything, you shall have two of my violets for your very own. They are *very* precious violets, and their fragrance is that of friendship," she smiled at him over her shoulder as she went to the door with his mother. "Don't worry or hurry, Mrs. Barlow. If you are late, I'll take Roger downstairs with me."

When she went back to the bed, Roger asked, "What do you mean by the fragrance of friendship?"

"Oh, when you have someone very much in your heart, when you know someone you love is your friend, then the fragrance of that thought is like the fragrance of my violets."

"I have you in my heart," said little Roger, simply. Virginia bent and kissed him on the cheek. "And I have you in mine." But she knew it was not of Roger she had thought when she had spoken.

"You say things like the verses in books," Roger told her, "and I like it."

"I don't talk this way to everyone," Virginia assured him, "that's our little language, yours and mine, Roger."

"We have another friend, haven't we?"

"Who?"

"The Bronze Knight on the stairs."

"Of course. He almost spoke to me when I came up."

"Did he?"

"Yes. I smiled at him and he seemed to smile back. I like him because he is such a gentleman, Roger."

They had often talked about the Bronze Knight when Roger had waited for his mother in the lower hall and Virginia had come out to sit beside him on the stairs. Virginia had invented a story of the Knight's adventures, and each day she added to it.

“Tell me about him now,” Roger commanded, as he handed her the empty bowl and leaned back on his pillows.

“Well, you see the Bronze Knight vowed that he would love God, that he would never tell a lie, and that he would never be afraid. So when he waked at dawn with the fields all sparkling with dew, he would pray for a day in which he might help men and serve Christ. And when he lay down at night, with the stars over him, he would pray again that for all he had left undone in the service of God, he might be forgiven.”

“Can any boy be a knight?” asked little Roger.

“Yes, and hold a torch. You see, for a time the Bronze Knight has finished his travels, but he still has something to do, so he stands there on the stairway lighting the world for kind Mrs. Leonardo when she brings you spaghetti, and for me when I bring you violets. He lights the way, too, for people who are not kind. So—even when they stumble they will not fall. And he hopes that the light will shine in their hearts and make them good and happy.”

The child’s eyes were heavy. “I’ll sing you a song,” Virginia said, “if you’ll try to sleep.”

She sang with her lips and sang with her heart. For Michael was with Rickey and soon she would be seeing him. Surely he would stay if she was not too long. And when she stopped singing her eyes were smiling.

Later when Roger waked, she said, “Your mother is late, so I’m going to take you downstairs with me to see my primrose cat and my Weenie-Wurst dog.”

She wrapped him in a shawl and carried him in her arms. He was very light in spite of his six years. When they reached the Bronze Knight on the newel post, Roger touched him with a finger tip, “Your light shines in our hearts,” he said.

Virginia, opening the door of the big room found Michael alone. He turned as she entered and she saw by his face that something had happened.

“Where’s Rickey?” she asked breathlessly.

“Gone for a taxi.”

She laid the child on the couch, picked up the kitten, dropped it down beside him, and returned to Michael.

“Oh, what is it?” her voice was tense.

“I’m afraid I’ve muddled things up. I tried to be careful—but your brother chose to misunderstand.”

All the light had left her eyes. “Did you agree with me about the story?”

“Absolutely. But the moment I criticized, he resented it, went up in the air.”

“I know. I hoped he wouldn’t—with you.”

“He gave me to understand that he would look for another editor. One who had appreciation of what he was doing. . . .”

“I’m so sorry. . . .”

“Don’t be sorry on my account. Only you mustn’t let it come between us—our friendship—”

Her heart was beating wildly. “Nothing can come between us—”

He drew her a little towards him, “Virginia—do you mean—that—?”

There was no time for her to answer, for Rickey’s step was outside.

The boy had no word for either of them until Michael had departed. Then he burst out, his eyes blazing, “I hate him, Jinny.”

“Rickey! Why?”

“Oh, in a perfectly polite way he told me that my story was—punk. Do you know what he is? He’s just one of a standardized lot of bromides who have it in for young authors. They kill genius. And if he thinks I’m going to listen to his advice he can think again! There are other editors in the world besides Michael McMillan.”

“Rickey, dear, I’m sure he meant to be kind.”

“Kind? Do you call it kind to fling the things I’ve worked over for weeks in the scrap heap?” His voice broke in a sob.

She laid her hand on his shoulder, “Hush, Rickey, little Roger will hear you.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have brought him down—” irritably. Then with a sudden change of mood, “Oh, I’m a brute and a beast to talk this way to you, Jinny, when you’ve done so much. . . .”

Her eyes did not meet his. She wanted to cry out: “It’s not Michael’s fault, but mine.” Yet she knew she must not. Rickey might cast her off as he had cast Michael, and she must always be at hand to help him.

The next morning she sent for Mary Lee. “Rickey’s in despair,” she said, “I don’t know what to do with him.” She told a little of what had happened, “He went out an hour ago, and he had his traveling bag with him. I’m desperately worried—he’s so unlike himself.”

“I’ll find him,” Mary Lee stated confidently, “I know the places he goes with those arty friends of his. He’ll get sympathy there. They all feel that the world doesn’t recognize genius when it sees it. He’ll come back here ready to high-hat the rest of us.”

“I am willing he should high-hat me, if he’ll only come back,” Virginia assured her.

Mary Lee, sallying forth was not as sanguine as her words had indicated. If she found Rickey, what then? She couldn’t tell him what Virginia had said. She must feel her way. Get Rickey’s confidence, sympathize, and set his feet on the right path.

She found him at last, lunching in the restaurant where she had taken him and Virginia on the night of their arrival. She nodded to him and waved a hand, then went on to another table.

Rickey got up at once and came over to her. “Do you like your solitude?” he demanded, “or why this exclusiveness?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your party.”

"It isn't a party. And if it is you're a part of it."

Mary Lee, joining the others, found them in the midst of argument. The minds of them all were rather alike, but for the moment the point of view was different. They welcomed Mary Lee with an offer of cigarettes. She did not smoke, but she drank coffee and listened.

The subject of their argument, she discovered, had to do with the things which were worth writing. The way to write was, it was hotly asserted, to be as detached as possible. One must have a mental vision.

It was at this point that Mary Lee flung herself into the arena. "Mental vision, nothing," she said, "great novels are written out of great emotion. There's 'Tess' and 'Vanity Fair' and 'Anna Karenina.' Do you think when Thackeray wrote his great scene of the ball before the Battle of Waterloo that he did it by any mental rule of three? He was carried out of himself by what he felt—and Becky's reaction is the most human thing in literature."

They scoffed at that, "Mid-Victorian" they flung at her.

And she flung back, "If any of you can do anything that will live half as long you will have a right to criticize."

They raged at that, and Rickey's voice was the loudest of any of them. "Do you think we are going to take our ideas from the men who went before us? We're off with the old and on with the new."

Mary Lee did not seem to be listening—idly she had set in a row before her the glasses which were near her, and now she swept the tines of her silver fork across them. Then, under her breath she sang the song of the Chinese maiden as she had sung it that night in the old house in Annapolis. And, presently, one by one, the young crowd stopped to listen, until silence fell on all of them.

Mary Lee's voice was low and lovely—there was an almost eerie quality in it, and her eyes were fixed on space, yet they who listened, saw with her the tragic maiden, going to her death, the ivory towers, the wind-swept moon!

Out of the stillness which followed her singing, Mary Lee said, "You can be off with the old and on with the new if you like. But can any of you match a thing like that? It was written a thousand years ago—it will be sung a thousand years to come. . . !"

She rose. "Come along, Rickey. I'm tired of candlelight. Let's walk in the sun. People who live among shadows, see nothing else."

So she flung down the gauntlet, and none of them answered her. Yet they were left with the feeling that, after all, sunshine was a fact to be reckoned with. That there were realities other than things which were sordid and sorry. They found, indeed, after Mary Lee left them, their sophistication somewhat oppressive.

Rickey riding in a bus with Mary Lee was told that their destination was the Park. "I want fresh air," Mary Lee stated. "I sometimes think we are all wrong, Rickey."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, we're trying to express our souls, when we haven't anything really to express."

“I have a great deal to express,” Rickey asserted, stormily. “I don’t know about you, Mary Lee. But I have things that I must tell the world.”

“Maybe you have and maybe you haven’t. Maybe you only think so. As for me, I wish I were a South Sea islander dressed in a grass petticoat. I am trying to sing and you are trying to write, but what if we were both just trying to live, Rickey?”

He turned in his seat and looked at her—“What do you mean by living?”

“Oh, taking the days as they come. Forgetting ambition, forgetting everything but that life is—good.”

“It isn’t good,” he said with a touch of wildness. “Look at the deal it’s giving me. Michael McMillan . . .” and then it all came out, violently, incoherently. His resentment against Michael, his fury against fate, his bitterness, his need of understanding. “Jinny tries of course, but she can’t.”

“Nobody understands. I suppose it’s the curse of genius.” Mary Lee had Rickey where she wanted him. She had led him to show his wounds, she would now proceed to bind them up. She could see that he felt himself a Keats, a Shelley, the world against him.

“I may not understand,” she said, “but I sympathize more than you know. I like you—more than I have liked any man. Down home there have been lots of men in love with me—but I’d rather have your friendship than their love. Perhaps you don’t want my friendship. But you need me. And I want you to promise that you’ll let me stick around—and help—”

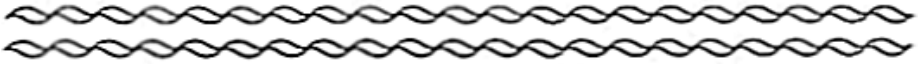
It was honestly said, and her honesty soothed him. “You’re a good sport, old girl. . . .”

Nothing sentimental in that—but at least it promised something. “You’re going to find yourself, Rickey, one of these days, and show them.”

He would not admit that he had not found himself. Yet he did not rage at her as he had raged at Michael and at Jinny. She managed in some subtle way to make him feel himself important. He was her world. She wanted no one else. . . . The very fact of those shadowy other men whom she would not let love her contributed to his sense of what was due him.

They found bare, bleak trees in the Park, but the winter sunshine poured itself in a golden flood along the paths. Rickey breathing in the sharp cold air, felt himself stimulated as if by a draught of wine, while at the same time he was soothed by the incense of Mary Lee’s adoration.

When she suggested that they get back to Washington Square, he went willingly. He had left his bag at the restaurant. He said nothing about it. He would get it later. He looked back now on his impulse to run away as a moment of madness. But if he had been mad, who could blame him?



CHAPTER TWELVE

A Delicious Old Woman

In the afternoon mail, Virginia had a note from Michael. “I am much concerned about my *fiasco*. Is there something I can do? And can’t we talk it over? May I come to you, or will you lunch with me tomorrow?”

While Rickey was away, she answered by telephone. “I’m afraid I can’t have you at the house. Rickey might come in at any moment, and he’s not in the mood. But I’ll be glad to lunch with you.”

He took her to a quiet uptown restaurant, and before the luncheon was over they had entered into a conspiracy. “I must see you,” Michael had said, “as often as I can.”

She had spoken with frankness. “If I do, I can’t tell Rickey. Yesterday was dreadful. He tried to run away—” she told of her brother’s adventure.

Michael was stern, “Why didn’t you let him—go?”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Why not—”

“Because I love him.”

He leaned across the table, “Dear child,” he said, “sometimes love has to be hard. You’re too good to your brother.”

“Not to Rickey—” she said, “you don’t know.”

He let it go at that, and made his plans for her. “We can motor now and then. There’s one place I’d like no end to take you—to my Aunt Molly’s. She’s a delightful person, and when things get too much for me I go up to her farm. It’s a marvelous old place, and she has an ancient couple to look after it for her. She has always lived there, and she is as unchanged throughout the years as the rocks on which her house is built. She cares nothing for fashions, she cares nothing for motor cars or radios or telephones. She adores her doves and her ducks and her comfortable old cows.” He stopped and laughed a little. “Do you like the way it sounds?”

“I adore it.”

“Good. I’ll take you there. Can you manage it? Soon?”

She promised, and in the days that followed she made her little plans deliberately and clandestinely. She wrote to her mother, however, freely about this new friend of hers.

She gave the whole history of Rickey’s book and Michael’s criticism and the consequent coolness.

> “Rickey’s wrong, of course. You know his moods, Mother. He’s like Daddy and I suppose neither of them is responsible. It is probably a throwback from generations of high-strung Oliphants. But it doesn’t make them easy to live with. Michael and I are going around a lot together. We’ve been to two matinees, and Rickey thought I was going to art exhibits. I *did* go to see the

pictures, but Michael took me and we rushed through them, and I was late getting home, but both times Rickey had gone out and didn't miss me.

"I feel sure you wouldn't disapprove. Michael is so careful and he is really wonderful. He says I am mid-Victorian, but that he likes my 'proprieties.'

"We've had gorgeous times 'window-shopping.' We went one night when Rickey was out with Mary Lee, and Michael told me all the things I ought to wear, and I picked out everything that was expensive, and the trunks to put them in and bags to carry. And we stood in front of the booking offices, and looked at the ships and the scenery, and it seemed as if Michael had been everywhere. Does all this sound very silly? It really makes me feel very young—as if I were a child again, and Michael calls me a child.

"We went yesterday to his adorable Aunt Molly's. She has a farm out in Westchester. We lunched there and had broiled chickens and hot biscuits and honey and her famous Dutch cheese. She wears long dresses and a cameo pin and does her gray hair in a pompadour. You would love her, Mumsie, because she belongs to the old régime. But she isn't delicate and dainty like you. She's jolly and plump like some of the delicious old women in Dickens' stories."

Aunt Molly had said to Michael when lunch was over: "You'll want to show Virginia the doves and the ducks." So they had gone together to the dim, deep barns, where the doves cooed among the rafters, and where the cows looked at them with melting eyes. They saw the ducks sunning themselves in the yard, and swimming in the cold pools between frozen banks.

They walked on then across the fields and through a grove of pines. "I'll bring you here in the spring," said Michael. "The dogwood is simply wonderful—deep pink, like roses."

"I'll bring you here in the spring." It seemed to Virginia too perfect to be true that he should be looking forward to spring days together.

As yet he had said no word of love. He had spoken of friendship, of how their tastes met, of his delight in her companionship. Yet she knew he loved her. There had been that moment at the Spanish Museum, when they stood in front of one of Sorolla's paintings—the Valencia group with its clear and startling color, its deep-hued oranges, its sapphire sky, the red trappings of its milk-white horses. And Michael had said, "It was in Spain that my castles fell to the ground."

"Why did they fall?"

"I spent my honeymoon in Valencia. And I found before it was over that I had married a woman who knew nothing of love as I had dreamed of it. I don't know why I am telling you this. I have never told anyone."

"I am glad you told me."

He had beaten his fist thoughtfully on the arm of the bench on which they were sitting. "I think the time will come when I shall tell you everything."

It was after the visit to the Spanish Museum that Virginia found herself lying awake late into the night. She slept on the big couch sheltered by the three screens which made a little room of the space about her. Since the beginning of her friendship with Michael, she had pushed into the back of her mind the thought of her visit to Derekdale. Now, however, it was almost upon her, and there was her promise to Rickey.

She had told him it should bind her to nothing. Yet she knew that in a way it did bind her. Tony expected things of her, and so did Rickey. They showed it—each in his own way. Tony by a maddening air of possessiveness, Rickey by taking impossible things for granted. It had been hard to keep Tony from a knowledge of the hours she spent with Michael. Tony was always coming in at odd moments and asking her to do things. When she said that she couldn't, he demanded, suspiciously, "Why? You seem to be having a lot of engagements lately."

She had refused to be drawn into any damaging admissions. "Just because I haven't time for you, Tony, is no reason why you should feel injured. You are really a most demanding person."

"A lot of good it does me to be demanding," he told her. "I haven't seen you alone for ages."

"You are seeing me alone today."

"Because Rickey happens to be out. There's always Rickey, or Mary Lee, or that small boy from upstairs. I can whistle for a chance to talk to you without ears wide open to hear."

"You shouldn't want to talk about things that 'open ears' can't hear."

"You know what I want to talk about and you might as well let me."

She did know. And as she lay wide awake on her couch she blamed herself for letting Tony go on with it. She could never love him and she knew it. She ought to settle it now and stay away from Derekdale. Anything else was not fair to Michael or to herself or fair, indeed, to Tony.

Yet if she did not go, Rickey would be furious. He talked of nothing else—Derekdale, Derekdale, Derekdale.

She rose and put on her dressing-gown. It was very late, but she could hear the click of Rickey's typewriter. She must tell him at once that she could not visit the Bleeckers. It would put her in a false position. Tony would think things that were not true. He would think she was willing to marry him and she was not.

She came to the little room and opened the door softly. Rickey's back was turned to her and he was writing madly. She spoke his name and he whirled around and spoke in a startled voice, "What's up, old girl?"

He looked very tired and his hair was ruffled. There were dark rings under his eyes. She faltered. "I couldn't sleep."

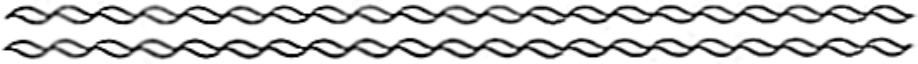
He came and put his arms about her. "Anything worrying you?"

Everything was worrying her, but she couldn't tell him now. She simply could not—not this tired Rickey, with his arms about her and that touch of tenderness in his voice.

So she said, “Come on in and talk to me. I’m fed up on myself.”

They went into the living-room and he added another lump of coal on the fire. The little dog and the bright cat came and camped on the rug in front of their beloved mistress, and Rickey, also on the rug, talked of the things he was going to do. “I’ll get a new start at Derekdale,” he said. “I know it. It will be like wine in my veins, Jinny, to meet people like that. I’m one of the kind that has to have excitement. I simply shrivel right up when things are at a dead level.”

Excitement—That old roistering ancestor! Virginia was afraid. Rickey mustn’t get restless. It wouldn’t do to disappoint him. No matter what happened, she must not disappoint Rickey.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A High Mountain

CHRISTMAS came that year on Saturday. The big ball was to be on Friday, and Virginia and her brother were to motor with Tony to Derekdale on Friday morning. Michael would come in time for dinner.

For Michael, too, was going to Derekdale. Mrs. Bleecker, at Marty Van Duyne's instigation, had urged him. "Too many millionaires are deadly, Jane. You mustn't forget that. Mere money makes people heavy. Michael's presence will add distinction."

Michael had accepted, but not because of Marty or of Jane. He was going because of Virginia. He told her so frankly. "It will give us three days together."

Three days! Virginia went about her preparations for departure as if she walked on air. She packed her new clothes and Rickey's into the good-looking bags they had bought, and refused to be weighed down by the thought of their extravagances.

Mary Lee Logan drifting in on Thursday and finding Virginia alone asked, "Where's Rickey?"

"Out doing some last-minute errands. He'll be back for luncheon."

"May I stay? I want to say good-by to him."

"Of course."

Mary Lee sat dejectedly by the fire and watched Virginia pack. "Do you ever have premonitions?" she asked.

Virginia smiled at her. "Are you having them?"

"Yes. I get such superstitions, I suppose, from my old black mammy. But when I am low in my mind as I am today, I always know that unhappiness of some kind is ahead. And just now I have a feeling that things aren't ever going to be again with us as they are now, Virginia."

Virginia, tucking silk stockings into the pocket of her traveling bag, said, "Cheer up, we will be back on Tuesday."

"But it won't be the same," Mary Lee persisted. "The gobble-uns will git you, Jinny, or the witches. It's that silver witch I am afraid of—for Rickey."

Virginia straightened up and looked at her. "She isn't half as nice as you are, Mary Lee. And Rickey's sensible enough to know it."

"Rickey isn't sensible. No temperamental person is. And he's going to suffer—"

There was a great change in Mary Lee. She was no longer the plump little maiden who had made eyes at Tony in the old house. She was composed, quiet, more womanly. There was, indeed, about her now something of the tragic remoteness of the little Chinese lady in the song. The effect was heightened, perhaps, today, by the fact that she wore black—a smart tailor-made with a white flower in her buttonhole, a small pull-on black hat, and a scarf of silver fox.

When Rickey came in and saw her he gave a whistle of astonishment. “You’re simply stunning, Mary Lee,” he told her.

She turned herself about on slim patent leather pumps. “If you only knew,” she said, “how hard it was for me not to have steel buckles. But I knew these were smarter.”

The three of them had luncheon together, and when she was ready to go, Mary Lee said to Rickey, “Don’t fall in love with Marty Van Duyne.”

He flushed. “What rot!”

“It isn’t rot. But I probably shouldn’t have said anything to you about her. It’s like telling children not to put beans up their noses. They won’t think of it if someone doesn’t suggest it.”

“Marty Van Duyne wouldn’t look at me.”

“That’s the very reason you’ll fall in love with her. She’s the distant star that you poets rave about. I’m the ripe plum that falls at your feet.”

She laughed as if it were a light thing, but Virginia knew that back of the lightness was deep emotion. She was sorry for Mary Lee, of course, but she wasn’t sure that she wanted Rickey to love her.

On Friday, before Tony came for her, Virginia and little Roger Barlow hung Christmas greens in the shabby old hall. Virginia had felt it might help the dreary people who came up and down the stairs to get a bit of the holiday spirit.

“We will put a crown of mistletoe on the Bronze Knight, Roger.”

“Oh, will everybody kiss him as they go upstairs?”

“I hope not.”

“I should think he’d like being kissed.”

“But not by so many people.”

They hung a holly wreath in the glass of the front door and put the crown on the Bronze Knight’s head and wound the balustrade with evergreens. It was all very beautiful, and as the dreary people in the house went in and out, they stopped to look—and Roger said to each one with great politeness: “You musn’t kiss the Bronze Knight because there are too many of you.”

When their work was done, Virginia and Roger went back to the fire in the honey-colored room and Roger curled himself up in Virginia’s lap and said, “Tell me about what the Bronze Knight did on Christmas.”

“Well, the Bronze Knight woke one morning, and it was Christmas, and he knelt and prayed, ‘Oh, good and great God, because of thy little son who was born in Bethlehem, may I be a better son to my own mother. May I this day do some deed she would have me do,’ and he rose and went on his way and came at last to a little house. And a woman stood in front of the little house and she said, ‘Will you cut a tree for my sick child, so that he may have Christmas?’ And the Knight cut the tree and carried it in, and the sick child did not smile when he saw the tree. And the Knight said, ‘Alas, a child who will not smile at a Christmas tree is close unto death. Let me take him to the city where he may

be healed.' And the mother said, 'If he goes, I must go.' And the Knight said, 'You can sit on my horse and hold the child in your arms, and I will walk beside you.'

"So all that day they walked on and on, and the Knight's feet grew sore and bled, but he did not speak of them; he sang to the child of the Three Kings and of the Star, and of the Babe which was born in Bethlehem. And at last they came to the city, and to the place where the child could be healed, and the physicians when they had tended the child, looked at the bleeding feet of the Knight and said: 'You have suffered.' And the Knight said: 'I do not care for my hurt if only the child may be healed.' So they bound up his wounds, and he slept under the shining sky, and when he looked up in the heavens he seemed to hear the angels singing and he said, 'Mother, did I do well?' And it seemed to him that his mother's face smiled down at him."

As Virginia's voice fell away into silence Roger said softly, "It sounds like the Bible."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes. When I grow up I am going to be a knight and try to please my mother."

When Tony came a little later and Virginia kissed the child good-by, he said wistfully, "I didn't think you'd go away."

She picked him up and comforted him. "Darling, darling," she said, "I'm coming back, and mother has a little tree. And you are going to hang up your stocking."

Tony carried her off after that, and she sat in the front seat with him, with Rickey in the back with the bags. "Heavens," Tony said, "I'm glad to get you out of that house. You don't belong with people like that!"

But she knew that she did belong with little Roger—with all children who clung to her—to old and young who leaned on her and loved her.

The arrival at Derekdale had in it for Virginia certain elements of comedy. Mrs. Bleecker was not there to receive her. She was shown to a room which was all mauve and ivory, with French windows which looked out on a terraced garden which seemed with its snow and pale shadows and glittering icicles to repeat the colors of the room. There was a maid in attendance to look after Virginia's dresses and to offer her services, which Virginia declined. "You see, I'm used to doing things for myself," she said, smiling, and the maid smiled back.

At luncheon there were four footmen in attendance. There was gold-colored satin down the length of the table—gold lace doilies under the Royal Worcester place plates. There were eggs in paper cases, and truffles and other things in aspic, there were great pears with ice cream centers. All strange and different, but all like something in a dream.

Mrs. Bleecker, who wore her hat and a sports dress, shook hands with Virginia before they went into the dining-room and presented her to one or two of the older women. She then apparently forgot her. Virginia's cheeks were hot. For a moment she wished she had not come. Then under his mother's eye, she began to flirt with Tony.

She knew it wasn't worthy of her. But she was human. And Tony, sitting next to her, played the game with her. At last he said, "Midget is furious. But she deserves it."

"I shouldn't have come."

"Nonsense. And anyhow Midget isn't treating you any worse than she does the rest of them. She adores being bad-mannered. She says that bad manners are a sign of aristocratic blood; that half the old monarchs were hateful and ill-tempered, and that it is middle-class to be polite to everybody."

After luncheon Tony took Virginia up, as it were, on a high mountain and showed her the world. There was the great mansion with its retinue of servants, its surrounding acres of woodland, its terraced gardens, its fine stock in barns and stables. "All this will be mine some day," he said, tempting her.

When they returned to the house they sat for a time in the picture gallery in the left wing. "That's Dad," Tony said, indicating a portrait painted by Sargent of a handsome, middle-aged man in riding clothes.

"How much you look like him, Tony."

"Think so? Most people do. We're not alike in other ways. He's masterful and I'm not. That's why I get along with Midget. I give her rope. I don't care what she does usually. But I do care about you, Virginia, I'm going to marry you and that's the end of it."

She did not answer him at once. She stood looking up at the portrait. "Shall I see your father while I'm here?"

"He expects to come up tonight for the ball. But we never can tell. He hates such things and stays away as a rule."

She said thoughtfully, "Then this house isn't a home really?"

He was eager, "We could make it a home, Virginia. I'm to have Derekdale when I marry. Dad has always said so. He and Mother would take the Long Island place and the town house, and Derekdale would be mine—and yours." He caught her hands in his. "Think of it, dearest,—mine and yours throughout our lives—forever."

"But I don't want it, Tony."

"You do, but you don't know it. I'm going to make you know it."

"You can't make me love you just because you've a big house, when all I want is a warm fire and a pussy cat in front of it, and rain on the roof and a book to read."

He laughed, "You'll want a man to love you."

"It must be the right man, Tony."

"What makes you think I'm not the right man?" He drew her down beside him on the velvet seat. "Tell me."

"Oh," she moved away from him and looked up at the picture. "I think after a time you'd grow to be like your father."

"What do you mean?"

"Masterful. You'd want to rule me. You're a bit of a tyrant."

"How do you know?"

"Little things." She stopped there and went on presently, "But that isn't the reason I don't love you. It is just that I—don't."

"But you will."

"I'm afraid not."

He was patient. "I have three days, Virginia, and I'm going to make the most of them." Again he caught up her hands and drew her towards him, looking down into her troubled eyes. "You are going to be mistress of Derekdale, remember that, my dearest." He released her and rose. They crossed the room, and met Marty Van Duyne half way. "Your mother wants you," she said to Tony, "she's been looking everywhere."

"I'm sorry. I've been showing Virginia the house, and now we are going to the stables."

"You'll stop and see your mother?"

"Yes."

He went on with Virginia. Marty did not follow them. She stood quite still in the middle of the room, looking after them. Tony's head was bent above the bright head of the girl beside him. Things were going rather fast in that direction. And Jane seemed unable to stop it. Marty wondered what she could do to help Jane.

She crossed the room and stood in front of the painting, staring at it with unseeing eyes. She wore a straight frock of pale gray crepe, absolutely unrelieved by any color. There were only the silver buckles on her gray shoes and the silver band tied about her silvery hair. The sunshine which poured down through the glass roof lighted her so that she shimmered and shone. To Rickey coming in, she seemed like a white birch in the spring. He told her so, at once, and added, "You're a silver witch, and I'm going to put you in a book."

"Suppose I refuse to be in a book," she told him, smiling.

"I shall do it anyhow. I knew when I saw you at Annapolis that I had to have you for a heroine. That's why I followed you up here. I've never seen any one like you. There's an unreal quality, like a wood nymph or a mountain sprite. There was that witch in *The Sunken Bell*."

"Wasn't she rather—horrid?"

"She was beautiful—"

"Is beauty enough?"

"There were the old Florentines. They had no consciences, but Heavens, how men loved them."

"Do you think I haven't a conscience—?"

"How do I know—yet?"

She was attracted by his audacity. Here was a mere stripling, yet he was analyzing her mercilessly. She sat down on the velvet seat and motioned to him to sit beside her. "Tell me about your book," she said.

She looked at him with appraising eyes as he flung forth his ideas in a torrent of vehement phrases. He was vivid as a flame, and extraordinarily handsome with his russet, ruffled-up hair and dark brows and lashes. And his ideas were most amusing.

"In my book," he said, "you won't love anybody. You'll let yourself be loved. I think you are like that. You break men's hearts. Yet some day some one will break yours. . . ."

"That's all very well in a book," Marty's voice was scornful, "but I haven't any heart —so how can anyone break it."

He laughed with his head thrown back, his white throat showing. "The man who breaks yours will be a boy, like me. Someone you'll think you can rule—and can't—"

She was aware of a challenge, and of a certain unexpected thrill in response. "Nobody can make me do anything I don't want to do," she told him. "And I am going to marry Tony Bleecker."

She wondered afterwards why she had been so crude about it. Surely there had been no need at the moment to lay her cards on the table. But he had seemed utterly unimpressed. "You are not going to marry him."

"Why not?"

"He's in love with my sister."

She stiffened. "How do you know?"

"Oh, he's told her so a dozen times. And she wouldn't have him. She didn't want to come to Derekdale. But I made her."

"Why did you make her?" Marty was not laughing now, and there was no sign of her usual indolence.

But Rickey was calm. "I made her come because I wanted to see you. I'm in love with you. I knew it the moment I looked down on you from the dormer window."

Marty dared not show him her feelings. "You make me feel like a lady in a play," she told him, smiling.

Tea was being served when at last they went downstairs. A crowd of people had come in and Marty was immediately surrounded. Rickey sat in a corner and looked at her. Everywhere she went she was aware of his eyes. At last she spoke to Mrs. Bleecker who was pouring. "Jane," she said, "I wish you'd put that Oliphant boy next to me at dinner."

"The Oliphant boy? Why?"

"He amuses me. All the rest of the men bore me."

She moved on and came quite suddenly upon the master of the house. "Anthony," she ejaculated, "when did you get here?"

"Five minutes ago." He held out his hand and smiled at her. He was big and fair like his son but with a sort of tawny fairness like a lion. Indeed he made one think of a lion as he lifted his massive head and gazed about. "Who's the girl talking with Tony?" he asked.

Marty looked. Virginia Oliphant sat in a high-backed chair of green brocade, which showed gold carving above her shining head. Tony stood beside her, bending down and laughing.

"That," said Marty, drily, "is the future Mrs. Bleecker."

Old Anthony surveyed the two young people with level gaze. "Just what do you mean by that, Marty?"

"Oh, Tony's mad about her, and Jane's frantic."

Old Anthony laughed. "Jane would be. Who is she, Marty?"

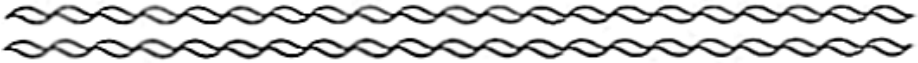
Marty told him, and finished with; "She has had practically no social experience, but she's completely at her ease."

"She would be. Back of such women is a long line of belles and beauties. I know the type. I had a Maryland grandmother. She would have met the king of England as easily as she met one of her own neighbors."

"Come on over and let me present you," Marty suggested. "I am really generous to pass you on to her. You may side with Tony instead of Jane, and with the two of you against me that would be my last chance at Tony as a matrimonial possibility."

He laughed: "You're a great bluffer, Marty; you haven't the least idea of marrying anybody."

She meditated on that. "I'm not so sure. I'm not in love if that's what you mean. But Tony plays up to me so splendidly, I'd hate to lose him. It isn't that I want him so much myself, but I don't want anyone else to have him."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Behind the Screen

VIRGINIA, safely alone in one of the huge guest rooms at Derekdale, put on the gold lace gown and surveyed herself in the long mirror which showed her from the top of her gleaming head to the toes of her shining slippers.

She had a feeling almost of awe at the vision she saw reflected. Never until now had she been aware of her own loveliness; against the background of Bleecker magnificence, the jade and ivory of the beautiful room, she seemed to glow and sparkle. She drew a quick breath. In a moment Michael would see her,—Michael!

As she descended the great stairs a few moments later, a hush came upon the dinner guests assembled in the hall. She was alone on the stairway, and back of her on the landing hung a rug of deep purple bordered with gold. Nothing could have been more royal in its suggestion, and Anthony Bleecker looking up, said in his heart, "She is a great lady. More of a great lady than my mother or any of these women. Jove, but blood tells."

But Michael McMillan, seeing her, said, "She is my love."

It was to Mrs. Bleecker, however, that the fact of Virginia's beauty came with the force of a blow. People were talking about Tony's infatuation. But not until she saw Virginia on the stairs had Jane Bleecker known the danger of her attractions. The girl might be poor, but if Tony made her his wife, he would have reason to be proud of her.

It was Marty Van Duyne who voiced what Mrs. Bleecker was thinking. "Tony's mad about her, Jane. What made you have her here?"

"He said he wouldn't come if I didn't ask her."

"I see. Your hope is in the fact that she isn't in the least in love with him."

Mrs. Bleecker turned and looked at her. "Not in love with him? What difference does that make? She'll marry him for his money."

But Marty was shrewd. "She won't. That kind of woman marries for love or not at all."

Virginia came down the stairs. And she saw neither Tony who loved her, nor Jane Bleecker who hated her, nor Marty Van Duyne who was playing a game and meant to win it. She saw only Michael—Michael with his deep blue eyes laughing up into hers as he stood at the foot of the stairs waiting, and who carried her off through the crowd before Tony could get near her. "I'm to sit with you at dinner," Michael said, "did you ever know such luck?"

"I've a thousand things to tell you," she was laughing softly, oblivious of everything about her.

"We have ten minutes before dinner. Where's a quiet spot?"

She took him to the library, where a low divan was set in front of the fire, one end of it backed by a high screen. Michael and Virginia as they sat together, were hidden by the screen.

"Are you glad to see me, Virginia?"

"*Glad!*"

He opened his arms to her and she came within their circle. He laid his lips against her cheeks, softly. No more than that. Not yet.

She drew away, breathless. "Let me tell you about Rickey. He is writing a new book—he is calling it *The Silver Witch* because of Marty Van Duyne. He began it yesterday and sat up half the night."

But he would not listen. "What do I care about Rickey?"

"Michael! We mustn't stay here. It's time for dinner."

He laughed, holding her close. "Say 'Michael, dear, it's time for dinner.' "

So she said it, "Michael, dear—"

When they returned to the great hall, they found Tony looking for them. "You're to sit by me," he said to Virginia. "Mother had a dowager on one side and a flapper on the other. She thought they'd balance. Midget is a bit tricky at times. But I told her if I couldn't have you, I'd have a headache and stay upstairs."

There was a smouldering fire in young Anthony's eyes. He had just had it out with his mother. He had told her a few things and had frightened her. "You've done everything you could since she came to get her away from me," he had said, "if you keep it up, I'll marry her before you know it!"

So he had his way, and Virginia and Michael were separated. But they had had their moment, and Tony, blind as a bat, secure in the ultimate success of his wooing, did not know that the light in Virginia's eyes was not for him nor was the radiance of her smile. He could not know that her heart was singing, "Michael, Michael," as a bird sings to its mate.

But Michael knew, and his heart answered. His doubts were dead. What did he care now for all of Tony's glitter and shine? And at the moment Tony was saying, "Marry me tomorrow."

"Silly."

"I'm not silly. And it would settle everything. Without argument. Midget would rave, of course, but she couldn't do anything. Dad has fallen for you flat. He said so. He had a Maryland grandmother. He hates the modern worldly type like Mother."

Virginia looked at him in astonishment. "Do you mean he hates your mother?"

"Not exactly. It's only that the way she likes to live doesn't appeal to him."

"But why did he marry her?"

"Oh, she probably camouflaged," coolly.

Then with a quick change of voice: "Marry me tomorrow."

"I'm not going to marry you at all."

He laughed. “You may think that, but you’re mistaken. You remember what I said to you—‘You’re going to be mistress of Derekdale—’ ”

Virginia was gripped suddenly by a sense of impending disaster. Would she really marry Tony? And lose Michael? But then; she couldn’t. Michael loved her. Nothing mattered but that!

After dinner, awaiting the arrival of the guests for the dance, the house party grouped itself about the fire in the great hall. Old Anthony had Virginia with him in a corner where she could look out at Michael leaning on the back of a chair. Marty Van Duyne on a fireside bench had Rickey at her feet. He sat on a great red cushion, his bright ruffled head almost touching her knee. Marty was challenging Michael, “We’ve been saying there isn’t a ghost of a chance for young authors these days. What do you think about it?”

“There’s always a chance for genius.”

Rickey blazed, “The average editor doesn’t know genius when he sees it.”

Marty tapped his cheek with a pointed finger. “Don’t be rude, little boy. We have Mr. Michael McMillan speaking! Go on, Michael. I apologize for your opponent.”

“Why apologize?” Michael realized that Rickey was in a mood to make trouble. Yet nothing Rickey could say should move him to retaliation. He regretted that Marty had seen fit to bring on such an argument. But that was Marty, loving to set a spark to men’s tempers for the excitement of it.

He spoke with calmness: “We editors want spontaneity and imagination. Most of our young people are writing according to a formula.”

Rickey broke in, “Isn’t that a rather broad statement?”

Things began to get tense. The people about the fire were looking with interest at the beautiful boy with the flushed cheeks who sat at Marty Van Duyne’s feet and dared defy the most famous editor in New York.

Virginia held her breath. Oh, how wonderful Michael was, leaning on the high back of the green chair, his eyes with their deep sparkle, his laughing voice making light of it all, refusing to recognize the rudeness and rancor of Rickey’s youthful challenge.

Oh, if only Rickey wouldn’t! She caught the almost hysterical note as he again began to speak. She turned to her host. “Oh, can’t you stop him, Mr. Bleecker?”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. He is saying the most dreadful things to Mr. McMillan.”

“It is Marty’s fault. She egged him on.” Old Anthony rose and stood with his arm on the mantel shelf. “Speaking of geniuses,” he said, “there’s a young South American—”

After that he dominated the conversation. Rickey sulked on his red cushion. Michael, with a sigh of relief, left the green chair, and went over and sat by Virginia. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, and Michael said, “Why be sorry for anything tonight?”

They drifted presently to the ballroom. Virginia had never seen anything like it. It was so high and wide that the people in it were dwarfed by its immensity. It had balconies and a raised platform where the musicians sat. There was no suggestion in the

decorations of the usual Christmas scheme of color. The whole effect was modernistic, grotesque, glaring; deep pink and purple, orange and blue. Orange trees set about the room were hung with artificial fruit, the great golden globes to be used later as favors. There were purple balloons and purple umbrellas, and prim tight nosegays of pink roses, frilled with lace paper.

She did not like it. "It's all rather dreadful and nightmarish," she told Michael when she danced with him.

It grew more nightmarish as the evening advanced. It seemed to Virginia that the people in the ballroom took on something of the effect of the decorations. They were grotesque, distorted.

She shivered in Michael's arms when she again danced with him. "I hate it."

"Hate what?"

"Oh, the men aren't themselves—I wish I could dance with you forever, Michael."

He held her close, and presently she said: "In Annapolis we went to church on Christmas Eve, and there were the bells, and the stars shining—"

As if in mockery of her words, other bells began to ring, a mad chime of them, giving a syncopated version of a sacred time. "It is midnight," Michael said, and in a moment, "A Merry Christmas, my dearest."

All about them others were saying it—"A *Merry Christmas*—a *Merry Christmas*—a *Merry Christmas*—" One joined hands with another until there was a great ring of dancers. Tony came up and literally tore Virginia away from Michael. "It's my turn," he said, and danced off with her. "We'll join the others," he added. "It's going to be fun. Midget is having things a bit different."

He stopped, picked up a wreath of mistletoe from a cart drawn by two pages, fitted it on Virginia's head and bent down and kissed her. Then suddenly Virginia saw what everybody was doing; all the girls wearing mistletoe, all the men kissing them.

She broke from Tony and fled. He followed, laughing, at her heels. "Oh, look here, look here, Virginia!"

The ring of dancers charged madly between them and gave her a chance. She ran into the hall and up the stairs, finding sanctuary at last in the picture gallery where in the afternoon she and Tony had talked. As she stood in the door, panting a little after her wild race, she saw a leonine head raised above the back of a seat drawn up in front of a painting of a family group, and old Anthony Bleecker spoke to her, "I thought I heard a step." He rose and came toward her. Then as he saw her agitation, "My dear child, what's the matter?"

She told him, frankly, "I ran away."

"Ran away? From what?"

"Tony and the others."

Her cheeks were flaming. "Tell me about it," he said. They sat down, and Virginia stated her case, "I'm not a prude or a prig, but they were having a mistletoe cotillion, and

I didn't care to be kissed."

He laughed a little, but his eyes were understanding. "A woman like you wouldn't. In these modern days almost anything goes with young people. But you belong to the generations of gentlewomen who had a sense of personal dignity."

"Perhaps that's it," she agreed, "I don't know. You see I've always lived shut away from people. I'm not up-to-date and all that."

"Thank heaven, you are not, my dear," he answered smiling. "Sit down and talk to me."

She was glad to do it. He asked her questions and she told him about her life in the old house in Annapolis and in that other old house in Washington Square. She told him about the sale, and about the things his wife had bought.

She told him about the Dutch spoons, and her roistering ancestor. She told him about the Bronze Knight on the stairs and about little Roger.

She told him about the primrose cat and the little Scotch dog who had followed her home.

Old Anthony was much interested in it all. He liked to see her sitting there in her gold lace gown, her bright head against the dark velvet, the soft voice with its Maryland accent speaking a language which had once been his, and which he had almost forgotten.

For old Anthony loved the things of the heart and mind and spirit, but in the world of business and in the world in which his wife lived these things counted not at all. The only things that counted there were stocks and bonds and sports and jazz.

And here was Virginia Oliphant, bringing to him memories of the simplicity and charm and dignity of the life he had lived before he met Jane Bleecker. Oh, well, he was not blaming Jane for anything. He was blaming himself. In a sense a man was master of his fate. He was master at least of his soul.

"Tell me," he said to Virginia suddenly, "are you going to marry Tony?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because he's in love with you and I'd like it no end."

She lifted her eyes to his. "I'm not in love with him," she said simply.

"Couldn't you be?"

"I think not."

"Is there someone else?"

She drew a quick breath. "Yes."

"Oh—I'm sorry."

They sat in silence for a moment, then he said again, "I am more sorry than I can tell you. Tony needs in a wife just what you can give him. He's not weak. He's simply on the wrong track and you could lead him into other paths. To be perfectly frank he's following false gods. I am not finding fault with his mother. It is her world and she likes it. I am blaming myself. I should have held on to my own ideals. Oh, you don't have to tell me,

little Virginia, that you believe in God and life and love and all the other great good things that so many of us scoff at. And if you have children your motherhood will be sacred, and your wifehood will be sacred."

He stopped and sat staring for a moment at the picture before him. "That's my family, painted ten years after our marriage—"

Virginia looked up at the great painting. She had not seen it in the afternoon for Tony had been called away before they reached it. It showed Jane Bleecker in trailing diaphanous blue, with her hair dressed high and a tiara of diamonds. She was seated in a carved chair and her husband leaned on the back of it looking down. Old Anthony was young Anthony then, and so like his son today that it almost took Virginia's breath away to see him—the same fairness, the same air of laughing gaiety. Young Tony, a boy of eight, sat on a cushion at his mother's feet. Pressed against Jane Bleecker's knee was a little girl in white with a rose-colored sash. The contrast between the blue of the mother's gown and the rose-color of the child's sash was exquisite. The whole thing was indeed lovely, and Virginia said so.

"The little girl," old Anthony explained, "was our daughter. She died when she was five. She was named for my Maryland grandmother, Cynthia Howard. Tony adored her. He has never, I think, got over it. It is because of what he was to little Cynthia that I know what he might be to you. He was very tender, very protective."

She laid her hand on his. "I wish I might."

"And you can't?"

She shook her head.

"I'm going to hope a bit," he smiled at her, "there's no one else I'd like so well to see as mistress of Derekdale."

Mistress of Derekdale—Mistress of Derekdale—Tony's words came back to her and the shivering sense she had at the time of impending disaster.

A voice behind them said, "Anthony."

It was a cold voice—Jane Bleecker's. She stood in the doorway. She wore a tulle gown of palest rose, which dripped with rhinestones. She looked young enough to be the grand-daughter of the woman in the portrait. "In a few minutes," she said, "we'll be having supper. Aren't you coming, Anthony?" Then, to Virginia, "Michael McMillan was asking for you a moment ago." She did not say that Tony, too, was asking.

Old Anthony said, "She ran away from your mistletoe cotillion, Jane, dear. It was a bit too rackety for her taste."

Jane shrugged her shoulders, "My dear Tony, we're not mid-Victorian!"

Virginia's temper was flaming, but she controlled it. "Your husband has been showing me your portrait, Mrs. Bleecker. You look younger now than you did then."

"It's the short hair and my clothes," Jane said. She stood staring up at the lady in the blue dress. Then suddenly her eyes rested on the child in the rose-colored sash. "If Cynthia were here," she said, "she'd be nearly twenty." It seemed to Virginia that her

voice softened. She wondered if Jane Bleecker's daughter had been at the ball if there would have been a mistletoe cotillion.

Jane turned from the picture. "Anthony, we must be going down."

The three of them descended the stairs. But at the door of the ballroom, Virginia left the others and made her way to the library. Before she entered she spoke to a servant in the hall, "Do you know Mr. McMillan?"

He thought he could find him. "When you do, will you ask him to come here to Miss Oliphant?"

As the man went on his way Virginia found her cheeks hot. What would he think of her? And what would Michael think? She curled up on the divan behind the screen and waited. He would come in a moment, eager, lighted-up, smiling.

He came, presently, but not alone and not in answer to her message. Rickey was with him. From her hiding place she heard their voices, Michael's first: "Have you seen your sister?"

Then Rickey: "If I had seen her I wouldn't tell you."

"I am sorry you feel that way about it, Oliphant."

"Why shouldn't I feel that way about it? Just because I happen to owe you a thousand dollars is no reason why you should try to force your attentions on Jinny."

She heard Michael's sharp exclamation: "If you were yourself, I'd make you take that back."

"I won't take anything back and I am willing to fight if you are."

Virginia got to her feet. She felt that she must go out and face them, but Michael's next words restrained her. "Let us be friends, Oliphant."

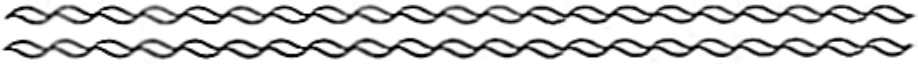
"Not if I know it. I'm going to pay back your money. But I don't want anything to do with your magazine—or you!"

Dead silence, then Michael speaking, "There's no reason why we should prolong this, is there? Perhaps when you are yourself again, you'll apologize."

Rickey began to laugh, and Virginia was aware, suddenly, that his laughter was receding. She ran around the screen. Both men were gone. From the hall came the echo of her brother's laughter.

She stood very still in the middle of the room, white and shaking, her mind whirling.

What had Rickey meant when he said he owed Michael McMillan a thousand dollars?



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

So Early in the Morning!

Following Michael, Rickey caught up with him at last. “Look here,” he said, and laid his hand on the other’s arm, “you might as well keep away from Jinny. She’s going to marry Tony Bleecker.”

Michael whirled around on him. “You lie.”

“Ask her if you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t need to ask her. She’s no more in love with Bleecker than I am.”

Rickey’s face was white. “Well, what if she isn’t in love with him? He has a lot to offer her. She’ll be mistress of Derekdale. That’s something for a girl to think about, isn’t it?”

Michael stood staring at him. “Something for a girl to think about”—but not a girl like Virginia Oliphant. He wanted to shake Rickey as he would a snarling puppy. But he managed to keep his temper. “I don’t care to talk about it,” he said, and made his way back to the ballroom.

He looked everywhere for Virginia, but did not find her. Others were looking—Tony and old Anthony. At last a maid brought a message to Mrs. Bleecker: Miss Oliphant was not well and had gone to her room.

To Michael the disappointment was like a blow in the face. He had counted so much on the moments they would have together. Behind the screen, perhaps, he would tell her all that he had left unsaid. And they would plan their future.

And now he must wait until morning.

He finished the night as best he could, and went upstairs to a sleepless pillow. He was weighted down with the thought that something was wrong. He recalled Rickey’s insolence, the sinister import of his insistence that Virginia was going to marry Bleecker. “She’ll be mistress of Derekdale—that’s something for a girl to think about.” Then Virginia’s sudden disappearance.

Tony Bleecker had seemed to take it philosophically. He had danced and laughed and eaten his supper with an appetite. If his mind was on Virginia it did not appear so on the surface. Yet, might there not be a secret understanding between them? Michael hated the thought and put it from him.

He rose early and went downstairs. A corps of servants was getting the place in order. Wells, the butler, fresh as a daisy in spite of only a brief season of rest, asked, “Would you like your coffee now, sir?”

“If I may have it.”

“There’s a maid in the breakfast room. She’ll look after you, Mr. McMillan.”

Refreshed by his coffee, Michael went out of doors. It was snowing delicately, the flakes floating like feathers in the crisp, thin air. The ground was veiled with white, and

the stillness was so intense as to be almost startling. It was as if there was nothing alive in the world except those falling flakes.

He looked at his watch. It was not yet eight o'clock. It would be hours before any of the guests would be down. He could not hope to see Virginia before noon.

He decided to bridge the time between by riding over to Aunt Molly's. He could buy flowers for her in town, wish her a Merry Christmas and get back easily to Derekdale by eleven.

Before he left he handed a small parcel to Wells, "Send this up on Miss Oliphant's breakfast tray," he said. "Don't disturb her with it before that."

He went to the garage and asked for his car. One of the men bringing it out, said, "The roads are a bit slippery this morning, Mr. McMillan. There's a lot of ice under the snow."

"I'll take it slowly," Michael said, "I have some time to kill."

"It will be a good thing if only time is killed this morning," the man remarked, "with all the delivery trucks and the boys on them full of Christmas hooch."

Michael's spirits rose as his car picked up the road. He stopped at a florist's shop as he drove through the little town and bought roses for his Aunt Molly—an armful of gorgeous red ones.

He bought roses, too, for Virginia, small pink buds tied with ribbon. He put them in his car and went on light-heartedly.

When he reached the old farm house, he saw a marching line of ducks making its way toward the big barn. The door of the barn was open, and his aunt, wrapped in a great fur coat, stood with a pan in her hand and threw out food to the doves which flew down from above, and to the ducks which broke ranks as they reached her.

Michael was warmed by her delighted welcome. "My dear boy, how does this happen?"

He kissed her. "I am staying at Derekdale, and ran over before the others were up."

"You'll breakfast with me?"

"I've had my coffee."

"You'll want more than that after your ride."

She finished feeding the doves and ducks. The ducks were greedy but it was a sort of sedate greediness. "They always seem to me much better bred than chickens," Aunt Molly remarked, "that's why I keep them. They have manners and so have the doves."

He laughed and put his arm about her. "What a dear you are."

"Am I? Well, I like to hear you say it."

When they reached the house, breakfast was on the table—the hearty breakfast of farmer folk—country ham and fresh eggs, buckwheat cakes, the famous honey.

Michael ate with an appetite. All his doubts of the night had fled. He asked Aunt Molly, "May I talk to you about Virginia?"

"Of course."

"I am going to marry her."

"My dear boy, I guessed that long ago."

They sat a long time at the table talking of it. "You must come out here often when you are married," Aunt Molly said. "I'll lend the place to you for your honeymoon, and all my doves can coo for you." She was radiant with the thought of his happiness, and Michael was radiant. How silly he had been to doubt.

He told her what he had in mind. A camp in Maine, deep in the woods; adventuring voyages everywhere.

"But when will you work, Michael?"

"I don't need to work as I do now, Aunt Molly. I've tried to fill my life because of the empty days."

Aunt Molly laid her hand over his. She knew all about his wife. She had never wanted Michael to marry Helen. She said now, "You'll be happy with Virginia. She's a darling and she loves you."

When Michael was again in his car he rode along to the tune of that harmony: She's a darling and she loves you! In a few moments he would see her.

There was a truck coming toward him as he ascended a hill. Another truck tried to pass it. He was never sure how it happened, but something skidded. There was a crash and he brought his own car to a stop. Then he jumped out. The driver of one of the trucks was lying in the road. His head was cut and he was unconscious. Michael ran to him and picked him up.

"We must get him to a doctor or to a hospital," he said to the driver of the other truck. "I'll take him to town if you'll help me lift him into my car."

It was just an everyday episode and the man recovered. But Michael got back to Derekdale two hours later than he had planned. And when he got back there was a note in his room from Virginia. He read it and his structure of dreams toppled about him. It was very brief, just a few significant lines:

"Dear Michael:

I am leaving this morning. I am running away from everything. Even from you. Not because I want to, but because I must. Please don't try to see me. It will make it hard for me. It has been wonderful knowing you. Will you believe that and believe that I am always your friend—

Virginia Oliphant."

As he finished reading, Michael was conscious of a sense of uncontrollable fury. He burned the note and went downstairs. He found a half dozen people gathered about the table and sideboard in the breakfast room. Rickey was there and Marty Van Duyne. Rickey did not speak to Michael, but Marty announced, "We've been to church."

Someone said, “I didn’t know you ever went to church, Marty.” Marty, smiling a little secret smile, received that in silence. She had gone to church because Rickey had planned it. “It will be a weird and wonderful experience going to church with a witch,” he had told her.

Tony came into the room presently and went up to Rickey. The two spoke together in low tones. Rickey seemed flushed and explanatory. Tony, with no laughter in his eyes, was asking questions. Michael, still consumed with dull rage, wondered what Virginia had said to Tony. He had, perhaps, seen her this morning, driven her to the station. Yet only last night she had said, “Michael, dear.”

Jane Bleecker came down. She rarely stayed in bed as late as her feminine guests. She dropped into a seat beside Michael and outlined the plans for the day. Then she added, “We miss your sister, Rickey.”

Rickey, smiling, threw over his shoulder, “Oh, yes,” and went on talking to Marty.

Old Anthony who stood with his back to the fire, said cordially, “She must come again.”

Tony said nothing. He too had had a note from Virginia. She had told him she was going away and that she hoped he wouldn’t try to see her. “I can’t marry you, Tony, and that’s the end of it.”

But it was not the end. Young Bleecker felt that he could bide his time. Virginia needn’t think she could get rid of him with a gesture. Women had been known before this to change their minds. Now and then he had made them do it. He had liked the sense of conquest.

As he and Marty Van Duyne rode later over the frozen fields, he demanded, “What are you trying to do with young Oliphant?”

“I’m falling in love with him. He’s unique. At this moment he is probably up aloft somewhere writing odes to my eyebrows.”

“And you like that?”

“I think I do. If he had your money I’d marry him in a minute, Tony.”

He laughed. “You don’t mean that. You are just saying it to hear yourself talk.”

“I do mean it.”

“He’s too young for you.”

“It’s his youth I adore. He’s like one of the tragic young gods burning altar fires before me.”

When at last they came to a wood and walked their horses, Marty spoke of Virginia Oliphant. “What made her go home?”

“Heaven knows!”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Only that things had come up which made it necessary.”

"Have you thought," and Marty's words seemed to tinkle in the thin air, "that it might be Michael McMillan?"

He turned on her sharply. "McMillan?"

"Yes. She's dead in love with him. Surely you know that, Tony."

"I don't. And neither do you."

Marty said nothing. She rode under the dark trees and thought of Rickey. If only he had Tony's money. But he hadn't and that was the end of it.

And just at that moment Rickey in the great room that had been given him, was getting out pen and paper. Here and now he would begin the book. It would be his own and Marty's—*The Silver Witch*. He wrote the title with a flourish. Then with deft strokes he drew a picture of Marty—not as he had ever seen her in life, but as he had seen her in his imagination. She sat on the edge of a pool with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms around them. Her eyes were fixed on the pool from which a thin spiral of smoke seemed to ascend. He worked over the sketch for a long time and laid it aside only when it was time to dress for dinner.

After dinner he carried Marty off to the picture gallery. "I've got something to show you," he said.

He handed her the sketch of the witch by the pool.

She looked at it for a long time. "Am I like that?" she asked.

"You are, as I see you."

"But—there's something in the eyes."

"That is not in your eyes? Yes, I put it there. Wait a minute while I write what I mean."

He turned the sketch over and wrote rapidly on the back. Marty watched him—the ruffled head bent down, the curve in the boyish cheek, the grace of the long figure . . . Shelley? Keats? Byron? Marty wasn't sure . . . but he had the same stuff in him as all the great young poets.

He lifted his head presently and read what he had written. "The silver witch said to the pool, 'Bubble and burn with the fire at your cool heart. For my heart is cool, yet there is fire within, and the smoke that ascends comes from the ashes of my old desires. They have burnt out and have left my heart clean.' "

Marty stared at him wonderingly. "Rickey, how did you know that?"

"That you've had love affairs? How could I help knowing? But you've always loved yourself more than anyone else."

"Well, why not? Then if I am disappointed I have only myself to blame."

He shook his head and bent down to write. When he again looked up he said, "Listen."

"And the witch said to the pool . . . 'Let your smoke ascend and blind the eyes of my lover so that he may see me always beautiful even when age creeps upon me. Let me

weave a spell about him so that when my eyes are dull and my hair falls out and my flesh folds into wrinkles—' "

She stopped him. "Don't! You're dreadful."

He gave a triumphant laugh. "I'm not dreadful, and I've made you think. And why should you want to marry a man with money? You've enough of your own and I can do more for you than Tony Bleecker. He can only add a million to other millions. I can immortalize you in a book."

She tried to laugh at him. "How sure you are!"

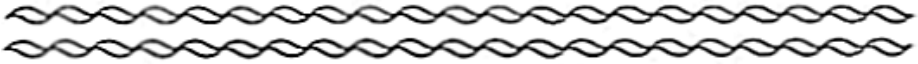
"Why shouldn't I be sure?"

"No one knows what he can do until he proves it." He threw back his head, his chin up, his eyes flashing. "With you for my inspiration—"

Her voice shook, "Oh, Rickey, Rickey."

She insisted then on going downstairs. "If I stay," she said, "I'll be saying things I don't mean."

"You'll mean them some day," he had said with certainty. "You're mine forever, if you only knew it."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hands Off!

WHEN she had fled upstairs to her room, after the horror of Rickey's revelation, Virginia had thrown herself across the bed and with clenched hands and burning cheeks had faced what was before her. Nothing could be as it had been. Her sense of shame in Rickey's inexcusable attitude towards Michael was overwhelming. She felt herself smirched by it. Soiled . . . !

She had sent finally for Rickey, and when the door had shut him in with her, she had demanded, "What did you mean when you said you owed Michael McMillan a thousand dollars?"

He had said, sharply, "Who told you that?"

"I heard you talking to Mr. McMillan. I was behind the screen in the library."

"Eavesdropping?"

"You know I wasn't. Tell me all about it, Rickey."

"You needn't take that tone—" but he told her, sullenly—of the night by the river, the game with Lute Carney and his cronies, of the meeting with McMillan, the conversation that followed.

"And you promised him the manuscript?"

"Yes."

"And now you are not going to give it to him?"

"He doesn't want it, does he?"

"Even if he doesn't, you shouldn't have said the things you did, Rickey."

"Why shouldn't I say what I think? I'm not McMillan's lackey—to lick his boots—"

As Rickey had stood leaning against the foot of the bed, cheeks flushed, eyes bright, his tongue a little thick, it had seemed to Virginia that for the first time she saw him without the veil of illusion in which her love had wrapped him. She had known his faults, but had refused to admit them. All at once it had swept over her; the realization of his weakness, his selfishness, his neurotic obsession as to his own importance.

"I think," she said, slowly, "that you owe Mr. McMillan an apology."

"Then you can think again," he blazed. "What do you take me for, Jinny?"

"A gentleman, Rickey."

She had been sitting upon the bed in her gold lace gown, her hair disordered, her cheeks stained with tears. But something in Rickey's face as he had bent above her, had made her afraid, and she had risen and put a chair between them.

"I am a gentleman," he had raged, "and I dare anyone to say I'm not. As for Michael McMillan," he had seemed to cast him aside with a gesture, "I'm done with him. And you needn't think you can boss me, Jinny. I'm my own master. I'm going to do as I

please. I'm not tied to your apron string. And one of the things I am going to do is to accept an invitation from Marty Van Duyne to go to Florida on her father's yacht. He's taking a party of friends. And I shall write a book about her."

She had stared at him, not comprehending, then she had said, "You're not yourself, Rickey."

"You mean I've been drinking?"

"Yes."

"What if I have? My mind is clear enough."

"Then—you are planning to—leave me—alone?"

"Why not? It's the opportunity of a lifetime, Jinny. And they haven't asked you."

"No . . .", slowly, "they haven't asked me."

"And I can't afford to miss it. And I don't intend to miss it. I'd follow Marty Van Duyne to the end of the world—"

"Rickey—are you—in love with her?"

He had flung up his head. "I'd rather not put it that way. She's a wonderful creature. A star high in the heavens."

She had known then it was hopeless to go on with it. Rickey in his exalted moods was beyond reason, beyond anything but his absorption in his own point of view.

So she had said, with beating heart, "How long will you be gone?"

"Six weeks."

"But—can you afford it?"

"I'm going to afford it. It will be in a sense an investment."

"We are spending our money so fast, Rickey."

"I'll be making more. . . ."

A long silence. Then, "When do you leave?"

"The day after New Year's."

"Have you thought what—I shall do?"

"You can live right on in our rooms. You might ask Mary Lee to stay with you, she'd love it."

Virginia had had no words for that. She had been stunned by the knowledge of his indifference to her welfare—Oh, she had thought he loved her. . . .

"I shall not ask her to stay with me, and I shall be leaving here early in the morning, Rickey."

"Leaving?"

"Yes. I can't stay on."

"Why not?"

"After—all this. . . ."

"All what? Nobody knows—but McMillan. And Tony will be furious—"

"Let him be furious. I'm not going to marry him. He knows it, and you may as well know it, Rickey."

"You needn't be so up-stage. It would be a very good thing for you—"

"It wouldn't be a good thing for me—" all at once her self-control had vanished, "it wouldn't be a good thing. I can't marry a man for his money, and I won't. So that's that, Rickey. You are having your own way about running off to Florida with Marty Van Duyne. Well, I'll have my own way, in this. . . . ! You say it is hands off with you? Well, then, it's hands off me, too, Rickey."

He had been sobered by her vehemence, "Oh, well, you needn't take it that way—"

"What other way can I take it?" She had begun to sob, and suddenly he had bent over her and had said in a softer tone, "Don't, Jinny."

Her arm had gone about his neck and for a moment they had clung together. "I'm a brute," he had whispered, with his cheek against hers, "but I've got to go!"

After he had left her, she had taken off the gold lace gown and had put on a simple blue negligee which she had made for herself. With her bright hair braided and down her back, she had looked like one of the ladies of Arthurian legend.

She had known what she had to do and had gone to the desk and got out pen and paper. The paper bore the Bleecker coat-of-arms, and was very thick and fine. The words as she had written them to Michael had looked very clear-cut and cameo-like on the white surface. She had written steadily and without hesitation, had sealed the envelope and set the letter aside. She would send it downstairs in the morning.

She had said her prayers in a methodical fashion, kneeling by the bed, with her face in her hands. She had known that she ought to pray wildly, but she couldn't. Her petitions had been cool and conventional. For many nights she had been saying, "Dear God, be with my Michael, and bless him—" But now why pray a prayer like that? He was no longer her Michael. . . . !

She had crept into bed, and between the covers had thought about it. No, Michael was no longer hers. She must not think of it. She had not been quite sure why she had decided it so quickly, nor why she had held so firmly to her decision. Perhaps pride had had a lot to do with it. To have Michael mixed up in a sordid thing like this—to have to make excuses for Rickey, to have to make them again and again. For Rickey would be coming back—some instinct told her that Marty Van Duyne wouldn't want him—and when he came back, he would have to be reckoned with. Virginia couldn't cast him off, and neither could she burden Michael with the problems of Rickey's future.

She had slept at last, and had waked at dawn. Wrapped again in the blue negligee she had looked forth from the windows, and had seen the sky illumined only by the stars, had heard the wind blow across the dead gardens of Derekdale, and had known that it was Christmas morning. Lighting the candles on her desk, she had written another letter which she had addressed to Tony. Then, dressing rapidly, she had gone downstairs and had asked her way to the nearest church.

The long walk had refreshed her, and when she had come to the little sanctuary and had found there a simple rector tending his flock at the early service, she had prayed with a clearer mind than on the night before. She had prayed for Michael, in a gesture of renunciation—"Wherever he may be, dear God, go with him."

She had returned to Derekdale, composed and sure of the way before her. She had asked if she might see Mrs. Bleecker, and had been received by her hostess in bed.

Jane had looked younger than ever in a rose-colored bed-jacket, with her hair tied with a wide pink ribbon. She was having tea and thin toast. She adored hot chocolate and muffins at this hour, but she had to think of her figure.

"My dear child," she had said as Virginia entered, "what gets you up so early?"

"I've been to church."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes . . . and I am having to leave you this morning, Mrs. Bleecker."

A light had come into Jane's eyes. "Why are you going?"

"Unexpected things have come up which I must look after."

"Will your brother go with you?"

"No."

"What does Tony say about it?"

"I haven't told him."

It had been plain that Jane was puzzled. "Are you running away from him?" she had demanded.

"Oh, no. I've written him a note."

Jane had seemed to make a sudden decision, "Sit down," she said, "we might as well have things out. I know that Tony wants to marry you, and I'd like to know what you are going to do about it."

"Nothing. I'm not in love with him."

"And you won't marry him unless you are in love?"

"No."

"Some women might think of the advantages."

Virginia's eyes had met the older woman's, and the scorn in them had burned like a flame. "You mean the money? Marriage with me could never be a—contract. You needn't be afraid, Mrs. Bleecker. Tony is perfectly safe."

Then Jane had shown herself as crude as a fishwife: "Of course," she said, "there's someone else. You wouldn't throw away millions unless you were in love with another man. That's your real reason though you aren't telling it."

The humor of the situation had suddenly struck Virginia, so that she had smiled as she answered: "You don't want me to marry Tony. Why should you care whether I love

anyone else?"

Jane had been a bit sullen about it, "I don't care." But Virginia had seen in that moment that Jane's pride was hurt. She had wanted Virginia to suffer, not Tony. Who was this girl that she had dared put aside with a gesture the Bleecker fortune?

Because of this knowledge which seemed to set her above and beyond all Jane's petty irritations, Virginia had been able to hold out her hand and say, with calmness. "I must be running along. And I haven't wished you a 'Merry Christmas.' "

"Fat chance," Jane had said, inelegantly, "that I'll have a merry Christmas with Tony raging." But she had taken Virginia's hand, and had had the grace to be a bit ashamed of herself, "Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken with quite so much frankness. . . ."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Virginia had found herself again smiling down at the rose lady among the pillows. Why be troubled in any way by petty prejudices. Jane was not worth the hard thoughts that one might otherwise have wasted upon her.

When Virginia had at last said, "Good-by," she had gone downstairs to find old Anthony in the breakfast room. He had risen at once: "How does this happen? No one else is up."

"I'm going home."

"You're not—!" his tone had been dismayed.

She had made her explanation. "I must—matters have come up—"

His shrewd eyes had questioned her, "You're not telling me the whole truth. Sit down and have breakfast with me and talk it over."

She had sat down with him at the end of the long table and been served with fruit and coffee. "I'm not hungry."

"But you didn't eat any supper last night. They said you weren't well and had gone upstairs. But I knew you couldn't stand the racket. I feel, my dear, that I should apologize."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Perhaps not. But it made you unhappy—"

"Yes. That and other things." Her eyes had met his steadily. "I can't tell you all about it—but I must go."

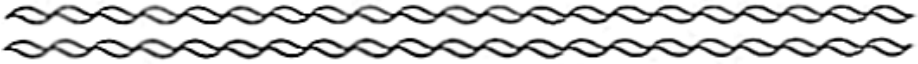
"Have you told Tony?"

"I've written him."

"I'm no end sorry. But you've a good head on your shoulders. You know what you're doing . . . so I'll let it rest there."

As she had risen from the table, Wells, the butler, had handed her a tiny parcel. "Mr. McMillan left this for you when he went out. . . ."

Virginia had taken it and had tucked it into her bag, and had said calmly, "Thank you, Wells." And how could Wells know that her heart was beating wildly at the sound of Michael's name.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Attic Room

And now at last in the train Virginia was opening the parcel Wells had handed her. Old Anthony had driven her to the station, and had said, with a touch of emotion before he left her, "My dear, if you ever need a friend, you'll let me know?" And she had promised him and had added, "Oh, I wish I loved Tony. It would be wonderful to have you for a father."

But all that was forgotten, everything was forgotten, as she untied the string and found in a white kid box a carved moonstone set round with diamonds. The figure on the moonstone was of Diana, and Michael had written on a card the lines her ancestor had given to the lady of the Dutch spoons:

"*If east or west,*
Or north or south,
Be my direction,
This silver toy
Will show me Dian's face,
And thy reflection."

He had written, too, "To my own Dian—with love—forever."

The pendant hung from a slender platinum chain. A beautiful thing, but Virginia knew she must not keep it. Or was she foolish not to take her happiness when it was at hand?

When she reached New York she found the streets of the city wearing their empty holiday air. As her taxi whirled downtown, it passed churches out of which streamed those who had come to worship in memory of the Babe of Bethlehem. There were wreaths tied with red ribbons in the shop windows, and such pedestrians as there were had their arms heaped high with gifts.

When she reached the old house, there was no one to greet her. The little Scotch dog and the primrose cat had been left in care of the Barlows. The day was dull and no sun shone through the honey-colored curtains. The taxi driver had set her bags down in the middle of the floor. The big room was chilly, the fireplace black. And she had come away from a house that was all glow and color and laughter—for what?

Because two men had wanted to marry her!

No—no—that wasn't the reason. She had come because of Rickey. She had wanted to hide her head. It was better to be here—alone, than there with things that made her shudder and shiver . . . ! She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't. What good would it do to weep and wail? The way to get things out of life was to march with one's head up. Of course that wasn't modern philosophy. One did not, according to that, march. One stumbled along, and finally fell by the wayside.

Well, she wouldn't, she wouldn't, she wouldn't! She found herself making a tune of it as she went about building a fire, lighting her lamps against the dullness, and finally running down to ask the landlady if there were any letters.

There were, Mrs. Leonardi emphasized, not only letters but boxes and bundles. She brought them out, more than she could carry. “Tommaso shall take them up for you. We did not know you would be here. We are having a Christmas—I am cooking the dinner.”

It was very evident from the pungent odors that the dinner was cooking. Virginia had eaten nothing but fruit and coffee since the day before, and the fragrances were tempting. She had not thought of her own Christmas dinner—she had thought of nothing except to get away from Derekdale.

Mrs. Leonardi going up the stairs asked hospitably, “And you? Will you come and have some Christmas with us? We are very plain. But there is plenty.”

Virginia, knowing that about her landlady’s board would be all the cousins and the aunts and the uncles and the grandfathers of the Leonardis, declined the invitation. “It’s dear of you to ask me—but I have other plans.”

She was not sure what those plans might be, but they were slowly crystallizing. Among the boxes was a big one from her father and mother. It was filled with tropical fruits and cans and bottles and boxes of dates and olives and figs and apricots and prunes stuffed with nuts, and strange delicious candies. “For my darlings,” was on the card in her mother’s fine script.

Well, she would make her Christmas! She would set her tables and light her candles and have a feast, and she would forget Derekdale and the great banqueting hall—and the women all shine and glitter, and the men holding their glasses high—!

She looked at the clock. It was just noon. She had left Derekdale at nine. It did not seem possible that so much could have happened in three hours. Yet how long the hours seemed since she had seen Michael. . . .

She found herself running up the stairs. When she reached the top floor she knocked at Mrs. Barlow’s door. When the little woman opened it, she gave a cry of delight, “Miss Oliphant . . . ! Roger, it is Miss Virginia!”

There was a whirlwind of welcome—the child in her arms, the little dog wild with excitement, the little cat waving an ecstatic plume of a tail. “What made you come back, what made you come back?” little Roger was demanding.

“To ask you all to Christmas dinner.”

“But we’re having one—”

“Now?”

“In a minute. It’s cooking. Isn’t it, Mother?”

“Yes. Perhaps Miss Virginia will share it.”

“I will, if you’ll come to my party tonight?”

“Oh—are you going to have a party?”

“Yes, for you and for me and for your mother, and Weenie and Prim, and Miss Mary Lee Logan, if we can get her.”

Mrs. Barlow said, with flushed cheeks, “Our dinner is very simple, Miss Oliphant.”

"It's a lovely dinner," Roger's voice was eager, "you told me so yourself, Mother."

She smiled at him. "It's lovely because we make it so. You see, Miss Oliphant, there isn't a turkey, because it takes such a big family to eat a turkey, and it isn't a chicken because a chicken is so extravagant for two. But it's a wonderful bird all made of beef and its got stuffing and skewers for drumsticks, and we are going to stick cranberries on them—and every time we open the oven—"

Roger took up the tale, "Every time we open the oven we baste it with butter, and I do it myself, Miss Virginia. You let me show you—and you'll see it. . . ."

It was delightful to watch them playing the game, the little mother and her child, making a feast out of simple food. . . . "There's plenty for everybody," Roger was saying, "for Prim and Weenie and you—"

The two women talked alone for a moment before the meal was served. "I came back unexpectedly," Virginia said, "and I thought it would be fun to have a party—at supper time. I'll have a tree—"

"I had trimmed a tiny one for the child," Mrs. Barlow said, "it was to be a surprise. But yours will be better."

"We'll have both of them."

So they ate their dinner and had the little tree, and the presents which Virginia and Rickey had left with Mrs. Barlow for herself and the child. And after dinner Roger and Virginia opened the window and fed the pigeons on the roof. "I have to do it every day now," the child told her, "since the people moved out next door."

"Do you mean," Virginia asked him, "that they've given up their rooms?"

"Yes, haven't they, Mother?"

Mrs. Barlow who was clearing the table said, "They moved two days ago."

"Has Mrs. Leonardi the key?"

"Yes."

Nothing more was said about it, but in the back of Virginia's mind as she went downstairs to prepare for the party was the thought of those upper rooms. A place for a bed in one and a desk in the other! And with Rickey away, why not?

She called up Mary Lee and found her at home. "I'll be over at once," was the rapturous response to the invitation, "I'm bored to death. And where's Rickey?"

"I left him at Derekdale."

"Making love to Marty Van Duyne? Has something happened? And why are you back so soon?"

"I'll tell you later," Virginia hung up the receiver, and pending Mary Lee's arrival, sallied forth to the delicatessen at the corner. It was open and furnished all the food she would need for a real collation. She bought salad and sliced breast of turkey, a frosted cake. There would be hot chocolate and hot biscuits—she would like to make biscuits. She wanted to be busy—busy—! She also found a fat fir tree and some glittering things

to put on it. She wondered if she were being extravagant. Well, if so, she would pay the piper.

When she got back she met Mary Lee on the door-step, and the two went in with their parcels together. Mary Lee was pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. "Oh, Jinny, Jinny," she said, "if you could know how I've wanted you."

Virginia's arms went about her. She knew that Mary Lee wanted Rickey, as she herself wanted—Michael.

They busied themselves for a time with their holiday preparations, then as the afternoon waned, sat down by the fire to rest. "Tell me all about it, Jinny," Mary Lee said, "tell me about—Rickey—"

"He's going on a yachting trip—to Florida—"

Mary Lee's voice had a note of fear in it. "Whose yacht?"

"The Van Duynes'."

Mary Lee flung up her hands. "I knew it," she cried with a touch of wildness, "and she'll make him unhappy."

Virginia said, with a touch of sternness, "Perhaps he needs—unhappiness—"

Mary Lee stared at her, "What do you mean?"

"I can't tell you everything—only Rickey isn't being a good sport. He ought to stay here and work."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"That he would get atmosphere, and he was going to write about Marty Van Duyne."

"What's he done with the other book?"

"Burning Beauty?"

"Yes."

"He—isn't going on with it." Virginia's voice was very low, her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. Mary Lee reached forward and laid her own hand on the clasped ones of her friend. "Can't you tell me?"

"I wish I could, Mary Lee—but I can't—"

She went on to speak of her plans. "I'm going to sublet these rooms if I can and take the two next to Mrs. Barlow."

Mary Lee was incredulous, "But they aren't comfortable."

"They'll do well enough for me, and I shall have Roger and his mother for company."

"It seems a shame to have you leave all this." Then, after a moment, "If you're hard up for money, why not let me help?"

Virginia's eyes were wet, "You're a darling, but I can't borrow. And I want the rooms upstairs because I don't want people—to know—where I am—"

Mary Lee stared at her, "You're going to hide? From whom?"

"Tony. . . . Michael McMillan. I shan't see anybody—except you and the Barlows—"

"Most women would jump at the chance of marrying Tony Bleecker."

"Because he's rich?"

"No, because he's great fun and good-looking. And you'd have a marvelous life as mistress of Derekdale."

There it was again—mistress of Derekdale. Virginia felt once more that shiver of apprehension. Well, no one could make her do it. No one . . . !

"If it wasn't that I cared for Rickey," Mary Lee stated, "I'd try to cut you out—" she stopped, and went on presently with quick breath—"But I do—care for Rickey. And when Marty Van Duyne gets through with him I intend to make a man of him."

Virginia's cheeks were flushed, "I wouldn't want a man if he loved another woman."

"I know," said Mary Lee, simply, "but I haven't your pride, Jinny, and Rickey is worth saving."

Virginia sat gazing into the fire, giving herself up for the moment to a mood of deep depression. What hope was there for Mary Lee's happiness? Rickey had no thought of wanting her. The things that Rickey wanted were illusions, will-o'-the-wisp pursuit and mad worship.

She roused herself presently, and got ready for her guests, and when Roger and his mother came down, there was the tree shining between the great windows and hung with gold and silver balls, and red and green and blue and purple lights, and with festoons of tinsel from its tip to the ends of its branches.

And under the tree were all the things that Mary Lee had brought, and that Virginia had bought, and little Roger was speechless with content.

Mary Lee played Santa Claus, having pinned herself into a costume of red crepe paper and white cotton from a druggist's package into some semblance of the jolly saint. She was extremely funny, and so feverishly gay that no one would have guessed that her heart was broken.

Virginia had bought a lot of amusing toys—things that you wound up and which ran around the floor, animals that danced, a clown on a stick whose bells rang when you pulled a string.

And it was while Mary Lee was ringing all the bells of the grinning clown, that the door opened and some one came in. No one heard, but the little dog! There was a rush and a bark; then Jinny cried sharply, "*Rickey . . . !*"

The toy dropped from Mary Lee's hand, and she stood in her grotesque costume as still as a statue, staring. For Virginia was in her brother's arms, and Rickey, his bright head upheld, was saying over and over, "I had to come, Jinny. I had to come."

It was some time before he saw Mary Lee, but then he said, “By Jinks, you’re pretty. You make me think of a nice fat robin.” He kissed her on the cheek in brotherly fashion —and the morning stars sang for Mary Lee!

Little Roger piped, “Have you come to supper?”

And Rickey said, “I’ve come to anything. . . .”

His hand was on his sister’s shoulder. “I couldn’t think of eating Christmas dinner with anyone but you, Jinny. I’m going back on the nine o’clock train. That will get me to Derekdale in time for the dance at the country club.”

And when he said that, Mary Lee’s stars were silent!

Yet it was something to have him here, even though she knew that his wild spirits came from his absorption in another woman. He set all of the mechanical toys going, he tied a bow of gold tinsel around the neck of the primrose cat, he put a foolscap on Weenie of red paper, and he whistled a tune and danced with Mary Lee.

And when they sat down at last to supper, he made Mary Lee sing the little Chinese song for him. And as the glasses tinkled out the last tragic note, he said, “You’re by way of being a great artist, Mary Lee. Only an artist can do a little thing like that with such perfection. It’s like a carving in old ivory, or a painting on a fine old fan.”

Mary Lee glowed under his praise. She was sitting beside him, and presently she said, very low, “Why go back tonight?”

“I must go.”

“But we want you—here.”

“It’s my destiny to go. I feel it, Mary Lee. I’m being swept on and on by something stronger than myself.”

Mary Lee suddenly saw red, “Are you being swept on by—your Marty?”

“She isn’t mine—yet—”

She stared at him in amazement. “You don’t think for a moment she will ever be yours?”

“Why not?”

“But, Rickey, the nerve of you, asking her to share your attic!”

“Who’s asking her to share an attic? And you needn’t think you can irritate me by saying things like that. I’m too sure of Marty. It’s the first time any man has dared fling a challenge at her.” Rickey paused, then went on fervently, “I’m trying to show her that money doesn’t make a world.”

Mary Lee was scornful. “Money does make a world, Rickey, and you know it. You wouldn’t look at Marty Van Duyne if she didn’t have everything to set off her beauty.”

“You’re right in a way,” he admitted after a moment, “but what I am telling her is that she needs some things money can’t buy. I can give them to her, and Tony Bleecker can’t.”

“Shall you write when you are on the high seas?”

“There won’t be any high seas.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, I shall work a bit. But I expect to absorb ideas and get atmosphere.”

“Has Virginia told you that she is moving upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“And are you willing?”

He spoke with some heat, “My dear girl, what else can I be? Jinny has a mind of her own.”

Mary Lee gave him a long look, “I’d hate to tell you what I think of you.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “Nothing pleasant, I fancy.”

“You’re a selfish pig.”

“Genius is always selfish.”

“Genius!” she threw up her hands. “Oh, I thought that once, but I’m learning a lot. And one thing I have learned is that there’s a difference between talent and genius. I thought I had a voice. But what I have is just a little pipe.”

This was a tragic Mary Lee, the Mary Lee of the Chinese song. Rickey found himself suddenly sympathetic, “You’re better than you think. I told you that a minute ago. . . .”

“I know—but I don’t want fame—I want—happiness—Rickey.”

“All of us want happiness. I want it—not the little satisfactions—but the big thing. And I intend to have it—. Something transcendent—being lifted above—everything.”

He was gazing into space, his eyes lighted. Mary Lee laid her hand on his arm, “Rickey—if your wings are ever broken, come back—to me.”

He looked down at her, “My wings broken? What do you mean?”

“Only that when you cannot fly in the upper air, you can flap along beside me.” She laughed a bit ruefully. “I wonder if you catch my idea?”

“I’m not sure,” doubtfully, and she let it go at that.

Rickey had only a moment alone with his sister before he left. “I shan’t see you again, Jinny, before I go. And you mustn’t think me a selfish pig. It’s only that things are too strong for me—”

“You mean your feeling for Miss Van Duyne?”

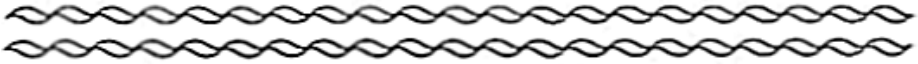
“Yes. Jinny, there’s a chance for me. No one has ever said to her the things she lets me say—” he was breathing quickly. “I’m telling her the truth about herself, I’m always going to tell it.”

They were in his little room, and she was standing with his arm about her, her cheek against the roughness of his coat. “Rickey, darling,” she said, “I’m glad you came tonight. No matter what happens, I shall always have this to remember—”

“What can happen, Jinny?”

“Oh, so many things . . .”

“Cheer up, old girl, I’ll be back before you know it,” he bent and kissed her. He had packed some things in a bag and now he took it with him. She did not go to the door, and it was Mary Lee who let him out. “Remember,” Mary Lee said, standing on the top step, “when you can’t fly, you can flap.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tony Goes to Market

THE day after her return to New York as she had bent over the sheets of her brother's manuscript which she had found on his desk, an idea had entered Virginia's mind. She had read again the first pages of *Burning Beauty* and had thought of that day by the river when she had lifted her arms to the brightness of the west, of her vision of what the book should be, of the glory that would illumine its pages. And Rickey had not known how to fix that radiance in words—the thing was dead, dull, without a spark of genius or even of great talent.

But what if she could do what Rickey had not done? Could she, out of her memory of that mood, reconstruct it? Might she not, alone in that attic room, find inspiration? And anyhow, was it not worth the trial?

She had talked over the matter of moving with Mrs. Leonardi, and the landlady had good-naturedly found other tenants for the first floor. Virginia was to leave the honey-colored curtains and the chintz covers. An artist and his wife would take the rooms if they could remain as they were.

So up to the attic with only a few cushions, some books, a picture or two, and Michael's bit of pottery, went Virginia—feeling as one might who starts on a strange voyage.

Michael—! Virginia would not let herself think of him. Neither he nor Tony were to know that she was still in the old house. She had given Mrs. Leonardi instructions. "I am doing some work and want no interruptions. If any one comes, say that I've given up my rooms."

So with the little dog and the little cat, she settled at last into her strange surroundings. For a day or two the puzzled animals wandered about restless. Then, curling themselves up by the round stove which was the substitute for the fireplace, they adjusted themselves to what had to be, and seemed content. There was this, too, that they had the roof for a promenade, and shared it with the pigeons, who seemed to have not the least fear of the kitten, and whom Weenie treated with respect.

Day and night Virginia worked on Rickey's story. She studied it until she knew the theme by heart, then, dipping her brush, as it were, in gorgeous color, she painted the scenes in harmony with that radiant inner vision. Approaching the characters with a quality of emotion which made them seem to live and breathe, she transformed them from puppets into real people.

She was fascinated by what she had to do. She wrote all day and far into the night. With pen and typewriter she toiled, seeing the pages glow beneath her touch.

Then came the inevitable reaction. Late one night inspiration left her. She felt that she could never write another line. Oh, the whole thing was dry as dust. She wanted to live—to be loved by Michael—! Michael, Michael—! Why didn't he come to her?

She was, she knew, unreasonable, for how could he come? By her own act she had put him away from her and she must not call him back. Her yearning for companionship

became almost unbearable. She wondered if Mrs. Barlow were awake. At last she ventured to tap on the door, went in, in answer to the little woman's invitation, and found Roger asleep.

"Could you come and sit with me?" Virginia asked.

"I'd be glad to."

"I had to have some one," Virginia said, shakily, as they sat together presently by the round stove. "All at once I was afraid as I sat here alone with the wind howling and the fire sirens shrieking."

Mrs. Barlow nodded. "I know, I used to feel that way when Roger and I first came here."

"Do you ever feel that way now?"

"Not often. Time helps."

"Does it really help?" Virginia reached out and caught Mrs. Barlow's hand. "Oh, I'm terribly unhappy. I've put things out of my life. I oughtn't to talk about it, but I must. I thought I was strong, but I'm not strong enough." She began to sob, suddenly, uncontrollably.

Mrs. Barlow knelt beside her and put her arms about her. "Hush," she said, "hush, my dear. It's because you've been so fine and brave—you just had to break a little. Time does help, my dear. You'll learn this, as I have learned it."

Mrs. Barlow was a mouse of a thing, but she had beauty of a kind—soft gray eyes and black hair worn Madonna fashion, pearl-tinted skin, with a slight flush on her thin cheeks. She dressed always in black which gave her a deceiving air of maturity. She was not more than thirty, but she had known sorrow and it had aged her.

Virginia clung to her hand, as a drowning person clings to a strong swimmer. "Tell me how you learned to bear it."

"We don't talk much about such things in these days," Minnie Barlow said, "but I leaned on God."

No sound but the fluttering of the flames in the little stove and the boom of wind across the roofs. "I just talked to him," the quiet voice went on, "and I told him how things hurt and that I wanted to learn how to live. And I think I have learned."

Then, quite unexpectedly, Virginia found herself speaking of Michael. "I've put him out of my life."

"Can you tell me why, my dear?"

"Oh," Virginia's eyes were troubled, "it's a sort of pride, perhaps. There are problems in my life—I can't ask him to share them—"

"Are you sure he wouldn't rather share them?"

"How can I be sure—?" restlessly.

"Tell him how you feel about it."

But Virginia had a despairing feeling that she could never tell Michael what she had heard behind the screen, not until she could give him back all that Rickey owed, or at least give him a book, in Rickey's name, which he could publish with pride.

So she stared at the glowing stove and said, "I'm afraid I'll have to let him misunderstand. At least for a time. Do you think if he loves me—he will wait?"

"If he loves you, yes. But all men don't know love as women know it. We women wait forever."

January passed and February. Letters from Rickey came flaming across the dreariness of Virginia's days; letters from her mother—things not so well with Daddy. Letters from Tony demanding that she reveal her hiding place. He had been to the house, but the new tenants had known nothing about her. "But I shall find you, my dear, some day," he wrote confidently.

Letters, too, from Mary Lee, who had been called to Memphis by illness at home. "I can't get back before the middle of March and in the meantime give me all the news of Rickey," she wrote. But not a word from Michael!

Virginia worked on doggedly, wondering some days how she did it, wondering, too, about what she had written. Would it seem as good to others as it did to herself? For it did seem good. As she read and re-read it, she knew she was bringing Rickey's work up from mediocrity. The wooden creatures he had created she filled with flame and fire. They swept through the pages in a glorious procession. She would not be ashamed to show the manuscript to Michael, and she must show it, must let him have it to publish, to redeem her brother, Rickey's, debt.

As for herself, she would ask nothing. If he had really loved her he would have let her have word from him. It was a man's right to dominate a situation. Michael should have broken down all barriers, over-leaped all obstacles. Yet—why should she blame him? By her own act she had separated herself from him; she must take the consequences.

Then one stormy morning in March came a line from Rickey: "I must have more money. Can you lend me a bit, Jinny?"

She drew what he wanted and sent it immediately. Her heart almost stopped beating at the thought of her brother's extravagances. What would they do when the money was gone; with Daddy and Mother drawing heavily on their resources for additional nurses and expensive specialists? Yet what good would it do to try to warn Rickey? He would not listen.

As for herself, she practised the closest economy. She stopped going out and cooked her simple meals on the round stove. Now and then she and Mrs. Barlow pooled their assets, bought enough for three and dined together. On Saturdays she and little Roger went to market, and it was on a certain Saturday morning that Tony found her.

She was unaware of his nearness. "We will buy soup greens, Roger, and tomatoes for salad, and oranges are cheap," she was saying to the little boy.

Then she heard Tony's voice: "We will buy everything in the market. Strawberries are up from Florida, and new peas. Here, Virginia, let me fill your basket."

She whirled around on him. “Tony!” she cried.

He laughed excitedly: “You might have known I would find you. I have felt you might be in this neighborhood, so I have hung around, hoping.”

“Well, now that you have found me, what then?”

“Let me come and see you.”

She stood looking up at him, lips parted, eyes bright with welcome. For she was glad to see him. He knew she was glad. And how charming she was with her bright hair showing beneath her close brown hat. He held her hand in an eager clasp: “You’ll let me come?”

“Tony, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I haven’t a place to receive callers. I am living in two little rooms on the top floor.”

“On the top floor? Why?”

There was a touch of coldness in her voice: “Because I thought it best. That’s all I can tell you.”

Little Roger, intent on the matter in hand, complained, “Why don’t we buy things, Virginia?”

It was Tony who answered him: “We are going to buy things—what shall we buy first, Roger?”

“Little cakes,” said Roger hopefully, “and a jar of honey and a fat hen.”

“Why a fat hen?” Tony demanded.

“Because it goes farther when you cook it,” Roger explained, “there’s the gravy ’n’ everything.”

Tony bought the hen, he bought the honey and he bought the little cakes. He bought, too, other things for Roger’s delight and carried everything home in a taxi.

And while the taxi driver, with Roger in the lead, went up the stairs, Tony stood in the hall and had it out with Virginia.

“You needn’t think I am going away without a talk with you.”

She considered that with a little frown. “Surely you won’t insist if I don’t want you.”

“You do want me. Look me in the eye and say you don’t.”

She smiled at that. “We can sit here on the stairs.”

“Not if I know it. I left my car a block away. Come on and have luncheon with me.”

“I might, of course, if—”

“You weren’t so obstinate? I wouldn’t have believed it!” He was pressing his advantage.

“Well, I’ll run upstairs and change my hat.”

"The one you are wearing is superlative."

"It's a thousand years old!" She sped lightly up the dark stairway, while he, his hand on the newel post, waited for her. His eyes rested on the Bronze Knight, but he saw him not as a crusader lighting his small world, but as a rather shabby remnant of former grandeurs. Tony had little imagination. This place was unspeakable as a setting for Virginia's radiance. He must have her out of it.

As he drove up Riverside he said, "I'm taking you into the country. We can have a longer ride."

"Not too long," she warned him.

Yet she felt it was delightful to slip along in Tony's purring roadster, past this monument and that, with the river glinting in the cold sunlight, boats going up and down and across, their smoke billowing back of them in pearl-white and silver; with the line of the Jersey shore cutting up into a sea-blue sky, and the great apartment houses on the right gaining something of glamour because of the clear air and the glow of the morning sun.

She did not watch the road and was somewhat startled an hour later to find that they were entering the gates of Derekdale. "You shouldn't have brought me here, Tony."

"Why not? I'm a bold buccaneer, Virginia."

"Please take me home."

"No. You're being kidnapped."

She was half frightened. "What do you mean?"

He redeemed the situation from seriousness by his light laugh. "I mean nothing except that you are going to lunch with me. Mrs. Fields, the housekeeper, will play propriety."

They laughed together, and Virginia forgot her fears with Mrs. Fields to welcome her and Tony saying, "Will you look after Miss Oliphant for a bit? And have luncheon for us at once. Virginia, take off your hat and let me see your hair."

The housekeeper was smiling as the two of them went up the stairs. "Mr. Tony wants his way," she said, "and he usually gets it."

When Virginia joined Tony a little later, he took her to the portrait gallery and chose a seat for her at one end of the room, so that she looked down its length with all the imposing pictures to her right and left.

"Do you know why I brought you here?" he demanded.

"No."

"Because I want you to gaze on all these lovely women and imagine yourself among them."

"Among them?"

"Yes. Painted as the wife of the eighth Anthony Bleecker—in gold lace with a purple curtain back of you as I saw you on the stairs, and with your hair making a crown."

Virginia sat very still. She was seeing herself, suddenly, set among these others. In the gold lace gown with all the glory of her hair against the purple background. For generations the women of the Oliphant family had been painted in all their pride and beauty—they had reigned as queens over great houses, as she might reign! What a future she would have as the wife of the eighth Anthony!

And she was refusing that future for what? Because there had come into her life a man beside whom all Tony's glitter and gorgeousness paled into insignificance. And because of him she would go back to her attic, go back to being her own cook and dishwasher, back to all the drudgery of her dreary life, back to the writing over of Rickey's book, to discouragement and apprehension.

And Tony could save her that. She had only to say the word and here in this big house would be Mrs. Fields and all the maids and men to make things easy. The stables would be hers, and the great barns, and the wide acres, stretching over the hills and far away!

Mistress of Derekdale. . . . Mistress of Derekdale. . . . with the world before her!

Tony was urging: "My dear, my dear, why not be gay and happy. We could be married in a minute and join the others in Florida."

Why not, indeed? Never to go back again to the grim old house in Washington Square, never to walk up the stairs with their frightening shadows, never again to be alone in the attic room. She found herself wavering. . . .

It was old Anthony who saved her. He came to the door of the gallery and spoke to them. "This is great luck, Virginia. I arrived unexpectedly. Mrs. Fields told me you were here with Tony."

Virginia ran towards him, "I've been kidnapped. By your son. . . ."

She was laughing, yet old Anthony felt that behind her light words was a deeper meaning. He laid his arm protectingly about her shoulders. "You're safe enough with me."

Tony protested, "Look here, Dad, aren't you on my side? I've been trying to make her see that she belongs up there with the rest of them," his gesture indicated the portraits.

Old Anthony spoke with heartiness, "Nobody wants it more than I. What about it, my dear?"

"I'd like it in a way," Virginia confessed. "But you can't marry a man simply because he wants to hang your picture on the wall."

Tony flushed, "So that's the way you look at it?"

She held out her hand to him, "I'm sorry. . . ."

He lifted the hand to his lips, "Not half as sorry as I am."

The three of them lunched together, and Virginia sighed when at last she said she must go. "It's like Cinderella leaving the ball. . . ."

"You don't have to leave it."

"Yes, I do, Tony. But it has been glorious while it lasted."

While Tony went to order the car brought up, Virginia had a moment alone with old Anthony.

"May I say this to you?" he asked, "that you might go far and do worse than marry my son."

"I know. Perhaps I'm taking the wrong road. But I must follow it."

As she drove home with Tony they talked of everything but that which was in their hearts and it was not until they came again to Riverside, where the whole scene was changed by the slant of the afternoon sun, which spread a sparkling haze over the landscape and turned the Jersey sky to pale saffron and the river into a molten flood, that Tony, his voice rough with emotion, asked, "Is there anyone else?"

She did not look at him, "Yes."

"Is it—Michael McMillan?"

She nodded.

He bent down to her, "I shan't give you up," he said, "remember that, Virginia. I shall never give you up."

When they reached the house, he stood in the hall and asked a favor. "Let me come!"

She shook her head, "I mustn't."

"Does McMillan come?"

"No. Nobody does but Mary Lee. And Tony, if you meet Michael—don't tell him . . ."

"That you are here?"

"Yes."

He stood irresolute, "But I don't understand—if you love him—?"

Her hand went out in protest: "Tony, don't ask questions—*please* . . ."

"My dear, I won't." He caught her to him suddenly and kissed her cheek, then opened the door and was off.

Virginia stood very still, looking up at the Bronze Knight. She wondered if he would have kissed a woman like that—without her wanting it? But the days of chivalry were dead.

Tony and his father sat late that night by the fire in the great hall at Derekdale. The dogs lay at their feet. A storm was raging outside yet so firm were the foundations of the fine old house that no blast could shake it. The wind had come up before Tony got Virginia home.

And young Anthony said to old Anthony, "She is such a little thing to fight alone. And she could do so much for me. I'd have ambition to be something more than a rich man's son. She wouldn't care about my money if she cared for me. She'd be a companion, a good comrade. If she loved a man it would be with all her heart and soul,

but there'd be more than romance in it, there'd be all the qualities of mind and heart that make a man content. You know what I mean, Dad. You've missed it."

The old man lifted his head and nodded. "Yes, I've missed it. Never since I married have I had a home. I might as well be honest about it—you know it and I know it. I've had houses, yet your mother and I have never sat by our fireside satisfied to be together. We've never gone into deep forests or sailed the seas, happy to have no other soul near us. When we married I wanted a hearthstone, your mother wanted excitement. She has what she wants, and I make up my life as best I can. I have no complaint, I chose her from among all other women, and if I made a mistake it was my own fault. But I have this to say to you, Tony. If you can't have Virginia Oliphant, make no compromises. You'd better be single to the end of your days than marry the wrong woman."

"You mean Marty?"

"Yes."

"Not the ghost of a chance she'd have me even if I wanted it."

"That's not the truth and you know it. She'd like the linking of the fortunes even if she hadn't a shred of love for you." He hesitated, then said significantly, "Your mother wants it."

Tony was aware of a cold chill of apprehension. What Jane Bleecker wanted she usually got. It was foolish, of course, to think that she could make him marry anyone he didn't want to marry. Yet if he couldn't have Virginia, might he not be too indifferent to set his will against his mother's? He threw off the feeling, however. His life was his own. Neither his mother nor Marty could manage it for him.

So potent, however, was his mother's influence, that when she wrote to him a week later to join her on the Van Duyne yacht, he took a bit of leave and went down. Why not? It would serve to pass away the time.

It was a day of purple seas and warm moist winds when he arrived at Miami and boarded the Van Duyne yacht. Nothing could have been a greater contrast than his memory of Virginia on the dreary stairs and the gay group which welcomed him. Jane, in faint pink, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. "My blessed boy!" she cried.

Marty, silver under the sun, came flashing across the deck. "Tony Bleecker, I've a thousand things to say to you. Let's find a place to talk. Jane, they want you for bridge. You can kill the fatted calf later."

Jane laughed and rushed away. There were left presently only Marty and Tony and Rickey Oliphant.

Rickey had shaken hands with Tony and now he offered, with a touch of gloom, to leave them. "I'd better be getting at my work."

Marty agreed. "Run along. You've been dreadfully lazy." She touched him lightly on the shoulder with her finger tips. "Run along and write some lovely things about me."

The boy went with reluctance. Tony could see his discomfiture and was sorry for him. He wondered if Marty realized what she was doing. Did she really care for the lad? And if not, what was going to happen to him?

He challenged her as Rickey left them. “What about your tragic young god?”

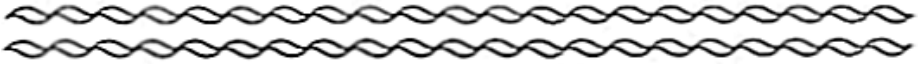
“He’s wonderful. But I must have moments when I can climb down from my pedestal.” Although she said it lightly, he perceived an undercurrent of seriousness.

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Heaven knows. He’s mad about me, Tony. He wants me to run away with him and marry him. Of course I can’t do it, yet the queer thing is that I want to. That’s why I got you down here, as a sort of anchor to windward.”

“It’s a bit hard on the boy, isn’t it?” Out of his own heartache Tony could appreciate the heartaches of others. “You’d better watch your step, Marty. He’s a temperamental lad and high-strung as the dickens.”

How hard it was on the boy neither of them knew. Rickey was at that moment in his stateroom. He was standing by the porthole, looking out over the purple waters, but his eyes saw nothing but Marty and Tony on the sun-lighted deck. His face was white. She had sent him away because of Bleecker. She had treated him like a child. He had an almost hysterical desire to weep. He flung himself down at his desk and began to write. The words ran hot from his pen, yet when he had read over what he had written he tore it up. Then with a sob he dropped his head on his hands. He had torn up hundreds of such pages since he had come south with Marty Van Duyne. His muse had left him. He was swept this way and that by tempestuous emotions, consumed by adoration of this silver witch. He wanted to lay on her altar the great gift of his genius. Yet he could produce nothing. He was burnt out, the flame of inspiration quenched. Would it ever again burn pure and bright? And if it did not, what had he to offer Marty?



CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Heart of Things

It seemed to Michael McMillan in the two months following Virginia's flight as if all the restlessness of his restless years had crystallized into a dynamic energy which drove him through the days like a high-powered engine. He worked as he had never worked before. After hours of almost superhuman effort in his office he would go home and read manuscripts until the early hours of the morning.

Day and night . . . day and night . . . a treadmill of existence. Michael scarcely felt himself alive. He had no heart, no mind, no spirit, only this driving sense of speeding ahead so that he might leave behind his burden of heavy-heartedness.

He had not tried to get in touch with Virginia. He had felt the thing was ended. She would marry Bleecker, and forget that there had been in her life such a man as Michael McMillan. And he would never forget.

The room in which he sat at night was the library of his apartment. In it were reminders of Virginia—the ladder-back chair was opposite his own on the hearth, the needle-point stool was set foursquare on the rug, the silver candlesticks shone on the mantel above the fireplace. He wished that he had the strength to put them out of his sight. He did not want reminders, yet something held him from breaking definitely from the few tangible things which bound him to her. He would have then, only memories.

It was on a windy night in March that there came to him poignantly that memory of memories, of the old house in Annapolis, and Virginia going up the stairs, the candlesticks held like a crucifix against her breast. He sometimes felt that it was that vision of Virginia which saved him from chaos. It was as if he saw beyond material things to some need for sacrifice from which she suffered. He told himself that he was a fool to believe it. She was superficial like the rest of them. She would marry Tony—and accept the little things of life. Each morning he dared not look in the papers lest he see the announcement.

It was after midnight when Nogi, who acted as butler and valet, came in to ask if there were any further orders.

"None, Nogi, and you'd better go to bed."

Michael knew that he, too, ought to go to bed. He was burning the candle at both ends, and was feeling the effect both physically and mentally. He would have to lay off for awhile—spend a few weeks on the Riviera, in Constantinople, Madrid, London, there were authors over there who would serve as an excuse if he needed one.

The room was very still. The fire had died down so that there was only a glowing bed of coals. On the table beyond the fireplace a lamp of Chinese porcelain shed a pale gleam like moonlight on the dark wood, and bathed in this light was a tiny silver figure perched on the edge of a shallow basin of malachite. It was a thing Michael had picked up in Florence to hold flowers, and the silver figure was that of Pan piping among the reed-like plants with which Nogi kept the malachite basin filled.

There was something so gay and sportive about the little figure that it had seemed to Michael to typify all that he longed for of youth and vivid experiences. Yet tonight he felt poignantly the contrast between that debonair image and his own dry-as-dust routine. Was life never to give him what he wanted? Hours filled to the brim with expectancy, excitement, fulfilment, laughter?

Then, breaking upon a startled silence, the telephone rang.

Long distance and a strange voice! His Aunt Molly was not well. Could he come to her at once? Was it as serious as that? Yes, there was hope, of course. But she was asking for Michael. There was an early morning train and they would be there to meet him.

He said he would drive up in time for breakfast. And they were to tell Aunt Molly he sent her his best love.

He went to bed and, unexpectedly, to sleep. He called Nogi long before dawn, had his bag packed and coffee made, and was off before the rest of the city was awake.

It was wonderful driving up the river with the rising sun spreading a soft pink sheen across it. There was a strong wind blowing and it had swept the sky clear. The countryside looked clean and bare as if nature were getting things ready for the gorgeous advent of spring.

Aunt Molly was in her room on the first floor, propped high among her pillows. Her breathing was difficult.

“Dear boy,” she said, and clung to his hand.

She seemed to sleep a little after that. Michael sat beside her and when she opened her eyes, she said, “I want you to be happy.”

She drifted away and came back. “Michael, I have left this place to you. You must bring Virginia here in summer. She can look after my little ducks. Your children—will love—my little ducks, Michael.”

She was smiling. He was glad he had not told her that Virginia was lost to him, that she was going to marry Tony Bleecker.

“Michael, will you bring her here?”

He lied gallantly, “Yes.”

She seemed to sleep again. The nurse came and whispered, “It is sleep she needs. Perhaps if she can get it—”

There seemed a bit of hope in that. Michael asked the doctor if the hope was justified.

“She may pull through. She has a strong constitution, but she never saves herself.”

Michael understanding her, said, “I think she’d rather die saving others than save herself.”

The doctor nodded. “She was out looking after the lambs. It was a dreadful night and she was chilled to the bone.”

Michael, walking later about the place, came upon the ducks swimming composedly in a frigid pool. What was it Aunt Molly had said? “Bring Virginia here—she can look

after my little ducks—your children—will love my little ducks, Michael."

One of the farm men coming up said, "She sent out to know if the ducks had been fed. She always does it herself. She loves every living thing on the place and they love her. She took cold looking after the lambs."

"The doctor told me."

That night a turn of the tide swept Aunt Molly away from the shores of death. Her convalescence was slow and she wanted Michael near her. So he went back and forth to the city, spending as much time as he could on the farm. It was thus that he saw all of Aunt Molly's friends and neighbors, and learned the place she had made for herself in the hearts of the people of the countryside. She had lived for others, not in any narrow sense, but wholesomely and heartily, with joy in their joy, sympathy in their sorrow. It seemed to Michael as he went among them, that this, after all, was the secret of real happiness, not to shut oneself away from the world, but to become a part of it, sharing the hazards of the road with rich and poor, simple and proud, as fellow travelers journeying toward a common goal.

A season of spring-like weather set in, and as he walked and rode about the farm, Michael began to sense the excitement of the approaching season. Everywhere one felt it; the little frozen streams thawed and rippled, there was a sprouting of clear green against the black earth in sheltered corners, birds flew up from the south, the barn doors were open, there were calves and lambs, piglets and goslings, tiny chicks and little ducks, making their first fascinating excursions into the outer world.

How Virginia would love it!

It was when Aunt Molly was sitting up that she spoke to him of Virginia. "When is she coming?"

Aunt Molly was in a great winged chair by the window of her bedroom. The view showed the round of the hill which led down from the house and a vast stretch of sky above it, pale azure with white clouds scudding across it like celestial ships.

And Michael, looking out of the window, said in a low voice, "She is not coming."

"Why not?"

He told her. Of the night at Derekdale; of her note; and of what Rickey had said of her marriage to Tony Bleecker.

Aunt Molly sat very still, her serene eyes on the scudding clouds. "And you let her go like that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because," he told her, "I felt she was like all the rest, and why should I have faith in any woman?"

"Don't be so shallow, Michael."

Her scorn stung him. "I'm not shallow."

"You are, you are!" Her eyes were no longer serene. They were keen, accusing. "To judge a woman like Virginia by a woman like—Helen."

He sat staring at her, but he did not see her. What he saw was his wife, Helen, her cold loveliness, her indifference, and beside that Virginia's radiance, the clear glance like a child's.

And suddenly he found himself saying, "I've been a fool, Aunt Molly."

"Such a dear fool," she said, and held out her hand smiling, "but none the less a—fool."

When he left his aunt, Michael walked under the wide azure sky. His heart was light. He would go to Virginia and beg her to forgive him. He would say, "Let me show you what you and I may share together."

He would bring her then to Aunt Molly's and she would know what he meant. That he was not offering her worldly possessions, but rather some treasure of heart and soul, a thing shared spiritually as it were by one who understood. Derekdale had its barns and stables, its livestock. It had its streams, its fields and pastures, but here on Aunt Molly's farm was an intimacy with nature which the great estate lacked. At Derekdale men were hired to keep perfect the machinery of dairy and poultry yard, but here one seemed to get at the heart of things—the doves and the ducks, the lambs, and the fat horses knew their mistress and loved her. "You and I," he would say to Virginia, "will meet life as Aunt Molly has met it. If not on the farm, then in some other place where we shall have the realities of love and friendliness, and where we shall grow roots that will strike into the soil and bloom to the end of our days."

A week later he came to Washington Square. He went into the hall and saw the Bronze Knight with his torch, and the dreary people going up and down the stairs. His heart was beating fast as he knocked at the door of Virginia's apartment.

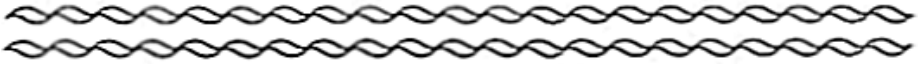
The door was opened by a strange woman.

"Miss Oliphant asked me not to give her address to anyone," he was told.

Why had Virginia disappeared like this? And had she gone alone? He was tortured for a moment by the thought that she might have gone with Tony. He had the grace to be ashamed of that. He knew her for what she was, a woman with ideals as high as her high-held head.

At the end of the week he went to Annapolis. The Oliphant house was closed. There was a sign up—For Sale. The March wind swept over the dead garden and rustled the brittle leaves. He asked the woman next door if any of the Oliphants were in town. She said they were not, and that the house was heavily mortgaged and must be sold.

Michael asked if she had the key. She gave it to him and he went back to the house and entered it. In the dark drawing-room his footsteps echoed as he crossed the floor. He flung the blinds open. The light streamed in and illumined the big room and the stairway beyond. Michael stood very still. He seemed to see Virginia going up the stairs, the candlesticks like a crucifix upon her breast.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucifer

It had been one of those cold days in Florida which dampen the ardor even of the wildest enthusiast. The spirits of the party on the Van Duyne yacht were at low ebb. Rain was falling in a chilly drizzle, there was no prospect of out-of-door activities, and card-playing seemed a dreary process when attempted within the bleak confines of the ship's cabin.

Marty having stayed in bed until luncheon was over, came out fur-coated on deck to find Jane also fur-coated and bored to death.

"I'll go mad if this keeps up," Jane said, restlessly. "My bridge luck is against me, and the men are all in terrible tempers. Even Tony snapped me up as if I were a bone and he wanted to bite me."

Marty had no nerves and said so. "If the men don't like it, they can go on shore."

"And leave us here? No thank you."

"We can go with them."

"Where? The whole world is drowned."

"There are tea dances at the hotels."

"That might be better than nothing. But we'd have to come back, and the storm may be worse . . . the wind's rising."

"Suppose we get up something on board, and invite people over. Then they'll have to be the ones to brave the elements."

Jane surveyed her with admiration. "You're a wonder, Marty. Always knowing how to pass the hard things on to other people."

"Why not?" lazily, "I like to skim the cream for myself."

Marty wore no hat, but she had tied about her hair a crimson handkerchief. It gave a bizarre effect to her beauty, in strange contrast to her usual silver whiteness, and as she stood leaning against the ship's rail, the wind fluttered the ends of the handkerchief like little flags of warning.

Rickey coming out, said, "What made you wear a thing like that?"

"Don't you like it?"

"No. It makes me think of blood, guillotines, men sharpening knives—" he shivered, his face pallid.

Marty laid her hand on his arm. "You're like Jane, Rickey. Feeling your nerves."

"Well, why shouldn't I? This rain's enough, and you shutting yourself up all the morning."

Jane's back was towards them. She had seen Rickey arriving, and had put the width of the deck between them. She wished Marty would get rid of the boy. She wished . . . !

Marty was saying, “Why shouldn’t I shut myself up? It was a gorgeous morning to sleep.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I was in purgatory.”

“There isn’t such a place.”

“Much you know about it,” hotly.

“We make our own purgatories. You worry too much, Rickey. Take what you can get out of life and let the rest go.”

“Easy enough to say,” moodily. “Since you have—everything.”

“Not everything. This morning I might have been restless—like Jane. But I opened my eyes and saw that it was raining—and went to sleep again!”

Her words expressed so absolutely her philosophy that Rickey found himself smiling. “Oh, Marty, Marty, make me happy.”

“Today? Well, then . . . ? We are all bored to death. Why can’t you write a play—to put on tonight? A thing with a lot of scenes, pantomime, dancing—dialogue?”

He caught at the idea, “I’ll do it.”

“We’ll be inviting a lot of people over. There won’t be much time to plan costumes or for rehearsals, but we can make it farcical, fantastic, funny.”

He leaned on the rail, looking out, mulling it over.—“I’ll put you in as leading lady, and myself opposite. Tony shall be the villain.” He turned and gave her a flashing smile.

“Poor Tony! Why should you be jealous? He doesn’t want to marry me.”

“No. But he’ll end by doing it. And you’ll—let him. . . .”

“Well, of course, it’s the logical thing, isn’t it?”

“Is there any logic in love?” hotly. “Oh, I ought to put you in a play as a woman with a glass heart, so brittle that when it broke there was no blood in it, and the woman went on without a heart, perfectly happy.”

“Nobody is perfectly happy,” calmly, “and we are not talking about my heart, but the play. . . .”

He came back to it. “We’ll make it with a touch of symbolism—sardonic—a bit of a burlesque like some of the modern things. And you’re to be some creature of an unreal world caught by a mortal and chained to domesticity. I’d like to see you chained to domesticity, Marty.”

“No, you wouldn’t. And please talk about the play—”

He was eager—“You catch my idea? The name could be something like—*An Afternoon of a Faun with a Frigidaire*, or *A Dryad Washes Dishes*, or *An Oread Buys a New Bonnet* . . . !”

“Rickey—you’re a wonder-child!” She spoke to Mrs. Bleecker, “Jane, come back here. We’re going to get up a play.”

Jane's gloom vanished somewhat when she heard what was in prospect. "You make out a list of the people," Marty instructed her a little later, "and we'll send one of the men over to telephone. Tell everybody they're to stay late, and we'll have a midnight supper."

The cabin was small, but there was room for a small stage and a curtain, and the chairs were set in rows. Marty went about directing the men, while Rickey in his room wrote madly. When at last he emerged, he demanded properties. He had called his skit, *The Peri and the Permanent*, and Marty must have wings. They could be made out of fringed white paper.

He demanded, too, that the electrician rig up an infernal machine like those used in beauty shops, "It is when you are faced by it, that you fly back to the regions whence you came."

"What are the regions whence I came?" Marty demanded.

"A half-world between hell and heaven."

The rain was forgotten in the bustle of preparation. Tony was sent ashore to bring back a gingham work-gown for Marty to wear as a mortal, and an all-enveloping apron. He was also to buy gilt paper, and yards and yards of red and blue and yellow cheese-cloth. Pots and pans were borrowed from the cook, all the women were madly sewing.

The wind was blowing a gale, but nothing mattered. Some timid people sent word that they would rather stay on shore, but other braver ones came through the darkness of the storm, daring and delighted.

Then quite suddenly the moon shone out, and a warm breeze illumined a tropic night. It was decided to have the play on deck, and there were a few wild moments while the change was made. It was nine-thirty before the curtain went up.

The first scene showed that region between heaven and hell of which Rickey had spoken. A black background and red lights gave a lurid suggestion, and in the center of the stage, on a throne of gold paper, sat Lucifer.

Rickey was Lucifer—a Lucifer of such youthful and compelling beauty, that people asked each other, eagerly, "Who is he?"

He had thrown about him, toga-like, a length of red cloth, and his shoes were gilded. On his head was a close helmet of gold paper. To him, to be judged, is brought the Peri. The charge against her is that she has lost her heart to a mortal. She has, indeed, gone to a gate and looked through.

"I thought it was the gate of Paradise," she falters, "but it was the world."

"What saw you there?" demands Lucifer.

"The most beautiful man in the universe."

Lucifer is black with anger, "More beautiful than I?"

"Alas, that I must say it."

Lucifer dismisses the attendant spirits with a wave of his hand, and in pantomime woos the Peri. Their dance is symbolic, and in the classic style, and at last repulsed by the Peri, Lucifer falls prone at her feet.

A clap of thunder rouses him, and he again ascends the throne and assembles his people. The penance of the Peri is pronounced. “She shall go to her mortal.” The doors of a gate are opened, showing a yellow light beyond. Stripped of her wings, the Peri is thrust out, while Chopin’s dirge sounds drearily.

Follows the scene on the other side of the gate. Anthony, as the mortal, is posed against a yellow curtain. With a spot-light full upon him, he seems to bask in sunshine. To him comes the Peri, in her flowing white, and he does not know her for a spirit. But, struck by her loveliness, he woos her confidently, offers her a ring, and summons finally a friar in brown to marry them.

In the third scene the Peri is chained to her pots and pans. In the gingham gown and the serviceable apron she is washing dishes. She is doing it competently, with her hair slicked back, but the audience wishes she wouldn’t. They want her again a Peri. They know now what clothes do to a person. And they hate to look at her. Her figure in the gingham gown seems fat. And there’s something the matter with her complexion. She needs dressing up, and the audience is relieved when her husband tells her so.

The music now is “Darby and Joan,” and the Peri performs her domestic duties in rhythmic fashion, cutting bread and buttering it like Werther’s Charlotte, filling a bowl with soup, heaping a plate with salad. As for herself, she eats nothing, which is a sign that she is still a Peri. Her husband, critical, as she stands before him, calls attention to her hair. He wants her different. She slips away and puts on her Peri’s dress, and the audience is glad she had done it, for she is beginning to be beautiful. But her husband shakes his head. He wants her to look like other women. When he says that, she cannot understand. She wonders if she had her wings . . . “If I had wings, would you love me?”

He shakes his head. “No man,” he says, “wants a woman with wings.”

He continues his argument. If she had a permanent wave! And a bob, and a dress that showed her knees—“like the Colonel’s lady.” This nightgown thing she is wearing is awful. He’d like to see her in something brighter, something figured, green with black spots. The General’s wife had worn one—and she put out your eye!

So in the next scene, the Peri wears green with black spots. She also wears a small felt hat. She is awful and the audience knows it. But her husband doesn’t. He gives her the money for her permanent, and the music plays, “A life on an ocean wave—” and they go out together. In a second we see them in the hairdresser’s parlor. The infernal machine occupies the center of the stage. The Peri, beholding it, wrings her hands. She is overcome by awful fear. But her husband laughs at her. At last she seats herself beneath the dread machine, the attendants begin to wrap her hair in preparation for the final ordeal. Then, suddenly, comes darkness, and the audience hears a piercing shriek, “Lucifer, Lucifer . . . !”

The scene which follows shows Paradise. The background is dull blue, and there are stars and a moon. The Peri is again all silvery whiteness, and it is wonderful! A gate opened shows a red light behind it, and in the gate stands Lucifer. He cannot come a step farther. The Peri tells him that through penance she has won Paradise. “In my extremity I called you, Lucifer, but I found myself here.”

“I can give you more than Paradise,” Lucifer tells her.

"What can you give?"

"Love," he stretches out his arms towards her, but dares not cross the threshold.

"If I come?" she asks, doubtfully, "may I keep my wings?"

"I am no devil," he tells her, "my only sin was pride. Yet I bow my head in the dust before you. In all humility, I will walk by your side, worshipping."

She goes near the gate and peeps through, then speaks with spent breath, "Perhaps, together, we might—attain Paradise. . . ."

"Where you are will be my—Heaven."

She still hesitates, but he beckons, and at last she reaches out her hand to him. He takes it, and she puts a foot across the threshold. She looks back as he draws her to him, and then suddenly the light fades behind her, but there is a greater light ahead. And the gate closes.

The people in the audience said, as they came out of the silence that gripped them, that there had never been anything more beautiful than Rickey and Marty as they stood together.

And Rickey behind the gate was saying, hoarsely, "I mean it, Marty. You are my—Heaven. . . ."

And she, shaken by his emotion and seeing all the glory of youth in his face as he bent above her, lay for a moment in his arms until the applause brought them before the curtain.

In his hastily-written play Rickey had done a subtle thing. He had made Marty know the quality of his adoration. He had made her feel that within herself was that which she had not known she possessed—a reaching out for something beyond the mundane and material. The scenes of which she had been a part were farcical, but Lucifer had not been farcical—Rickey had seen to that. And he knew now that he had triumphed.

After the play he did not join the others. While they were at supper he stood alone in the moonlight. Let them eat and drink if they wished, as for him he had different food. Like the Peri, he drew upon an inexhaustible source for sustenance.

And as he stood by the rail, Tony joined him. "Congratulations, Oliphant," he said, genially, "everybody is talking about your play."

"Why shouldn't they?" said Rickey with a touch of insolence, "the thing has genius."

Anthony looked at him in surprise. Was the boy drunk to speak like that? Had success gone to his head? He had had no other stimulant.

One must bear with him, however. Anthony said, quietly, "Your sister will be proud of you."

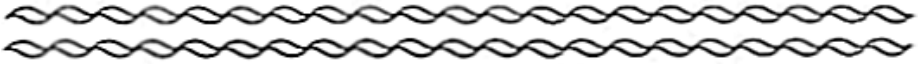
"Jinny."

"Yes. She's a rather wonderful person herself."

Rickey's tone was careless. "Oh, Jinny's all right. But she'll never set the world on fire."

Anthony wanted to knock him down, but there were limits to what one could do under the circumstances. So he leaned on the rail and said, “There’s a storm coming. The people who are going on shore would better get there.”

He went to warn them, but the wind came and held them all prisoners. It was a dreadful storm, and nobody went to bed. Rickey was, however, unaware of danger. He had Marty to himself while the frightened passengers huddled together, and he was saying, “Nobody will ever understand you as I do. No one will ever love you as I do, no one can show you Paradise, as I can show you, Marty.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jane Shoots an Arrow

A FEW days later Tony, all in white and very good-looking, lay in a long deck chair beside Marty and said with some heat: "He's an insufferable young brute. Why don't you send him home?"

"I'd rather send you home," Marty's little smile held a hint of Mona Lisa. "Rickey's always thinking of me. You are always thinking of another woman."

He did not deny it. He simply warned her, "You'll have trouble with that young poet. If you try to drop him some day, he'll explode."

"Perhaps I shan't try to drop him," Marty told him.

"You will when the next one comes along."

"The next?"

"There's always another for you, Marty. And there always will be."

"How mournful. It sounds like a funeral procession." She laughed and sat up. "There he is now."

Rickey came toward them. He, too, was in white and good-looking. Tony knew that the thing which attracted Marty was not Rickey's likeness, but his difference from all the other men she knew. There was the glamour of boyish beauty, of temperament which swung him swiftly from one mood to another, the charm and wit of his lighter moments, the reminder when he was serious of the young romantics of other days.

When he reached them, the boy gave Tony a curt greeting. "I've something to read to you, Marty," he said.

"If it's poetry," she told him, "it's too early in the morning."

He flushed. "It's almost noon."

"I haven't eaten anything. I must eat luncheon before I let my brain work."

Rickey stood looking down at her. "What makes you say things like that? You don't mean them. You want to hear what I have to read. You know you want it, but you never shall—" He tore the sheet in two and tossed it over the rail, then strode away.

Marty's eyes were clouded. "I've hurt his feelings," she said.

"What if you have?"

"It's like hurting a child."

"You are not usually so tender of the men who love you."

"I know. But in this case it isn't a question of the man who loves me, but of the man I love."

His quick exclamation showed his astonishment. "You don't mean you are going to marry him?"

She shook her head. “I don’t know what I mean.” Then after a pause, “Run along, Tony *mio*, and I’ll send for him and soothe his ruffled feelings.”

“You really want me to go?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I know it is hard on your vanity.”

“I haven’t any vanity. Nobody loves me.”

“Not even Virginia?”

“I wish she did.” He rose and looked down at her. “I’ll leave you now to your young poet. Remember if any thing happens, I warned you.”

But Marty would not be warned. Tony saw the pair of them that night under the moon—Marty wrapped in silver, Rickey at her feet, adoring.

Jane Bleecker saw them, too, and said to her son, sharply: “Marty ought to be ashamed of herself, leading Rickey Oliphant on.”

“Perhaps he’s leading her on.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s in love with him.”

“Marty—in love?”

“Yes.”

“Nonsense.”

“You may call it that, Midget, but she told me so herself.”

“She’ll never marry him.”

“You can’t be too sure what Marty may do. She’s her own mistress.”

Jane digested that in silence. All her life she had meant that Tony should marry Marty. She did not mean at this late day to have her plans frustrated.

So after her son had gone in, and Marty, and everybody except Rickey, who leaned on the rail and looked at the hot moon hanging low in the sky like a lantern, Jane still remained.

As far as Rickey was concerned, she might not have been there. Only a few minutes ago Marty had left him and he was in a heaven of his own. She loved him—!

Then, suddenly, Jane Bleecker said, “For Heaven’s sake, Rickey, stop looking at the moon.”

He turned to her. “I thought everybody had gone to bed.”

“Everybody has except the two of us. But why sleep on a night like this?”

Rickey came toward her. “You feel it, too? The enchantment?”

“Yes. We’ll all be going north soon and you will be cool and calm and sensible.”

“I shall never be sensible.”

“Sit down,” Jane ordered, with a little gesture toward the seat beside her. “Every year,” she began in a musing voice, “we come down here in Marty’s yacht and have a few weeks of hallucinations, and when we go back we wonder how it happened.”

Rickey asked idly, “What do you mean by hallucinations?”

“Oh, I flirt and Marty flirts, and we fall in love and fall out again.”

She had his attention now. “Marty has never been in love,” he said with a sort of tense eagerness, “until now. All the rest—were—what did you call them—hallucinations.”

Jane’s cool laugh matched her crystal beads. “She tells all of them that. It’s a part of the game—to tell the last man there has never been another.”

Rickey’s face was turned toward her. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that of Marty.”

“Oh, if you want evidence, there’s enough of it. Ask the man at the wheel how many nights she has sat late under the moon.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t want you to be hurt.”

He laughed, such a joyous laugh that Jane was startled. “How can I be hurt when I have her promise?”

“Her promise?”

“Yes, to marry me.”

Jane stared at him incredulously. “Of all the mad things,” she said.

“We are both mad, I think. But it’s a beautiful madness.”

Jane stood up. “You are two beautiful fools, if you want my opinion.”

“I’m not sure that we want it,” was Rickey’s assured response, “if it’s cynical and all that. Marty says she’s tired of her world. She wants to live in the world I create for her.”

“After you’re married,” said the practical Jane, “she’ll live in your world for about five minutes.”

“She’ll live in it forever.” Rickey’s tone was rapturous.

Jane went to bed after that. She had not shot all the arrows from her bow. She had always meant that Marty should marry Tony.

And she still meant it.

The next morning as she sat in her cabin writing letters, Tony came to her. “I’m leaving this afternoon, Midget.”

“My dear boy, why?”

“I’ve got to get back. Come with me.”

“Go with you—?”

“Yes. Dad’s a bit lonely. I wish you and he might—”

“Might what?” as he hesitated.

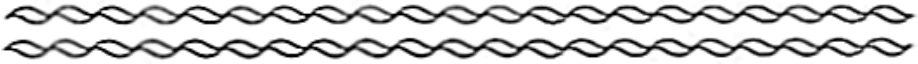
“Might see more of each other.”

“Tony, we’d be bored to extinction.”

“You shouldn’t be. Dad’s splendid.”

“He’s too much of a superman. He towers too high above me.”

So that was it? Jane’s smallness resented the bigness of old Anthony. Her cramped soul set side by side with his free mind and spirit—! Tony sighed as he left her. Hearthstones! Poor Dad!



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tony Makes a Gesture

When Tony came at last to Annapolis, he was aware for the first time in his life of a feeling of great loneliness. It was a new experience to be denied what he wanted. And now he was crying for the moon.

As he walked through the streets of the old town that night, he thought of Marty's cool glitter, of his mother's insincerities, and of Virginia's simplicity and straightforwardness. What a difference it would make in his future if he could marry her. How hard he would try to reach up, to find at his own fireside what old Anthony had missed.

He stopped in front of the Oliphant house, and as he leaned on the gate looking up at it, he saw a light coming down the stairs. There were windows on the stairway and the illumination made golden rectangles of the closely drawn shades. The light traveled to the drawing-room and stopped. Tony watched it for a long time, wondering if he should ring the bell and ask who was there in the empty house. His heart almost missed a beat as he thought that Virginia might have come back. The light went out at last. The front door opened and a man emerged. The glow from the street lamp fell full upon him. There was no mistaking the grace of the slender figure, the alert lift of the head. It was Michael McMillan!

What was he doing in that house? Some instinct held Tony silent. Michael walked up the street, unchallenged, his quick footsteps making a sharp sound on the rough-laid bricks.

Tony went home to toss and tumble. In his dreams he saw Michael going up and down the stairs. Virginia's house! What did it mean? What did it mean? It was dawn before he slept.

The next day in the late afternoon, he went out on the river. April was burgeoning in pale beauty. There was an amethystine haze over the woods as the buds grew big on the branches. There were other buds crimson as drops of blood. In the marshes among the dried reeds and rushes, bits of emerald flashed as the water plants shed their sheaths of brown. Tony's boat, cutting into the serene surface of the Severn made little sound as he left it to drift with the current.

He came at last to the strip of beach, where, the preceding October, Michael McMillan had seen Virginia Oliphant lift her arms to the sunset. On the strip of beach a man was standing. His hat was off and the wind ruffled his hair. Michael!

Tony started his engine and steered his boat toward the low pier. At the noise of the quick explosions, Michael turned, and Tony called to him, "Come on out, the river's wonderful."

Michael ran down to the landing place. "What luck! I'd like nothing better."

As they pushed off Tony asked, "What on earth are you doing in Annapolis? Hunting authors? Or getting a rest from them?"

“I wish I might find one.” Michael leaned back lazily and took off his hat. “Do you see those sandpipers, Tony, on that little beach? Not many of them left in these degenerate days.”

Tony was not interested in sandpipers. “Rickey Oliphant is doing a book,” he vouchsafed, “with Marty Van Duyne in it. Rickey goes mooning about the yacht like a young calf. But Marty calls him a tragic young god.”

“He is tragic—a boy like that. With great talents, but without the balance to use them properly.”

“He is not like his sister. Virginia has a level head.”

Tony tried to say it casually. But both men were aware when Virginia’s name was introduced of a quickening of their pulses. It was a significant moment and they knew it.

Shadows were falling across the water, dyeing it deep purple. To Michael, trailing his hand in it, it seemed like wine of some heavy vintage. “The boy’s a selfish little beast,” he said, “and Virginia makes him so by her unselfishness.”

“There was a lot of talk about him in the town when he lived here. But everybody blamed the father, an eccentric old aristocratic if there ever was one.”

Michael brought his hand up out of the water. It seemed strange that it was white. It should, he felt, have been stained with the purple wine. “Old families produce eccentrics,” he said. “The boy shows it; the girl escaped.”

They had come to the bay—a wide stretch of pale gold under the rising moon. A boat going down from Baltimore showed a line of twinkling lights. There were lights, too, above shoals and shallows, shining like stars.

Tony, standing up and steering, his hair blown back by the wind, was like some legendary figure—Lohengrin, perhaps, or a fair-haired Viking, strong and splendid.

“I saw you,” he said, suddenly, looking down at Michael, “last night, coming out of the Oliphant house.”

“Did you? I’ve bought it.”

Tony showed his surprise. “Bought it?”

“Yes.”

“Does Virginia know?”

“That it’s mine? I haven’t told her.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Heaven knows,” Michael laughed, and was silent, for how could he tell Tony the whole story? How he had come down seeking Virginia—how he had not dared ask questions openly, but had found that the general impression was that she had joined her brother on the Van Duyne yacht. Grogan had given him the Van Duyne address. “We’ve been instructed to send everything to the brother,” he said.

It was from Grogan that he had secured the keys of the old house. He had roamed through its rooms, fitting it out with things Virginia would want if she were here. If she

were here? She was, in spirit, going up and down with him, into the old kitchen and climbing to the attic where they looked down together from the dormer window to the garden. She roamed with him through the great rooms on the first floor, and always her hair was a burning halo and her eyes deep wells of blue.

And because she was there, he had bought the house. No one else should have it. No one else should banish that bright spirit from the place where it belonged. Some day he, Michael, would find her and bring her back and tell her he had loved her from the moment he had seen her going up the stairs.

He was startled out of his reverie by Tony's sudden remark, "I saw Virginia before I went to Florida."

"Then she didn't go with Rickey?"

"You thought she did?"

Michael said stiffly, "I haven't her address."

"I came on her by chance. I'd tell you where, but she bound me to secrecy."

"I see—" dryly.

"I am telling you the truth, McMillan. Oh, I want her badly enough. But I'm not so small as to play the game unfairly. You love her and I love her. They say the best man wins. Well—you've won."

Michael spoke sharply, "What do you mean?"

Tony waited for a moment as he turned the boat in a wide semi-circle toward home, then he said, "I asked her to marry me. I took her up to Derekdale and showed her all I had to give her. And she told me she didn't love me, that it was you she loved. She's not the kind that changes."

Michael tried to say something, but found he couldn't. Tony was more than ever like a shining knight. Michael thought of the Bronze Knight on the stairs—*vérité sans peur*—truth without fear. Tony had made a splendid gesture. Not every man could have done it.

At last Michael found words: "I shall never forget this, Bleecker."

"I've done nothing," Tony said, and meant it. His talk with his father had done things to him. He wanted a wife who loved him. Marriage without that would be dust and ashes.

The next day Michael began his quest by going again to Washington Square. But again he was baffled. No one knew anything. Neither the landlady or the new tenants. They had, the tenants said, rented directly through Mrs. Leonardi, they knew nothing of the people who had occupied the rooms. As for Mrs. Leonardi, she presented an uncompromising front.

"The young lady had her good reasons for not leaving her address. I ask no questions."

"But you could tell me if you would?"

"I have nothing to tell."

He knew she was evading the issue, and thought of a bribe. But there was about Mrs. Leonardi an air of sturdy independence, of simple dignity which held him back from an offer of money.

"It means a great deal to me," he said, still lingering.

Mrs. Leonardi was sympathetic. He seemed a nice young man, not in the least the predatory kind which goes forth to devour. And the young lady upstairs was not happy. It was not reasonable that such a beautiful young lady should be alone. And cook with those pretty hands. And write on that noisy machine until her lovely eyes were almost blotted out.

So Mrs. Leonardi, a plump angel against a background of the Monday wash, stood with her hands on her hips and said, "There's a game my children play in the parish school. It is called 'Hot and cold.' "

Michael was eager—"I know it. . . ."

Mrs. Leonardi nodded her head slowly, "It's a good game. I play it this way—with you. I say it is 'warm' when you look for the young lady."

"You mean she is near?"

"I mean nothing—" Mrs. Leonardi gave him a sidelong look from her fine eyes, "I mean nothing. I have told you nothing. I think only of my wash—and my spaghetti."

Michael's laugh was like a boy's. "I'll find her—and you shall dance at our wedding."

"I dance at nothing—"

"But our wedding, Virginia's and mine?"

She spoke in a whisper, "Is it to be that?"

"If I can see her long enough to tell her that someone has made trouble—"

Mrs. Leonardi wrung her hands, "But I have promised—I do not lie."

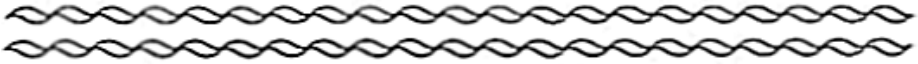
And not another word could he get out of her.

Yet it was something to know that Virginia was not far away;—in the neighborhood, perhaps. He would walk the streets until he met her. Each day he would come and patrol the Square at twilight. That was the hour she usually did her marketing. He remembered she had told him.

Failing that, he would write to Rickey. The boy hated him, but there must be some sort of compromise. Michael felt he could do anything, now that he knew of Virginia's love for him. Yet as he stood alone in the hall and looked about him, he was swept by a sense of desolation. It was raining hard outside. He would have to take a taxi. No chance tonight to continue his search. Virginia would not walk the streets in such a storm.

As he leaned against the newel post, the light from the torch of the Bronze Knight shone down on him. The door opened and dreary figures began going up the stairs, but Michael did not move. At last a boy in a slicker came in with a gust of wind and a sprinkle of rain. He threw a twist of sodden paper on the floor and as he went out, the door banged after him. The sound echoed and re-echoed in the shadowed space. The

empty stairs stretched up and up, three flights to the attic. To Michael standing at the foot of them, they seemed to go on and on, interminably, through the darkness to an unknown goal.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Wanderer Returns

Mary Lee, coming back from Memphis, asked Virginia, "What do you hear from Rickey?"

Virginia did not answer. She stood looking out on the rain which slanted across the roof and washed over the cornices in a streaming flood. The pigeons flew hardily away through the pelting storm and came back wind-blown to the shelter of the chimneys. At last she said, "I had a letter this morning."

"What did he say?"

Virginia turned and faced her friend. "He is going to marry Marty."

Mary Lee was white as a sheet! "When?"

"Very soon—before they come north. Quietly—on the beach by moonlight."

"Oh!" It was just a faint sigh, but Virginia crossed the room and took in her arms the forlorn little figure. "My dear, my dear—"

"I had thought," Mary Lee said in a sobbing whisper, "that he might some day, if we saw enough of each other, come to care for me. And I could help him. I am going to give up trying to have a voice. I have a bit of talent for acting, and if Rickey could write plays—do you see? We might do things together."

The rain splashed again the windows in a mournful obbligato to the troubled confidence.

"I'm being very silly," Mary Lee said at last, "but it will be the end of him—this marriage. I told you she was a silver witch and she's put her spell on him. But some day he'll cast it off and find himself sucked dry, like the fly and the spider. She won't let him write, you'll see. She'll want him to worship her. And when she finds he can't do both, she'll hate him."

"I know," Virginia told her tensely. "Marty has so much money—and I can't see Rickey accepting everything at her hands. He's proud and self-centered."

"And selfish." Mary Lee's cheeks were flaming. "Don't forget that, Jinny. He's selfish. But he wouldn't be if someone showed him the way." She sat silent for a moment, then asked, "May I stay to luncheon, Jinny? It's such a dreary day."

"You can always stay," Virginia told her. "You know that. I need you as much as you need me."

The little room was cozy with its shaded lamp lighted against the gloom. The gold coin of a cat sat in the window and watched the pigeons flying through the rain. But the little Scotch dog followed his mistress as she moved about intent on household tasks. "He's like Mary's lamb," Virginia told Mary Lee. "I don't know what I would do without him."

Weenie wagged his tail and trailed Virginia into the next room. He had a feeling that if he stayed by her he might keep her from harm. He was not very big, but his soul was

valiant.

"It seems strange," Virginia said as she poured the tea, "that even now Rickey may be married.

"I hope it is raining pitchforks in Florida," was Mary Lee's vindictive response, "and that there isn't any moon." Her remark would have been amusing, had she not been so much in earnest. "I am—afraid to be alone," she said, with a touch of breathlessness. "I don't want to think. I've got to go up to town as soon as luncheon is over, but may I come back? We'll dine somewhere together and go to a play."

Virginia agreed and they kissed at parting. Virginia, going back to her desk, was aware of the stillness about her. She went on with her work, writing steadily, hour after hour, while thoughts of Rickey flickered across the pages.

Why should she work while Rickey played? And what would he care about *Burning Beauty* when he would have all of Marty's money with which to pay Michael the debt he owed him?

Michael—Michael, who had forgotten her!

Oh, he would have come if he had cared. Any man who cared would find a way to win the woman he loved. It was a man's place to win even if she had run away from him. Couldn't he have followed? Tony had found her. And if at this moment Tony should come walking up the stairs, bringing all his brightness and charm into the blackness of her desolation, what might she not say to him?

No, *no*! She would never tell Tony that she loved him. It was Michael she loved, Michael.

Early twilight was coming on when Mrs. Barlow and Roger came home. They had been to a moving picture and Roger was ecstatic. He came in to tell Virginia about it and his mother came, too, and the three of them sat about the little round stove. The moving picture had had a swashbuckling hero and Roger showed how it was done. "You see," he explained, "he was in love with the lady and he carried her off and she was glad."

"Of course she was, Roger."

"And he put her on a horse and she pretended she didn't want to go, but she did."

"Most of them do, my dear."

The child went on with his play and Mrs. Barlow, keen-eyed, noted Virginia's depression. She spoke with solicitude. "Has anything happened?"

"My brother is to be married."

"Is it bad news?"

"I think it is. Perhaps I'm selfish. I want him to be happy in my way, not in his."

"You could never be selfish."

"I am not sure. His marriage will separate him from me and I love him."

Her voice broke on that, and Mrs. Barlow laid a quiet hand over Virginia's hand. "You are very brave, my dear. You will meet this as you have met the rest."

After Mrs. Barlow and Roger went away, the phrase lingered in Virginia's mind —"You will meet this as you have met the rest." Oh, it was all very well to be brave, but she wanted to be happy. She dropped down in the chair by her desk and buried her face in her hands.

Again the little dog was anxious. He pushed against her dress and got his head under her hand. He felt the movement of her fingers caressing him and was faintly aware, back in his little dog's mind, that his presence comforted her. He hated to hear her cry, yet she was crying. He whined softly. Then, suddenly, from far down at the foot of the stairs, his quick ear caught the thud which proclaimed the arrival of the afternoon paper. He always went for it, making a ceremony of it when he came back, holding it in his mouth until his mistress took it, expecting to be thanked for it, to have his ears rubbed in appreciation.

There were three long flights for him to travel and his legs were short. His nails clicked on the bare wood as he went down and down and down. The stairs were empty all the way until as he reached the last landing, he looked below and saw a man standing by the newel post.

The man was Michael. He had heard the sound on the stairs of those little paws. He had glanced up idly and his heart had given a great leap, for there, gazing at him with bright eyes, was Virginia's dog.

"Weenie?" he said, uncertainly, and Weenie wagged an inquiring tail. When he reached the lower hall, he took the paper in his mouth, gave Michael a slanting glance, made a slight circuit to avoid the detaining hand and trotted off up the stairs.

Michael followed. The room was dark when he came to it. He stood on the threshold of the open door and called into the shadows, "Virginia."

She answered in a whisper, "Michael!"

She rose and met him in the middle of the shadowed room. His arms went about her. She knew then that he was real and not a specter called up by her need of him. She clung to him, "Michael, Michael!"

For many long minutes the little dog stood unnoticed with the paper in his mouth. Then he dropped it at Virginia's feet and with a sigh of content dropped beside it.

Michael and Virginia sat by the window and talked. It was dark outside and the rain streamed. But Michael was saying, "Didn't you know that nothing Rickey might do mattered? It is you and I who matter. Don't you know that, my dearest?"

Oh, she did know it. She was saying it over and over. She had been so stupid; but she loved him.

Mary Lee, arriving at six, found the lamp lighted and Michael waiting to take them both out to dinner. "We'll make it a feast—I know a place. Mary Lee, I might as well tell you, I am going to marry Virginia."

"Everybody," said Mary Lee, "is getting married. She told you about—Rickey?"

"Yes."

"Has she heard anything more?"

“No.”

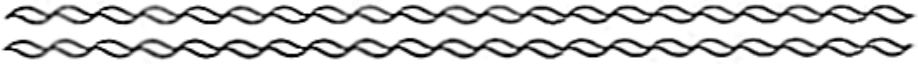
“No.”

“I thought there might be news of the—wedding.”

But there was no news, because there was no wedding—and there would never be, not of Rickey and Marty Van Duyne. And so it happened that while Virginia and Michael and Mary Lee were dining in state and elegance, Rickey Oliphant came up the stairs of the old house in Washington Square. He reached the attic, and found the door open and the little Scotch dog on guard and the primrose cat asleep in front of the round stove.

Rickey was haggard and unkempt. He threw himself on the couch and flung his arm across his eyes. He had not slept for two nights and even now he could not sleep.

Weenie came and sat beside him and licked his hand. Next to his adoration for Virginia, the little dog adored Rickey. At last Rickey drew him up on the couch and they lay there together, dog and man, silent in the dark.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Marty Faces Another Day

It was Jane Bleecker, of course, who had done it. At the eleventh hour, as it were. With almost uncanny instinct she had known the night when Marty came to dinner in a diaphanous gown with a silver wreath on her hair that something important was on hand. Marty had planned a party for her guests on a neighboring yacht. And at the last moment had sent the others on and had stayed at home. And Jane had stayed. "My dear," she had told her young hostess, "I don't think it's proper for you and Rickey to be here alone with nobody but the crew."

Marty shrugged her shoulders. "Do as you like." She was standing by the rail, so absolutely resplendent under the moon that even Jane had been thrilled by the sight of her.

Jane went and stood beside her. "So you're going to be married tonight, Marty?"

Marty's eyes slanted down. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't think it. I know it. Marty, are you mad?"

"Yes, Rickey calls it a beautiful madness."

"Oh, that boy. Do you know what you are going to do to him?"

"I don't care what I do to him—I love him."

"If you love him, you'll let him alone."

"What do you mean?"

"You won't make him happy. He can't make you happy. It will all be a miserable failure. And I can't associate you with failure, Marty."

Marty was listening.

"You've always been so absolutely sane," Jane went on. "You've known how to make the most of your beauty. You've kept away from all entanglements that might lessen your prestige. You've stood for success, for perfect technique, if I may call it that, in managing your life. And now you'll marry this mad young poet—and the world will laugh at you."

"Laugh?" Marty had turned a little, her figure tense.

"Yes, laugh." Jane knew Marty's pride and pressed her advantage. "A boy with nothing. Not even a book to show as an evidence of what he is. He talks a lot, but he gets nowhere. There might be some excuse for you if you could say to the world, 'He has genius. He has proved it.' But he hasn't proved it. He's done nothing since he came down but make love to you and write verses. If you marry him, Marty, the world will laugh."

"But if I give him up? Jane, it will break his heart."

Jane flung out her hand in a little gesture of derision. "Men's hearts! You and I know something of them, Marty. They don't break, and there's always another who will mend them."

"Don't!" Marty turned her head away and looked out over the water. Far away she could see a stretch of silver beach and the palms waving in the slight breeze.

Between the beach and yacht a boat came on swiftly. "Rickey's in that boat," Marty said, "he'll be here in a moment."

"Marty, you mustn't be here to meet him. Oh, I know you think I'm cynical and hard, and perhaps I am. But you're no young and tender child to be caught by romance. My dear, you'll regret it if you let yourself go. You know you'll regret it."

"Well, what if I do—I shall have had my moment." Her voice was sad.

"But who wants a moment—with a lifetime of regret after it? You'll be tied to him to the end of your days, or else divorce him and have the memory of failure. Marty—"

Marty leaned closer to the rail; the boat was coming nearer. "You're right, of course, Jane. But if you think I can give him up like this—!"

"You can give him up, and you mustn't say good-by to him," Jane spoke with earnestness. "Marty, come with me now, before he gets here."

And so it happened that Rickey, reaching the yacht, looked up at the rail and saw no silver figure under the moon. He had thought Marty would be waiting. He had picked out a place on the beach; the clergyman, a young fellow with a bit of romance about him, had promised to be there. The two men who took them over would be witnesses. In the boat Rickey had orange blossoms, a great bouquet tied up with silver ribbons and perfuming the air.

He came on deck and was handed a letter. "Miss Van Duyne left it," the man told him.

"Left it?"

"Yes. She went with Mrs. Bleecker to the 'Wanderer.' You're to follow them, I think, sir."

But Rickey was not to follow them and this was Marty's letter:

> "Rickey, dear, I know I'm being cruel. But I am cruel only to be kind. At the last moment, I can't marry you, my dear. It is too much of a risk for both of us. Beneath the glamour you have woven about me I'm a rather practical person and when the romance wore off, you'd see me as I am, and you'd be disappointed. And when you no longer worshipped at my shrine, I'd hate you. I would, Rickey. I know myself better than you do. So this is best—to remember in each other all that might have been beautiful and not to have it spoiled by the everyday things—the disillusionments. You'll always be my tragic young god and I'll always be your silver witch. Such a disappointing witch, I fear. But let me tell you this—I love you, and I am doing the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.
>
> Your friend forever,
>
> MARTY."

Rickey had torn the letter up like a mad man and had flung the pieces over the rail. Then he had packed his bag and had given orders to the men. He had to catch a train—they could take him over. And would they put the orange blossoms in Miss Van Duyne's room—with this note?

What he had had to say was in three lines:

"Some day you'll be sorry. When the world knows me, you'll be forgotten. Money doesn't count throughout the ages. But a written line may live forever."

He had signed it "Rickey"; had liberally tipped the men who took him to the train and had spent the last of his money on a ticket to New York. All the way home the pain in his heart had been an actual physical fact. He was like a man who suffers amputation, and every nerve cries out.

And so he had come to Virginia's attic, to find her gone and only the little dog to welcome him. With Weenie beside him he fell into an uneasy sleep.

When he waked it was after nine. He had eaten nothing on his journey and was famished. He foraged in the pantry and found milk and meat and bread. He fell upon the food. The cat and the little dog sat sociably beside him and he fed them bits of meat and poured milk into a saucer. He seemed to be doing it all in a dream—a dreadful dream from which he would wake and find that this room with its poor furniture would vanish, and that the reality was Marty in a silver gown, the sea molten under the moon, servants in white slipping silently about, a table set with precious porcelain and crystal frail as a bubble, with fruit and flowers in golden dishes.

Again the pain at his heart stabbed him. He rose restlessly and walked to the window. The lights of the city shone above the roof, the rain slanted across it and washed over the cornices—a dreary prospect after all the enchantment of the tropic nights.

As he turned back into the room, his eye was caught by the neatly typed pile of manuscript which lay on Virginia's desk. He picked it up and began to read.

It was his own story—*Burning Beauty*. But as he read he was aware that it was his story illumined by a talent which transcended his own. He was artist enough to know good work when he saw it and this work was good. Virginia had done it, of course. She had made his book something to be proud of. A book that was bound to be successful . . . a book to flaunt in the face of Marty. For, after all, it was his book—not Virginia's. His plot, his characters. The world would read it and call him great, and Marty's pride would be in the dust. . . .

But he didn't want her pride in the dust. He wanted her as he had last seen her—his beauty—his bride. . . .

He flung the manuscript from him and began to cry, clutching at his throat to still the pain. The worried little dog whined distressfully, then, as he got no response from that despairing figure, went back and forth from the door to the desk. If his mistress would only come things might be better.

It was late when Virginia came. Michael had taken her with Mary Lee to a play, and had returned with her to the old house and had watched her as she ascended the stairs. "It

is as if you were going straight up to Heaven," he had whispered under the Bronze Knight's torch, "beyond the roof, up among the stars."

She turned at the first landing to look down at him and to blow a kiss from the tips of her fingers. What a strange day it had been, but how wonderful. And tomorrow would be wonderful and all tomorrows.

Then she went up and up and opened the door of her shabby rooms, and found the little dog waiting and Rickey lying on the couch asleep. She bent over him, and saw traces of tears on his cheeks. He was unkempt, unshaven. Oh, what had happened that he should be like this? She spoke softly, "Rickey—"

He waked at once and held out his arms to her. She clung to him. "My darling, what is it?"

In stumbling words he told her of the last dreadful days. "Her letter was cruel. It broke my heart, Virginia."

She soothed him as a mother would a child. He was her child—Rickey.

"You shall sleep in my bed," she said, "and I'll take the couch. And you must have a hot bath and a warm drink."

He accepted her ministrations as a matter of course. She moved the little round stove, drawing water in the bath in the hall which she shared with the Barlows.

She had him comfortable at last on the fresh white pillows. She had said nothing of herself. Her thoughts had been only for him. He was so white, so spent—and he must sleep. She turned off the light and sat down by the bed in the dark. "I'll rub your forehead as I did when you were a little boy, Rickey."

He lay very still and after awhile he said: "I read the book."

"*Burning Beauty*—?" her voice showed her apprehension.

"Yes. It's good work, Jinny."

"Do you really think so, Rickey?"

"You know it is," he said with a touch of irritation. "But it's my book, Jinny, just the same—not yours."

She thought of her weeks of hard work, but said calmly, "Of course it's your book. And Michael wants it."

He flung off her hand and sat up. "McMillan?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I'll let him have it? There are other editors in the world, Jinny."

"I know. But this story, Rickey—he paid for it."

"A paltry thousand."

"That was only an advance."

"Then let me pay it back to him when I've sold it to someone else. Oh, it is useless to argue, Jinny. The book is mine. You know that, no matter what you've done to it."

She saw his excitement. “Rickey, dear, lie down. We’ll talk it over in the morning. You need all the rest you can get tonight.”

He was completely worn out, and when at last he slept Virginia went into the other room and faced the situation. Rickey was home again, unhappy, needing her more than ever, and hating Michael. What was she going to do about it? Was she going to let Rickey rule her life as he had always ruled it? She knew the strength she would need to set herself free. Would she use it? Or was she to be caught again in the net of Rickey’s selfishness?

She had not dared tell her brother what Michael had said about the manuscript. He had read a few pages and had said: “It’s really your book, my darling.” He had said, too, “I must have it. . . .” And now Rickey had set himself against it.

But Rickey’s word had been pledged that night in Annapolis, and he must not break it. The Oliphants had been men of honor. She would tell him that. She would make him see. . . . Oh, surely he would see it as she saw it—as a matter of deep obligation.

She would telephone Michael in the morning. She had promised to lunch with him, but she would have to break the engagement. Perhaps later in the day, if she could get Mrs. Barlow or Mary Lee to sit with Rickey, she could have tea with her lover. She felt it would not be wise to leave Rickey alone.

She had made up the couch as a bed and from where she lay she could look out of the window. The rain had stopped and the wind was blowing the sky clear. She could see the clouds flying high—catching the glow from the lights beneath. The big city was still awake, with all the gay people coming and going to parties which would end at dawn. She wondered if everybody was still awake on the Van Duyne yacht. And was Marty missing Rickey? What kind of woman was she, that she could treat a boy like that?

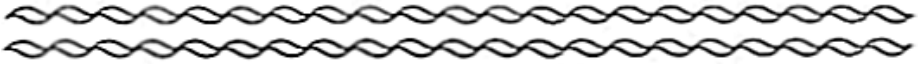
And how could she know that Marty was at that very moment on deck, wrapped in a great gray cloak and watching the sun rise. Jane Bleecker had come out to her in pink negligee, her bare feet stuck into pink slippers. “Marty, if you act like this, you’ll have everybody talking.”

“Let them talk. I want him back, Jane.”

“Call him back then . . . and be laughed at.”

“I shan’t call him back . . . you know that. But I shall love him all my life.”

She had risen then and had gone to the rail, and had stood looking out across the water. The sun came up in rose and gold, and lighted the world. Marty shivered and clenched her hands. “I don’t want to face another day, Jane. I don’t want to face it. . . .”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Leaping Flames

THE next morning Rickey wakened to see through the open door his sister in her green linen frock, cooking his breakfast on the little round stove.

"Eggs and bacon, Rickey," she said as she looked in upon him. "I'm going to bring them to you when you've freshened up a bit."

"I don't want anything to eat," he said as he turned his face to the wall.

She came and stood beside the bed. "Rickey, darling, just a cup of coffee."

"No."

"But, my dear—"

"I'm not going to get up. Why should I get up, ever?" His tone was despairing.

She was patient. "If you'd put on your dressing-gown and come into the other room —the rain has stopped and it's nice and cheerful."

"Nothing is 'nice and cheerful.' Let me alone, Jinny."

She laid her hand on his, but he flung it off. She left him, then, and closed the door, and sat down to her solitary breakfast, pale and heavy-eyed.

Little Roger came in presently with the morning mail. He was very important. "Two for you. May I stay a minute? Mother said I might."

"Yes, but you must be quiet. My brother is here and he wants to sleep."

Roger whispered, "I won't make the very littlest noise," and played with the primrose cat while Virginia read her letters. One was a line from Michael which lighted her eyes. She read it twice, then turned to the long letter from her mother. It was a rather surprising letter. Daddy was better and he wanted to go home.

> "To Annapolis—with you and Rickey with us. Rickey could write and you and I could keep the house together. I know there isn't any furniture, but Daddy says he'd rather camp in the old house than live in luxury anywhere else. Our roots are so deep, dearest, it seems to both of us that we shall kneel and kiss the dear red soil of Anne Arundel county—we love every brick of the rough sidewalks of the old town, every shabby residence and straggling garden.
>
> And so we want to come back. Can't you think it out for us? Jinny, my dear, we all seem to cast our burdens on you, yet your shoulders are slender. Tell me of Rickey. What about his book? And is he still in Florida? Of late we have had no letters from him. And you say nothing of yourself. Your letters are long and like you in your good sense and cheerfulness. But they don't tell me what I want to know. I am uneasy, Jinny. Are you happy? You are so far away, dear child. I want my arms about you."

Little Roger had gone, taking the primrose cat with him, and Virginia was glad there was no one to see her tears as she finished her mother's letter. "You are so far away, dear

child, I want my arms about you." Oh, for the shelter of those arms, the strength of that serene presence.

As she rose after a time to go about her work, the door between the two rooms opened and Rickey came in. Virginia had laid over the foot of the bed the old blanket robe which he had left behind him, but it had pleased him to don a luxurious Japanese affair which he had worn on the yacht, with bright blue butterflies on a black ground. It set off his fairness brilliantly.

He threw himself on the couch and piled the pillows back of him. "You might get me some coffee, Jinny."

She got it for him, setting a careful tray, making toast and boiling an egg.

"I've been thinking," he said, when he had finished, "about *Burning Beauty*. There's no reason on earth why McMillan should have it."

"Except that you're bound by a promise."

"Promises?" Rickey gave a hard little laugh. "Who cares for them? They are easy enough to break. Ask Marty Van Duyne."

"I know, my dear—"

Rickey buried his head in the cushions of the couch. "You don't know!"

Out of a long silence she spoke to him quietly of the future, of fame, success, fortune. "You have it in you to do anything!"

He listened avidly. "Marty didn't believe in me," he said, "but I'll show her. And I'll show McMillan." He came back to his grievance. "You might as well understand, Jinny, that he's not going to have the book. And you needn't throw it up to me that you've worked on it all winter. I didn't ask you to do it."

A sudden sense of justice flared within her.

"The manuscript," she said, "is as much mine as yours. I think if you will face facts, you will admit it."

He began to laugh. "That's rot, Jinny, and you know it."

She was very pale. "Rickey, you are not to speak to me like that."

Her eyes held his and presently he muttered, "I'm sorry."

She dropped on her knees beside the couch and laid her cheek against his. "Oh, Rickey, you know I love you, don't you?"

He did know it and said so. He was not himself he told her. His life was over.

"What have I to live for? Jinny, when I got Marty's letter, I should have flung myself into the sea if I had not been held back by the thought that some day I'd show her. I shall write *The Silver Witch* and she will see herself as I see her. I'll have her grow old and ugly and when she tries to weave her spells, men will laugh at her."

He was talking wildly. Virginia set herself to soothe him and when at last she stole downstairs to telephone to Michael, he seemed to sleep.

But he was not asleep. His disordered mind was going over the things he and his sister had talked about. He had shut his eyes so that he might not see Jinny—Jinny, whose strength was a constant reproach to his weakness; Jinny, who set her will against his own; Jinny, who had made him say, "I'm sorry."

Well, a woman was only a woman—and *Michael should not have the book*. Jinny needed a lesson. She had presumed to set herself above him, to hint that the book was as much her own as his. All of which was nonsense. There was only one genius in the family. Dad might have made a hit if he hadn't been so old-fashioned. The men in the Oliphant family had all had brains. It was enough for the women that they had beauty.

He got up and went to the window. The sun was shining and the pigeons were preening themselves on the roof. He opened the window and scattered crumbs. The soft air came in but it did not seem to bring coolness with it. Rickey's hands were hot, his skin dry.

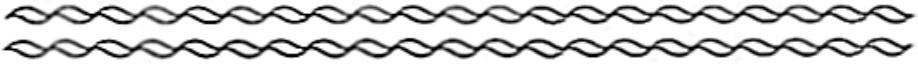
He roamed about the room, restlessly, looking at himself in a mirror as he passed it, seeing the spots of red color in his cheeks, his blue butterflies, his blazing hair. . . .

Heavens, did Jinny think he was going to stay here, between these dingy walls? Not if he knew it. He saw on the table his mother's letter, and read it. He was touched by her tenderness, yet raged at the thought of a return to Annapolis. No. He would break loose from all of them. Live his own desperate life in his own desperate way.

He stood now beside the desk, on which lay the manuscript, neatly typed, evidence of Virginia's hours of labor. The thought of those hours infuriated him. . . .

And Michael should not have the book.

As he snatched up the manuscript he laughed aloud. He knew now what he would do. It remained only to do it. He crossed the room and opened the top of the little round stove. Then as fast as he could stuff it in, he fed the pages to the leaping flames.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Again the Chinese Maiden

Mary Lee Logan had risen early and she had come to the old house in Washington Square before ten in the morning. She wanted to know if Virginia had had news of the wedding. She had slept little the night before. Rickey and Marty. Rickey and Marty. The two names flamed in her mind like fire.

She had bought the morning papers and had searched the society columns. Surely if the thing she dreaded had happened, the headlines would show it; there would be food for eager readers in the details of Marty Van Duyne's marriage to her unknown poet.

But nothing was in the papers, and when Mary Lee ascended the stairway of the old house she was trembling with apprehension. Virginia might already have had a letter or a wire. Mary Lee felt if her fears were confirmed, she would not be able to stand it.

As she opened the door of the attic apartment, she said, "It's Mary Lee, Virginia," then stopped and gasped. For the sight which met her eyes was so astounding that it seemed as if she must have, for the moment, a hallucination. Virginia was not there, but standing in front of the little stove was Rickey, wrapped in a gorgeous gown, his face as pale as death, his eyes blazing.

He turned with a start as Mary Lee said sharply, "What are you doing, Rickey?"

"Burning a book—my book."

She saw at once that something was wrong, that the brightness of his eyes was the brightness of fever. She crossed the room and tucked her arm in his. "I don't care about your old book. Aren't you glad to see me? Really aren't you glad, Rickey?"

He stopped for a moment in his orgy of destruction and looked down at her, "Glad?"

"Yes, glad to see me—little Mary Lee Logan?"

"Why should I be glad? Why should I be glad about anything?" His voice rose hysterically, "there isn't any gladness in the world since Marty wouldn't marry me. Marty—" He swayed a little and the papers in his arms went fluttering to the floor.

When Virginia arrived Mary Lee had helped him to the couch and stood leaning over him. "He fainted, Virginia. But he's better. Mrs. Barlow is telephoning for the doctor."

Jinny on her knees beside the couch cried, "Rickey, Rickey."

He opened eyes which saw nothing and murmured, "I burned the book, Jinny—so Michael—couldn't have it."

But the book was not burned, only a few pages and there were carbons to match them. But Virginia did not care about the book. She had only one thought—Rickey. People came and went in the room—Mrs. Barlow, the landlady, the doctor, a nurse, and at last Michael.

"He is very ill," Virginia whispered to her lover.

"I know. Dearest, let him be moved to my rooms, this is no place for him. And you'd like his being there better than in the hospital."

"Yes, but he'd hate it."

"Why need he know? I'll go to the hotel and give the place up to the two of you and the nurses."

She allowed herself at last to be persuaded, and before night it was all accomplished. Rickey was in Michael's great bed with its crimson canopy, and Virginia sat in her mother's ladder-back chair in front of Michael's fireplace.

Michael from the other side of the fireplace was saying: "And now you have nothing more to think about ever, but getting Rickey well."

"How shall I ever thank you, Michael?"

"By loving me."

She reached out her hand to him and said, "Michael, you've got to be strong for me. The men I've known best have been weak—Daddy and Rickey. I might as well tell the truth about them. They have never faced life. I want to face it with you."

He held her close. "Nothing will be hard if we face it together; all the hardness will seem happiness."

A little later she read to him her mother's letter. "Do you think we could go back? Grogan wrote that the house was sold, but he didn't give the name of the new owner."

"I am sure you can rent it. The new owner is a friend of yours," Michael hinted.

"Of mine?" Virginia cried, her curiosity piqued.

"Yes. Jinny, my dear, I bought the house. I couldn't let anyone else go and live there with your dear ghost going up and down the stairs."

He had his reward in the radiance of her countenance. It was easy enough to plan, he told her. He and she would have a gorgeous time getting the old house ready, "when Rickey is better," as they always said.

When Michael left at ten, Virginia went in and looked at her brother as he lay under the crimson canopy. He was still unconscious, and he might have been dead for all the movement he made. Once he murmured, "Marty," but it was just a breath of a sound and only Virginia's quick ears caught it. The nurse, pouring medicine in a measuring glass said reassuringly, "Things seem better tonight, I am sure they are better."

Virginia slipped to her knees beside the bed and laid her cheek against Rickey's hand.

In spite of all the common sense she brought to bear, she could not rid herself of the feeling that her loyalty to Michael was disloyalty to Rickey. She told herself over and over again that it was stupid to think a thing like that. Yet she couldn't help it.

A week later Rickey opened his eyes and looked up at the crimson canopy. "Where am I?" he asked.

The nurse said gently, "Your sister brought you here. It is much better than the hospital. She thought you would like it."

"I do like it," Rickey said, and went to sleep.

When he wakened he said, “This is a wonderful room.” The lamps were lighted and his eyes roamed about, seeing the dull gold of a screen, the black wood of a Jacobean chest; and when his sister came to sit beside him, he asked, “Whose bed am I in?”

Her heart almost stopped beating, but she smiled at him. “We found—a furnished apartment.”

“But who—who is paying for it?”

She had an answer. “Rickey, we’ve sold the house at Annapolis.”

Mary Lee came now every day to see Rickey. She sat by his bed and talked to him. He seemed glad to have her. She was the only one to whom he spoke of Marty. Mary Lee seemed to understand better than any of the others. “She loved me,” he would say. “I know that. She would have married me if I had had Anthony Bleecker’s money.”

“If I were a man I wouldn’t want a woman who thought about money.”

“All of them think of it.”

“I don’t. If the man I love, loved me, I’d follow him in rags to the end of the earth.”

Rickey turned on his elbow and looked at her. “The man you love? Are you in love, too, Mary Lee?”

“Yes. But he doesn’t care—”

“Why doesn’t he care?”

“Because he’s a fool,” Mary Lee blazed. “Oh, I’m not going to talk about him, Rickey. I can’t. Only you might as well know you’re not the only one who suffers.”

Rickey lay back on his pillows and considered Mary Lee’s charms. “I don’t see why he shouldn’t care. You’re pretty enough when it comes to that.”

“Oh, am I?” cried Mary Lee, her cheeks still flaming. “Did you ever stop to think that I’m something more than pretty, Rickey?”

“You are a lot of things that are attractive,” Rickey smiled at her.

Mary Lee leaned forward a little. “I’m intelligent enough to know what I can do, and that’s what I want to talk about. I want you to write a play for me, Rickey.”

He sat up. “A play?”

“Yes. Rickey, do you remember my little song about the Chinese girl and the temple bells? Well, I’ve been thinking of this—It could be amplified into a queer, exotic thing with a lot of color. You’ll see what I mean in a minute.”

She caught up his dressing-gown which lay at the foot of the bed—the black one with the butterflies, and drew it around her. Then, with his medicine glass and the medicine bottles tinkling an occasional accompaniment, she gave a reading of the poem. But it was more than a reading, it was a reincarnation. She saw she had his attention. Her voice kept to its insistent, tragic note; she used as a background the gold screen, and she had tied up her head in a black silk handkerchief. Her face was powdered to a ghastly paleness. As she took one pose after another, she was no longer Occidental but Oriental.

When at last she finished on a minor note and lay crumpled up on the rug, Rickey cried, “It’s marvelous. Where did you get the idea, Mary Lee?”

“Out of my own head. But you must write it. People want novelty, and you and I must give it to them together. I’ve the money to get it started.”

“Why should I use your money?”

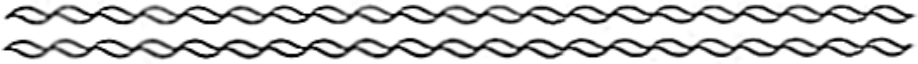
And then Mary Lee said a startling thing. “I want you to use my money so that you can get even with Marty Van Duyne.”

“Get even?”

“Yes; I hate her.”

He stared. “You hate her? Why?”

“Because she hurt you, Rickey.” She was not looking at him now. She stood very still beside the bed. Suddenly Rickey laid his hand over hers. His heart was sore. The adoration in Mary Lee’s eyes soothed and comforted him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Rickey Hears the Truth

RICKEY's convalescence was slow, but his illness had done this for him: it had dulled, as it were, the edge of the agony of his parting from Marty. There were days when he was still swept by the thought of it and lay beaten and bruised in his bed, days when it was difficult to rouse him, days when even the doctor was discouraged.

But gradually things grew better, and at last he sat up in a big chair in his room, and Mary Lee, coming in, found him with a pencil in his hand and a pad of paper on his invalid's table. "I'm writing the play, Mary Lee," he said. "Listen."

He read to her what he had written and made her go over it with him. She learned the lines quickly, and they rehearsed the scene, with Mary Lee again in the butterfly dressing-gown and the black handkerchief.

When at last they had the thing as they wanted it, they called in Virginia. She sat thrilled and breathless with delight. "You two wonderful people," she said, out of the hush which followed the finale. "How did you ever do it?"

Mary Lee laid her hand over Rickey's. "We did it together—" she said softly, and Rickey turned his fingers up to meet hers.

Mary Lee did not always meet such responses. A leopard does not quickly change his spots. Rickey was harsh with her at times, and irritable. Now and then he sent her away in the midst of a scene: "I'm tired," he would tell her, white-faced, and she would know he was thinking of Marty.

He was thinking of Marty one day when he sat in Michael's library. It was the first time he had left his bedroom and he was glad of the change. He was alone for the moment, for Virginia, seeing him safely settled, had gone off on one of the mysterious pilgrimages which had to do with her meetings with Michael, and of which Rickey must know nothing. The nurse was in the kitchen looking after the invalid's tray. Nogi, the Japanese man servant, was in the butler's pantry cleaning the silver. He brought now to the library the malachite bowl with its silver perching Pan, shining with its recent polishing and glinting among the reed-like plants.

Rickey surveyed the piping figure with interest. It was a charming thing . . . everything about this room was charming—its fine old books, its Spanish leather—its cabinet of ivories, the Sorolla painting above the mantel. Whoever had furnished it, had known a thing or two.

This was the kind of room he would have had if he had married Marty. They had often talked of it. "You should live in the midst of beauty," Marty had said, and Rickey had thought of a place like this, rich and glowing. . . .

Nogi brought in now a pair of candlesticks, set them above the fireplace, and went out again. Nogi had had a busy morning. The cook was sick, and Nogi was doing the work of two. Hence his moment of forgetfulness.

Rickey, thinking of Marty, lay back in his big chair, his eyes closed. The soft May breeze came in through the open window and blew cool on his forehead. A sunbeam

came in, too, through the open window, and shone straight on one of the candlesticks which Nogi had brought.

When Rickey opened his eyes, that ray of sunshine was like a guiding finger to his gaze. He looked and looked again. Then leaning forward, uttered a sharp exclamation. Up there by the Sorolla painting were the Lafayette candlesticks which Virginia had wanted to keep, and which Rickey had sold, as it were, over her head!

And suddenly Rickey knew the thing which had happened to him. He was in Michael McMillan's apartment! Those books were Michael's books, the little piping figure, the cabinet of ivories, the golden screen in the other room, the bed with the crimson canopy.

Nogi coming in hurriedly to retrieve his mistake, saw that the harm had been done. In all of his years of conscientious service, this was his first mistake. He had been told that the candlesticks must not be put back until Mr. Oliphant was out of the apartment.

And now the sick gentleman was asking him questions.

An hour later, when Nogi saw Michael, he said, "I forgot. I put the candlesticks back and the sick gentleman knows. He asked me—if they belong to Mr. McMillan. I say—nothing. I'm sorry. His sister come and he tell her."

As Michael went into the dining-room which adjoined the library, he heard Rickey's voice: "You can't keep me here, Jinny. When I'm dressed, I'm going to call a taxi."

"But where will you go?"

"I don't care where I go. To the devil, perhaps."

Michael could see them now; Rickey in his big chair, Virginia on the run in front of the fireplace, the candlesticks above her head. Her face wore the look of one stricken to the heart; her voice was broken. "Rickey, darling, if you go, I'll go with you."

Michael came into the room. His head was up, his eyes bright with something besides laughter. He went at once to Virginia's side, "What's this?" he asked, and put his arm about her.

She welcomed him with a little cry, while Rickey said, "So you thought you could fool me, McMillan?"

Michael looking down at him had still that brightness in his eyes. "We felt this would be better than the hospital. It is, isn't it, Oliphant?"

"If I had known it was yours I'd rather have stayed in the attic!"

"That attic where your sister spent hard days doing the work you should have done! Perhaps we should have left you there, Rickey."

Virginia drew away a little. "No," Michael said, and held her close. "He might as well hear the truth about himself. If he goes, he goes alone. You shall not go with him."

There was a moment's silence, then Virginia turned to him and buried her face in his coat.

"So you are giving her orders," Rickey flung out.

"They are better orders than yours, aren't they?"

It was a quiet question, steadily put, and Rickey did not know how to answer it. At last he blustered, "What do you mean?"

"You've always demanded things of her. You have never thought of her happiness. You aren't thinking of it now. You are thinking of your hurt vanity. You have nothing against me except that I told you the truth about *Burning Beauty*—that it was not worthy of your talents. You knew it was not worthy. You know it now."

The inexorable voice cut through the crust of Rickey's conceit and made him listen. "You do know it, don't you? That it was not worthy of your talent, your genius?"

Rickey caught at the word. "You think I have—genius?"

"Of a kind, yes."

"What do you mean, 'of a kind'?"

"For poetic fantasy. The sort of thing you are doing with Mary Lee."

"Did she show you—our play?"

"Yes."

"She had her nerve." The boy's face was flaming.

"It's great stuff—greater, perhaps, than you know."

"Do you mean it?"—breathlessly.

"Yes."

Rickey leaned back suddenly and shut his eyes. He had a vision of a great space crowded with people, and all of the people were applauding, all of them but one, who sat in her silver gown and looked down at him. And he looked up and laughed in her face. And the crowd cried, "Author, author," and threw flowers at his feet.

A little later he found himself lying under the crimson canopy, and the nurse was there and nobody else.

"What happened?" Rickey asked.

"You fainted," the nurse told him, and he had a keen sense of triumph in the fact that his weakness had saved him from capitulation. He was not anxious to go back to his attic. And what was it Michael had said? "Great stuff." You could expect the truth from McMillan.

And so when Michael came in the morning and smiled at him and said, "Let's be friends," and Virginia leaned down and kissed him, Rickey held out a hand to each of them. After all, McMillan was a big man in the literary world, and, as Jinny's husband, he might be helpful.

And he looked up at Michael and said, "I'm sorry I burned the book."

"You didn't burn it."

"I did. I stuffed it in the stove." Rickey was flaming with the melodrama of the memory.

"Only a few pages. I have the rest."

“Are you going to publish it?”

“Not without your consent.”

Rickey looked up at the crimson canopy and considered the matter. He was very comfortable, and the center of the stage was his. “Publish it under Virginia’s name and mine,” he cried. “She deserves it.”

“I don’t want my name on it, Rickey, dear.”

“You must!”

“She’d rather not, old man,” Michael told him. “It will be enough for her to know that she helped.”

In the days that followed there were plans for the wedding. The sooner the better, everybody said. Virginia was to go down to Annapolis and get the house ready for her mother and father. Then she was to be married and go away with Michael. Rickey was to go to Aunt Molly’s and Mary Lee was to go with him. It would be a wonderful place, Michael told them, to get the effects they wanted. “You can put Mary Lee under a pink dogwood on a gray day, or on the little bridge in a purple twilight. And you’ll have Aunt Molly’s saneness to balance your artistic ecstasies.”

But Aunt Molly’s saneness was to do more than balance Rickey’s ecstasies; it was to co-operate with Mary Lee in bringing the boy up out of his sensitiveness and self-absorption. Aunt Molly made him tramp with her over the farm and talk of crops; she waked him at midnight to help her with a sick lamb; she sent him and Mary Lee far down the river one day to rescue a lot of her little ducks that had been caught by the current and couldn’t get back.

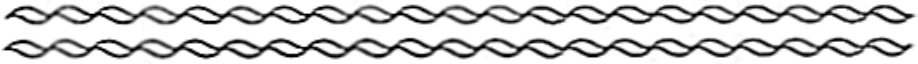
And Rickey, rowing upstream with the small ducks safely in a basket in the bottom of the boat, said to Mary Lee, “After all there is something in this sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?” she queried.

“Domesticity. One could never link that word with Marty.”

“Well, I’m not domestic, if that’s what you mean,” Mary Lee informed him. “That is, I’ve never worked with my hands like Michael’s Aunt Molly. But I like the lambs and the ducks and the pigeons and being here with you, Rickey.”

He smiled at her. “I like the lambs and the ducks and the pigeons—and you,” he said with great content. Then there was silence as they went upstream together.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tony Drifts Downstream

JANE BLEECKER had had her own way for so many years that now when it seemed as if everything was going against her, she found it difficult to meet the situation.

She was back at Derekdale after a short season in New York of buying clothes for the summer; a perfect orgy of buying: everything in pale rose where the occasion was appropriate, and for the rest, white. The thing, Jane knew, was to keep away from the bizarre. In pink and white she got the effect of youth, yet found the colors kind to her fading charms.

She had in mind a summer spent somewhere in France, at one of the exclusive resorts. Tony's cruise would take him near enough so that he could dance attendance on her now and then. And Marty should go; and she and Tony should see a lot of each other.

Yet one couldn't in these days be quite sure of Marty. She had mooned about the yacht after young Oliphant's departure; and now she talked of burying herself for the summer in her camp in the Maine woods. She had refused to shop with Jane in New York. "I shan't need things," she had said.

"Well, you can get what you want in Paris," Jane had ventured.

"I'm not going to Paris."

"Tony will be there."

"What if he is?"

"I thought you'd like it."

"Oh, what do I care about Tony or Tony about me!" Marty had said, fretfully. "You might as well put that out of your head, Jane."

But Jane refused to put it out of her head. She thought about it a lot. She wondered if there were not some way in which she could bring the two of them together.

There was, of course, June week at Annapolis. She might take Marty down to share in the festivities. Besides all the affairs for the midshipmen there would be a lot of entertaining afterwards, before the old Superintendent left and the new Admiral took his place. And Tony would have to see that Marty went everywhere.

But Marty showed no more interest in this plan than in the other. "I've been down so often—and then, there's Rickey."

Jane spoke her mind, "I thought you'd put him out of your life."

"I have. But I can't put him out of my thoughts, can I? I know I'm an idiot, Jane. You needn't look at me like that."

The end of it all was, that Jane got her way, and Marty went with her to Annapolis. They stayed at the old and historic hotel, in a room that looked out on the chapel and the stretch of blue sky above it.

It was on the second day after their arrival that Jane passed the Oliphant house and saw that the windows were open and curtains up, and there was every evidence of occupation.

She spoke of it to Tony that night. “Has someone bought it?”

“Yes, Michael McMillan. He’s going to marry Virginia.”

Then Jane, in her surprise, said a thing she regretted ever after. “I’m glad it isn’t you who are to marry her.”

And Tony turned to her, almost with an effect of violence. “If you really loved me, you couldn’t say a thing like that.”

“But I do love you.”

“If you did, you’d want me to be happy. And I have lost my happiness because I have lost Virginia.”

As he stood by the window of his mother’s sitting-room, with his back to the light, a shadow seemed to fall on him and dull his brightness and the youth which had been his.

Jane spoke breathlessly, “I thought we’d go abroad this summer. There are a lot of things we could do, Tony, you and I—”

Tony shook his head. “Dad’s going over. We’ve planned things—without you.”

She was truly frightened now. “But, Tony, I won’t be left out.”

“It’s Dad who has always been left out, and I am going to try to make it up to him, Midget.”

She clung to his arm. “Don’t you love me?”

He smiled down at her, but it was not the old adoring smile. “Of course. But we wouldn’t hit it off this year. You run along with Marty—and wear your new clothes.”

“I won’t be marooned with Marty,” she declared passionately.

“You never called it that in the old days,” he reminded her, “you’d leave Dad and me at any time to spend months on the Van Duyne yacht or at the Van Duyne house-parties. Marty is going up to the Maine woods, why not go with her?”

Jane took refuge in tears, “Tony, you are cruel.”

He laid his hand on her shoulder. “I want to spend this summer in my own way. I’m not going to fit my plans in with yours, Midget, and that’s the end of it.”

She found she could not move him, and later, when he left her, she went into Marty’s room. “My dear, do you want me with you this summer?”

“Of course.”

“Tony doesn’t want me.” She was pitying herself, but Marty didn’t pity her.

“We are getting what was coming to us—both of us. We’re a pair of worldlings, Jane. And we might as well own up to it.”

But Jane wouldn't own up to it. She was not as honest with herself as Marty. Far down in Marty's trunk was a little sketch which Rickey had made—of a silver witch whose heart had burned, but could not melt the ice around it. How well he had read her! She was what her life had made her, and she could not change.

She said now to Jane: "I talked with Virginia Oliphant this morning. I asked about—Rickey—!"

"Marty, you didn't!"

"Yes. He has been very ill—"

Marty was crying! All her silver whiteness suffused with red. Jane felt that the end of the earth had come. "You've always been so sensible, Marty," she said in a wavering voice.

"Oh, sense," said Marty, and wiped her eyes, and talked about other things. And she did not tell Jane the other thing that she had learned from Virginia. That Rickey was to be married. Quietly next week. To Mary Lee Logan!

So that was what Marty had to think about as she sat there with Jane—she had lost Rickey, she had lost Tony, and all this had happened since that first day in the garden.

The garden was gorgeous now with roses. Men had been busy for days trimming the borders and setting the old place in order. Much of the old furniture had been brought back to the house, and there was some new to go with it. It was to be as beautiful as possible by the time Virginia's parents arrived, and even now with summer draperies blowing in the breeze, with flowers in bowls, it was transformed from the empty shell which had echoed in the fall to every footstep.

Virginia and her brother were again installed in the rooms that had once been theirs—and Mary Lee was with them. Michael was at the hotel. Fresh breezes blew up from the Bay, and in the spring sunlight the waters sparkled. It was all very gay, incredibly gay it seemed to Virginia. No unhappiness anywhere—Daddy better, Rickey working like mad with Mary Lee—

She was in the garden, cutting roses and laying them in her basket. No unhappiness anywhere—!

And just then Tony came through the gate. Virginia had not seen him since her arrival in Annapolis. "Oh," she cried, joyfully, "how good of you to come."

He took her hand and looked down at her. "Did you think I could stay away?"

They sat on the stone bench, and she told him her plans. "Rickey and Mary Lee will live here with Daddy and Mother while Michael and I are in Italy—"

"In Italy?"

"Yes. We are going to a house—of Michael's. He bought it a long time ago . . . I think it's going to be rather wonderful, Tony."

He knew it would be wonderful. He, too, had wanted to reveal to her the loveliness of other lands—to take her to the ends of the earth. To show her the sea at dawn, the desert stars at midnight, to be with her when she thrilled to the beauty of it all. . . .

But it was not for him. “My heart is black with envy,” he said, and tried to say it lightly, “I’d hate to have you know how I envy—Michael.”

“Yet you were splendid, Tony—that night on the river.”

“There was nothing splendid in giving up what I had never had.”

Her eyes were full of tears. “We’re going to be friends—forever—you and I and Michael.”

He shook his head, “Only at long distance, my dear.”

“But some day, Tony, nearer than that?”

“Perhaps.”

At parting he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I shall never forget you,” he said. And then he went away, taking with him the vision of her as she stood in the garden, a bright and beautiful presence.

He did not dine with his mother. He felt he could not face Jane’s insincerities, Marty’s glitter. He got into his boat and went out on the river. As he drifted towards the bay, the sun was setting, and, suddenly, as he rounded a curve and came to the place where he had once met Michael he saw Virginia and her lover. They were facing the sunset and Virginia’s face was lifted to the flaming sky. Once more she was part of it, a priestess, as it were, at a golden altar. And Michael, too, was illumined.

Tony, following the darkening stream, left them to their radiance. Yet as he came out at last into wider waters, the stars rose and shed upon him their quiet light, so that he, too, was illumined as he lifted his face to the sky.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Burning Beauty* by Temple Bailey]