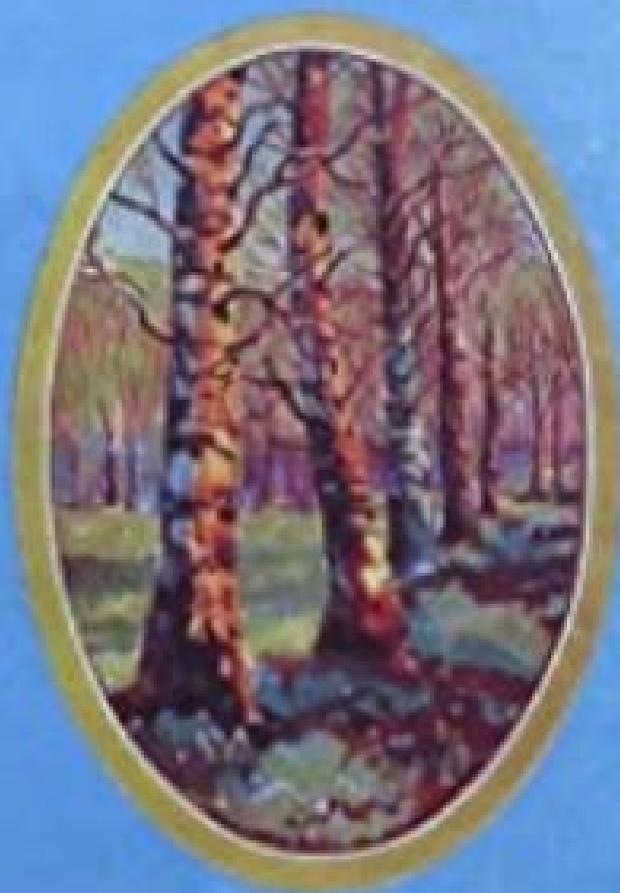


THE SUNSET TREE



A dramatic and realistic Romance

Martha Ostenso

Author of "O'River Remember"

(6 Vols.)

JOHN LONG

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Title: The Sunset Tree

Date of first publication: 1949

Author: Martha Ostenso (1900-1963)

Date first posted: May 15, 2022

Date last updated: May 15, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220534

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE SUNSET TREE

BOOKS BY MARTHA OSTENSO

WILD GEESE
THE DARK DAWN
THE MAD CAREWS
YOUNG MAY MOON
THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH
PROLOGUE TO LOVE
THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER YEAR
THE WHITE REEF
THE STONE FIELD
THE MANDRAKE ROOT
LOVE PASSED THIS WAY
O RIVER, REMEMBER
MILK ROUTE

THE
SUNSET TREE
BY MARTHA OSTENSO

NEW YORK

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY • 1949

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THE SUNSET TREE

THE ARTICULATE FOREST

A PRELUDE

WAIST-HIGH ferns in the narrow glade of the deep woods bore silvery webs of dawn light. But above the tangled underbrush, above the secret grottoes of moss that pocketed safely the small creatures of this northern forest, the tall trees rose, Norway and white pine and poplar, holding still the canopy of night on their densely interlaced branches.

Oliver Whittle, the artist, followed his friend Ralph Blake, the botanist, in all but silence on the path from Blake's cabin. The men wore Indian moccasins. They had come up this trail last evening, and Ralph had given Oliver a little lecture on things unfamiliar to the artist.

"A scientist once told me that the *mycetozoa* could hear," he had said. "Of course he was a zoologist, and half-cracked besides. Zoologists insist on classifying the mystery as animal. We call them the *myxomycetes*—plants, in other words. Still, we may as well walk quietly and observe things that do share our senses, even if the slime molds can't hear."

And they had walked quietly, had seen a raccoon bustle across the path conveying her young, and had spied upon a turtle patiently depositing her eggs in a hole she had dug, while a skunk as patiently crouched in ambush, already dreaming of the omelet that would be his before the eggs had time to cool. At last, Ralph Blake had halted before the object he had brought the artist out to see.

On one side of their narrow path stood the decayed but still erect remains of a poplar that had been lopped by a storm years ago. The bole of the tree was curiously laced by a glistening, gelatinous mass of a tint that shimmered between palest violet and deep blue, and that extended about three feet upward from the damp and crumbling base of the trunk.

"Well, there it is, Oliver," the botanist said, "whatever you choose to call it."

"Whatever *I* choose to call it?" Whittle said.

Ralph Blake laughed easily. "Being a mere artist, you might put it on canvas and call it *Female Rising From Her Bath*, or something equally

suggestive. You fellows aren't much concerned over borderline distinctions between the animal and the vegetable."

With his jackknife he made a notch in the bark of the tree just above the apex of the mass. "At dawn tomorrow," he said, "we'll come and have another look at it."

"That's all you're going to tell me about it now?" Oliver asked.

"Until tomorrow. I found it first only this morning—before you were out of bed. It was a mere baby then. It ought to be something really worth coming to see tomorrow morning."

And with those obscure words the botanist had turned to lead the way back toward the cabin.

Now, at the promised dawn, he had a long bamboo pole with him, on the end of which was a sharp hook. Oliver Whittle had wanted to know its purpose, but Ralph had merely smiled. Their half-mile's stealth through the dawn had been profitable, however, whatever it had to do with the sensitivity of Blake's *mycet* or *myxom*. Creatures furred, feathered, or humbly reptilian as to apparel had animated the forest. Even the mute slot of deer had made it vocal. Though now at sixty Oliver Whittle addressed himself mostly to portrait painting, he decided that the triangular emerald of a tree-toad burning within a chance sunbeam on the deeper emerald moss of an old log was worthy of his recording brush.

When they came to a halt beside the tall poplar stump, Ralph Blake seemed to lose his breath.

"My God, what a beauty!" he exclaimed. "It's the best specimen I've ever run across."

"She must have stretched up a good ten feet since last night," Oliver remarked as he stood by and watched his friend hoist his bamboo pole and thrust its hook into the bark of the tree where the jelly-like growth had reached its highest point.

"Closer to eleven feet," Blake observed as he carefully computed the advance of the plasmodium with his measuring rod. "Damned good, though they're known to do much better than that in a single night-reach."

"They grow only at night?" Oliver asked.

"They do most of their feeding after dark," Ralph Blake replied and glanced at the artist with a narrow grin. "Does my pet revolt you, old man? Most people are either morbidly attracted or disgusted."

Oliver Whittle glanced up at the hungry, inscrutable veil of life on the tree trunk.

“I know too much about human beings to be either disgusted or revolted by anything that grows on a tree,” he said finally. “But I must admit I’m impressed.” He frowned and drew his hand down his gaunt jaw.

Blake chuckled. “It has a certain human quality, at that. The slime molds are omnivorous, you know. I experimented with a little one I kept in the house once. It was a dainty thing, like topaz embroidery. But it devoured just about everything I put in its path, animal or vegetable. In minute quantities, of course. I believe if I’d put a live man in front of it, it would have despatched him in time.”

“It’s a hell of a thing!” Oliver observed.

“Oh, no, it isn’t! It’s quite terrestrial, whatever it may have been originally. We’re clumsy fools compared with it. I hope you can stay at the cabin until its fruiting period. It gets solid and powdery, and under the microscope its spore-cases take on the most grotesque forms. You wouldn’t believe it! Your surrealists would find everything from egg-beaters to handle-bar mustaches to work on. And brilliantly colored. Remind me to show you some magnified photographs I have, next time we’re back together in New York.”

Oliver Whittle looked up again at the tree and felt oddly uncomfortable. “It’s a little hard to believe, just as it is, without the aid of any microscope. Did I hear you say something about its night-reach? Was that the word?”

“Yes, the height it grows in one night.” Blake grinned. “It’s having its effect on you, I see. A cold-blooded devil like you, Oliver!”

“Well, it’s so—so damned fantastic! You say it’s never rooted in the earth for nourishment?”

“Never. Still I insist it’s a plant, because it tosses its progeny to the air. Of course it may be neither plant nor animal. I wouldn’t be too—”

“It’s got to be one or the other,” Whittle said.

“It might be some lost member of a stray organic family from another planet,” Blake suggested.

“Sort of a dual personality, eh? No, I wouldn’t accept that. When does this fruiting period start?”

“That depends on a number of conditions—atmospheric and so forth. Anywhere from hours to weeks and months. They are very erratic. They take their own time.”

“That would seem to establish them as females at any rate,” Whittle observed, and gave a last glance at the slime mold before he turned to retrace with his friend the trail back to the log cabin beside the lake.

There, in the mail box, they found a letter for Oliver, forwarded from his studio in New York.

“Another request for a thousand dollar sitting from one of your old dowagers, probably,” Ralph said as he handed the artist his letter. “Lord, if I could make money the way you do I’d have enough spare time to solve the riddle of the universe!”

Whittle tore open the envelope and glanced hurriedly over the single sheet of paper it contained. “No, not this time. It’s from—” He folded the letter and stood looking out across the glittering morning blue of the lake. “It’s from one who was never rooted in the earth, as you put it. Maybe that was what was wrong—she should have been.”

“Well—who? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

“Do you remember my telling you something about Ronda Southflagg?”

“Ronda Southflagg? Yes—I think so,” the botanist said, and raised his ginger-colored eyebrows. “I remember the odd name. You told me a little about her—oh, three or four years ago, it must have been.”

“She lives in Madison. She didn’t know I was coming up here. Now she’s in trouble. I meant to stop in and see her on my way back east. But now—I’ll have to leave right away. I can get down there in four or five hours, can’t I?”

“Easily. But, damn it all, I thought you’d be able to spend the summer with me and do a little painting while I went on with my work. We don’t get together often. You’ve got to leave?”

“Can’t get out of it,” Whittle said. “When Ronda says she’s in trouble and has to see me at once, it must be something serious. I’ll have to go.”

“Well, I hope she’s worthy of it,” Blake said as he turned into the cabin. “Never having met her, of course, I wouldn’t know.” “No, you wouldn’t know,” Oliver said, and put the letter into his pocket as he followed his friend through the doorway.

“At your age, it wouldn’t have anything to do with romance, I’m sure,” Blake said.

“A sound enough deduction for a mere scientist,” Oliver Whittle retorted, “but one that leaves much to be explained. No man ever thought of Ronda Southflagg without thinking of romance at the same time.”

PART I

DAWN REACH

Chapter One

ON an afternoon at the end of May, 1948, a fashionably tailored, tall, gaunt and homely woman of perhaps fifty years was walking leisurely along the south side of the broad thoroughfare that skirts the university campus in Madison, Wisconsin. The woman was Phoebe Larson, a comfortable spinster who traversed the United States once every season of the year in the interests of a nationally known cloak and suit manufacturer. For this she was very well paid, and expected in another ten years to retire to her “La Hacienda Rosa” in southern California, where she would devote the rest of her days entirely to the cultivation of roses.

Miss Larson had transacted her business satisfactorily with the department head of a large store in the city—satisfactorily and rather more quickly than she had even hoped. She had come away from the store, in fact, to find that she had a good two hours to kill before it would be time to go back to her hotel for the two cocktails she customarily allowed herself as a prelude to dinner. The day was inviting, pleasantly warm and with a stimulating crispness in the air that made unwelcome any thought of returning at once to the well-appointed room she had taken on her arrival in Madison the night before. It was a day for walking. A long walk in the country, of course, would have been just the thing. But even the city has something to offer in the month of May. And so she had turned westward along the broad avenue, into the bright face of the lowering sun.

Walking alone, as Phoebe Larson well knew from having done her share of it, had a way of setting the fancy free on flights quite unpredictable. Alone and unmindful of passers-by, one could weigh the present, chart the future, review the past. It was strange, however, that she had begun thinking of Esther Clarke before she had gone more than a block from her starting point. She hadn't given more than a random thought to Esther in years. She hadn't heard of her in years. Somewhere she had read—or had someone told her?—that the girl who had been her closest friend when they were at school together in the little Minnesota town of Sun Rock, was making a name for herself on the stage in the east. Esther had had a voice even in her school days, Phoebe remembered. But a fickle world had apparently turned cool

after her early successes. Somehow, somewhere, Esther had faded from public notice. Otherwise Phoebe Larson would scarcely have lost all trace of her.

But why should the memory of Esther Clarke come so vividly to her now as she swung her long legs down a street whose every aspect was so alien to anything either she or Esther had ever known? Why should it all come back so sharply now, as if some great unseen hand had swept the dust of memory aside in one magnificent gesture? Perhaps because it was May again. Or perhaps because it was only a little past four o'clock, when the youngsters would be bolting from the schoolyards, filling the spring air with their clamor . . .

It was the middle of May, 1913. The little town of Sun Rock nested in the sweetness of spring among the red granite knolls and quarries on the Minnesota River. The population of Sun Rock, though the railroad had built a roundhouse there, was not more than four hundred, including the itinerant laborers in the brickyard. But Sun Rock was proud of its school, built of the good red local brick, a school standing imposingly up against the even more imposing bald domes of rock that were the geological Archean outcrops, the gneiss responsible for the beautiful rainbow-banded granite that had become famous throughout the United States.

At a little after four, when school bloomed out in release, two girls walked arm in arm to the sandy road that led westward. More correctly, one of the girls—the larger one—had her arm linked tightly within the other's. Each was carrying her own high school books in imitation leather bags. The girls were sixteen years old.

The smaller of the two finally shook herself free.

"It's too warm to walk so close, Phoebe," she said. She reached up and touched the French roll arrangement on the top of her head, where it was held in place by a large red ribbon bow. Her hair was a dark, glossy brown, quite straight, with mahogany-red threads running through it. Her eyes were a pellucid, dark olive, startlingly veined by black threads through the iris. Even her walk was thread-like as slenderly she eluded the arm of her companion.

"I guess you're too small to walk home with me now, Esther," Phoebe suggested timidly. She walked with a perpetual stoop in the effort to reduce her ungainly height.

"It isn't that I'm too small," said Esther Clarke. "I'm five feet four. That isn't small. But you're five-eight in gym shoes. I'm not too short—you're too tall, Phoebe. And that's God's fault, not yours."

“It doesn’t matter whose fault it is.”

“Well, I certainly don’t want to stop walking home with you anyhow. You’re the only real girl-friend I’ve got. All the others are so stuck up—me being so darn poor and all.”

“They’re just jealous of you,” Phoebe consoled her.

“That’s only because the boys like me,” Esther laughed. “But can I help that? The boys look me up and down—the girls just look me *down*.”

“I don’t.”

“But you aren’t like the others, Phoebe.” Esther’s tone was magnanimous. “Here’s where we fix our skirts. Did you remember your safety pins?”

The girls stepped behind a large, flowering Juneberry bush and each drew from her book bag a dozen safety pins. Then, lowering their blue serge skirts so that the waist-bands were almost even with the lower edge of their white cotton middy blouses, they fastened them to their petticoats. More pins narrowed the garments at the sides. Thus, in mature style, in semi-hobble skirts draped at the hems, Esther and Phoebe sallied forth from the by-road and minced their way toward Main Street.

“Don’t slouch like that, Phoebe,” Esther admonished when they had gone only a few steps.

“But I’m so big—you said so yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Esther declared. “Whatever you are, be yourself.”

“That’s just what I don’t want to be,” Phoebe mourned. “It’s all right for you—you’re so beautiful. But I’m homely. No boy ever looks at me the way they look at you.”

“Sandy Keller certainly does,” Esther said generously. “I saw him when you won that debate today.”

“He’s got pimples,” Phoebe retorted.

“That’s nothing. Pimples clear up. Besides, his father owns the bank. That reminds me—I’ve got a dime for a soda at the Rosebud. Have you?”

Phoebe, it appeared, had two dimes, and was eager to treat Esther to a soda at the ice cream parlor.

“No, thanks, Phoebe,” Esther replied. “I’ll pay my own way as long as I can—by hook or by crook.” It was a phrase she had recently run across in a dime novel, and she thought it very expressive. “I don’t really know where my money goes to. Pa gives me a dollar a week, but with all the school stuff and everything, I never have a thing left for myself. Well, Duke and I are working again tonight at the Bijou, and that will be fifty cents for me.”

Phoebe laughed. “Gosh, do you remember how you set them all straight on how to pronounce Bijou when it came here last fall? Even old man Keller called it ‘By Joe’!”

“Well, I just looked it up in the dictionary,” Esther said airily. “I’ve always been interested in the theater—even the names are interesting. Bijou means jewel—in French.”

She suddenly remembered the picture of an actress she had once seen, and gave her right eyelid the droop she had been practising for months.

The girls were now passing the Beckmeyer place, where the spiraea hedge fanned out its tiny eyelet embroidery.

Behind that hedge, unseen by either Esther or Phoebe, Mrs. Beckmeyer and her neighbor, Mrs. Flathe, had been discussing varieties of tulip bulbs. Suddenly Mrs. Beckmeyer nudged Mrs. Flathe.

“Well, I vow!” she whispered. “Would you look at them two!”

Mrs. Flathe looked—and then blinked with distress. “Esther shouldn’t be letting her skirts down like that. She’d like to think herself grown up. The trouble is, she’s too old for me to say anything to her. When she was younger I did what I could to take her mother’s place, but—”

“I hope she ain’t leading that nice Phoebe Larson astray,” Mrs. Beckmeyer observed. “Phoebe’s *such* a good girl.”

“Esther isn’t leading anybody astray,” said Mrs. Flathe with spirit. “She’s a good girl herself, at bottom.”

Mrs. Beckmeyer sniffed. “Maybe—at *bottom*, as you say.”

Mrs. Flathe ignored the vulgar comment. “Well, I’ve got to be getting home, Myrtle. Don’t forget the church social tomorrow. We’re counting on you for the potato salad, remember.”

“I’m not likely to forget. Are you thinking of going to the moving picture tonight? I forget what they’re putting on. They announced it last week, but I never can remember from one week to another. They never set them signs out in front until they get the whole works in from the city, and I haven’t been downtown today. Aggie saw Lillian and Dorothy Gish in *An Unseen Enemy* when she was in Minneapolis last week. She says it was wonderful, but I s’pose it’ll be years before we get it here. I get so tired of living in a small town. If they’d only give us a few more shows with Maurice Costello—isn’t he just the most gorgeous man you ever saw! I keep

telling my husband if he could only look *half* like him—” She looked away and smiled dreamily.

“Well, I won’t have time for pictures tonight, no matter who’s in them. I’ve got to get to work on Edith Roberts’ wedding dress or I won’t be able to go anywhere. I’d like to go with you if I had a minute I could call my own. Esther and her brother are going to sing and play the piano again, and I’d love to hear them. They do them illustrated songs just fine. Esther especially. She seems to put her whole soul into everything she sings.”

“She certainly does! I’ll say that for her. I almost cried out loud last week when they done that *Curse of an Aching Heart*.”

“It *was* good, wasn’t it? Well, I have to get along, Myrtle. But I’ll see you tomorrow—at the social. I’m bringing the deviled eggs this time. Reverend Bradshaw likes my deviled eggs especially, even though he thinks it’s kind of improper to call them that.”

“I don’t know what else you’d call them,” Mrs. Beckmeyer said. “There’s a lot of sulphur in eggs, they say. I think the name fits all right.”

“Well, I s’pose preachers have to be more careful than the rest of us,” Mrs. Flathe said as she hurried away. “You can tell me all about the picture tomorrow—and how Esther got along with her singing.”

It was only natural that Dora Flathe should be concerned over what people thought about Esther Clarke. The girl’s mother had died in a typhoid epidemic six years ago. John Clarke, who had been a railroad brakeman before he lost a leg in a train wreck, had asked Mrs. Flathe, a childless widow and the Sun Rock dressmaker, to do what she could for his ten-year-old daughter. He felt himself capable of instructing his growing son, who was twelve at the time, but he was only too conscious of the need for a woman’s hand to guide Esther along the hazardous path to womanhood. He had been given employment as night watchman in the roundhouse at wages that were narrowly adequate for all their actual needs, though nothing was left for even the simplest luxuries. For four or five years, Mrs. Flathe had found Esther a most tractable child. But as the girl grew in beauty and in the consciousness of her own physical allure, a hostility had developed between her and certain other adolescent girls of the town. Mrs. Flathe had sensed it, and had shrewdly perceived that it was largely the work of Loretta Maltby, the well-to-do brickyard owner’s daughter and the undisputed leader of the younger set who lived on the right side of the track. The fact that Loretta was singularly unfavored as to looks and was cursed with what was popularly known as buck teeth, served only to sharpen the antagonism. If she had had the money to bring Esther up herself, Mrs. Flathe often sighed,

she felt she might have averted what she feared was happening before her very eyes. The girl was growing hard and defiant, living some kerneled life of her own from which the rest of the world was shut out.

Esther's brother Durwood—they called him Duke—would never be a problem to anybody. Now, at eighteen, he was already a young hustler. He worked in Coute's Garage and Livery, where he was as handy with an Overland as he was with a trotter, although he openly bewailed the fact that there were only four automobiles in town for him to tinker with when their owners finally admitted defeat before the devilish mysteries that lurked beneath the shining hoods of their vehicles.

John Clarke's wife had been of Irish descent, with the fiber of music in her being. Somehow, when the children were small, she had managed to buy an old organ at an auction sale, and without any training herself she had taught both Durwood and Esther to play "by ear," and to sing creditably as well.

Since his father would probably never make more than his present sixty dollars a month, it had been Durwood's ambition to earn enough money to send Esther away to some school where she could study singing. The girl had a velvety, low soprano, without much power but with a certain indolent charm that was quite agreeable. But she was lazy. Even Mrs. Flathe had been forced to admit that, ruefully. Or maybe it wasn't laziness—for the life of her, Dora Flathe couldn't name what it was in Esther. She was like some strange plant, loafing out of the sun all day, then blooming under the darkness of night. Oh, yes, there had been plenty of talk about Esther! If the girl had any father at all, Mrs. Flathe often thought, it was her own brother. John Clarke, trancedly unaware of the world about him, might just as well have gone the way of his departed leg. When his wife died, the sun and the moon and the stars had burned out for him. It was pathetically appropriate now that he should be a night watchman. All the world's lights had dimmed, had failed.

The railroad had been generous enough when John Clarke lost his leg. But in a few weeks his compensation had been lost in bad investments. His children should have been a token of remembrance from his poor wife, but John Clarke was a queer man, as the townspeople were wont to remark, and he looked upon his son and daughter as no compensation for his wrecked hopes. The stump below his knee was a source of constant irritation, of course, and may have accounted in some measure for his being so different from the common run of men. Still, he was a queer sort, and his neighbors were content to leave him to his own devices.

Esther and Phoebe had had their ice cream sodas at the Rosebud and were ready to leave when Brett Maltby paused for a moment to speak in a low tone to Esther. She nodded vaguely, while Phoebe glanced anxiously across the flower-painted tin-covered table at which they sat. She had cause for feeling disturbed. Brett was already cashier at his father's brickyard.

"What did he want?" Phoebe asked as soon as Brett had gone.

"Oh, nothing much," Esther evaded.

"I don't see what he—he's so much older than we are," Phoebe reminded her.

"High school boys bore me," Esther said. "Brett does too, in a way. But he's better looking than Loretta, thank heaven. Let's go, Phoebe. I've got to make supper."

The two girls left the Rosebud at once. Phoebe was atremble with curiosity, but she dared not ask Esther again what Brett Maltby had said to her. Once before when she had let her curiosity get the better of her, Esther had told her not to "pry."

"Will I meet you before the show?" she asked falteringly when they were in the street. "I could fix your roll up a little higher on your head—"

"No, thanks, Phoebe. I'd rather do it myself. It's a funny thing, but lately I can't stand anybody fussing with me—not even Mrs. Flathe when she measures me for a new dress. I don't like her to touch me. I don't know what it is."

"I'll wait for you after the show, then," Phoebe said.

"Well—no, don't wait for me. I—I'm going for a walk after the show."

Phoebe dropped back a step. "Esther Clarke, are you going down along the river with Brett Maltby again?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Esther burst forth. "Who said anything about Brett Maltby? And anyhow—"

"People are starting to talk," Phoebe said. "My mother said that Mrs. Beckmeyer said—"

"You can tell your mother to tell Mrs. Beckmeyer to mind her own business!" Esther retorted. "Anyhow, I don't give a damn if people are starting to talk, as you say!"

"Esther Clarke!"

"Don't forget to pull your skirt back up before you get home," Esther said, doing her best to appear undisturbed by what Phoebe had told her.

But as she left her friend at the next corner, the odd, narrow shelves of lovely pink on her cheekbones grew into a furious red. *Damn them!* she whispered as she strode homeward across the tracks. *Damn them all in this town!*

Home was a brown frame nothing of a house, almost without eaves, like an old woman without eyebrows. It had a small front yard where Esther remembered her mother tending irises and pansies and mignonette, and lilacs white and purple. But Esther's father had gone rather strange after her mother's death and refused to let anything grow except the natural grass in the once cherished spaces. The little backyard was rank with weeds, and there, where vegetables might have flourished, field mice and moles took their pleasure.

The Clarke place was wedged in between the water tank and The Eating House, Sun Rock's one apology for a restaurant and a hotel. About six times the size of the Clarke house, it might be presumed to have given birth to the latter, so like were the two in nondescript architecture.

Esther hurried past The Eating House veranda, where a couple of drummers in loud striped suits and natty fedoras removed their fat cigars for a better look at her. The tribute of their stares was not unpleasing, but today she had other and more important matters on her mind. Should she permit Brett Maltby to propose to her tonight? Ultimately, she knew, she would have to tell him regretfully that she couldn't marry him, that they had both made a mistake, but even a brief engagement to the son of the wealthy Tom Maltby would serve to set certain people she could name well back on their hoity-toity heels. So far as Brett himself was concerned, she had only one objection to such an arrangement. She knew she was not in love with him. She rather enjoyed being kissed by him—or seeing herself being kissed, with that motion picture backward bend that was almost a collapse. But poor Brett could provide nothing of the thrill she had known with Danny O'Rourke last year. Danny had Irish sapphire eyes, and was one of the roving kiln bosses at the brickyard. She had loved him in a way she could never love Brett Maltby—in a way she feared she would never love anyone else in all the world. And he had loved her. He had told her so, over and over again, though he warned her he was a rover and couldn't be depended upon in anything touching the heart.

Oh, Danny, Danny, why did you have to leave me? And why did you never send me as much as a post card, itself? She could not even think of him without hearing that loved County Clare accent of his, living in him again as she had lived in the late summer and early autumn before she was sixteen. Couldn't you have stayed here in the valley with me, young as I was, and earned a few acres of the rich valley loam for us to raise corn and potatoes on, and keep a cow or two? But you were a rover, Danny, you were afraid of taking root. That's what you told me, and I had to let you go. But how you kissed me that last night of the wild wind above the big quarry, when the balanced stone hurtled down from its place on the great boulder, where it had stood for centuries! How you kissed me, angry-like, and sent me home by myself, as if I was a child too soon thinking myself grown up, though you were afraid of me just the same. Oh, yes, you were, Danny—and afraid of yourself too, because you loved me. Or was it the thundering down of the ancient rock that frightened you, being so superstitious and all—and just you and me alone there to know that it fell by no human hand? And now, for the rest of my days I'll be looking for you and knowing you'll never come back!

She entered the house through the kitchen door, jerked the safety pins from her skirt and hitched it back up again where it belonged. Her father would never notice whether she had a skirt on at all, but Duke would scold her for parading around like a hussy. He couldn't seem to realize that she was no longer a child. Still, perhaps it was just as well he couldn't. As it was now, she could have an exploring life of her own in which he never interfered.

She peeled the potatoes, scraped the carrots, lighted the kerosene stove—the weather was warm enough so that she didn't have to stir up the clumsy old grinning range—and got the leftover pork roast out of the cupboard. She looked for the applesauce she had made for the roast yesterday, but Duke must have eaten it all for breakfast this morning. She got out a jar of wild raspberry jam she had put up last July, to take the place of the applesauce. The men of her family liked something sweet with pork—to “cut the grease,” as they put it.

Esther had picked the raspberries herself, out in Stanley's Ravine, a depression of rugged aspect haunted by the spirits of dead Indian warriors who had fought a battle there years before the coming of the white man. The youngsters in town rarely ventured to enter the ravine, but Esther Clarke had discovered bigger and juicier berries there than she had ever seen before. And more of them.

She recalled now the day she had lain flat on her back, gorging herself on the fleshy, wine-red fruit, while her eyes gazed dreamily up through the briars at a windless sky. White, narrow clouds had ribbed the sky like the roof of a cat's mouth. Esther had loved the solitude, the sky, the bursting juice of the berries between her lips.

Suddenly, just above her on the slope, fluttered the blurred leafy sound of a breeze. But there was no breeze. She looked up in time to catch a brief glimpse of a man's face through the dense underbrush, a thick, glassily red face with small, triangular eyes.

"You're Esther Clarke, ain't ya? Limpy John's girl, eh?"

Esther sprang to her feet, picked up her basket of berries, and ran. But as she stumbled through the woods into the open, she remembered having seen the face before—in Hanson's Mercantile where she had gone to buy groceries less than a week ago. Mr. Hanson had told her that the man was a hired hand from a nearby farm, and had a "few marbles missing." She had never heard the expression before, but its meaning was not hard to guess. She did not mention the frightening encounter in the berry patch either to her father or to Duke. It was enough that she had escaped without his laying a hand on her, though his leering face was to haunt her dreams for weeks afterwards.

Now, with supper well on the way, Esther tip-toed upstairs to see if her father were awake. As she stepped into his room, he stirred and yawned on his bed. His artificial leg and his crutch were close at hand.

"Ain't time for gettin' up yet, is it, Esty?" he muttered sleepily.

"What time do you think it is? I've got supper going, and Duke'll be coming home any minute."

"Must be spring fever—I could sleep for another hour," John Clarke complained. "Say, ain't that lilacs I'm smellin'?"

"Lilacs?"

He sat up suddenly on the edge of his bed and rubbed his eyes angrily. "Christ, I've been dreamin' again! There ain't no more lilacs." He looked almost savagely at the bound-up stump a few inches below his knee. "Have you got a clean rag handy, girl?"

"Lots of them, over here in the drawer, pa," Esther said. "Stretch your leg out on the chair."

"Ah, it's a damn' nuisance I'm gettin' to be, Esty," he moaned as he lifted his leg into place so that she could bind it neatly in the clean white cloth.

“You’re not a nuisance, only you don’t have to swear about it,” Esther told him.

“No, I s’pose I don’t. I’m sorry, Esty. I don’t know what comes over me now and then. I’m not a swearin’ man, as you know.”

By the time Durwood arrived home, Esther was mashing the potatoes and singing at the top of her voice.

*That’s why I wish again
That I was in Michigan—
Down on the farm.*

His voice rang out cheerily from the little entry where he was hanging his hat.

“Sounds real professional, Sis! That old skinflint, Krause, ought to be paying you a dollar instead of a measly fifty cents for singing in his joint.”

“A dollar, my foot!” Esther retorted. “What do you expect in a tank-town like this?”

Durwood stalked, lean and militant and bright into the kitchen, where he helped himself to a slice of bread and butter. He was as homely, in a clean, acceptable way, as his sister was pretty.

“Don’t worry, kid,” he said, “you’re not going to spend your life in Sun Rock.”

“So *you* say. Maybe you’ll tell me how I’m going to get out of it.”

“Listen, Sis,” he said in a low, guarded tone, “I’ve got news for you. Is pa awake?”

“He’s getting dressed. He’s having one of his bad days.”

“Leg hurting him? Maybe he oughtn’t to go to work tonight.”

“It isn’t his leg,” Esther said. “He’s smelling lilacs again.”

“H’m—poor old bastard! Can’t get ma off his mind, seems like.”

“What’s the news you said—”

“I got a two dollar raise today.”

“Duke!”

“Pipe down! And don’t go blathering about it to pa. I don’t want him to know anything about it. Them two dollars are going smack into the bank every week for your voice training, kiddo. It’d only make pa feel rotten because he can’t do something about it himself. He knows that’s what ma always wanted.”

“Sure. If she had wanted me to be a hash-slinger in The Eating House, that’s what he’d want me to be. He doesn’t know I’m alive. He sees me like

moonlight over a grave—ma's grave. Anyhow, I'm not so darn' sure I want to be a singer."

"What the hell!" Durwood exploded. "Why don't you make up your mind? That's the trouble with you. One day it's one thing, the next it's another. Well, I'm making up your mind for you. Just as soon as I've got enough saved up—"

"Are you going to ask the audience to join in the chorus tonight?" Esther broke in.

"Why not? They like it. And old man Krause thinks it's good for business."

Esther broke into a peal of laughter. "Myrtle Beckmeyer bellowing her head off—and that's good for business!"

"Well—sure, if she—"

From the bedroom above came two distinct thumps. One was the bracing of their father's crutch against the floor, the other was the impact of his artificial limb.

"Hold on, pa!" Durwood called out. "I'll be right up."

On level ground John Clarke could circumvent almost any obstacle. But stairways were something else. After Durwood had assisted him to the ground floor, he left his crutch standing against the newel post and all but strolled, smiling, into the kitchen. He seated himself at the table with its red-checked cloth and sniffed appreciatively.

"You're a hell of a good cook, Esty!" he declared.

Esther helped him to mashed potatoes and warmed-over gravy, then sat down silently at her own place.

"Say, Duke," John Clarke said suddenly as he began eating, "have you answered that letter you got a week ago from Chet Minninger, out in Los Angeles?"

"Well, no, I haven't," Durwood admitted. "I'll get to it one of these days."

"One of these days? Sometimes I don't understand you, boy. That letter sounded good to me—looked like it might be your big chance. Chet was an up-an'-comin' go-getter when he was here. He was old enough and had eyes to see he was too good for this God-forsaken town."

"That wouldn't be saying much," Durwood smiled.

"So now, when he wants you to take a mechanic's job in his big garage, you don't even answer him. Lord-almighty, what's holdin' you back? If I

was your age, with an offer like that, I'd be dustin' my heels out of here so fast—"

"And leave you and Esther alone to make the best of it, I suppose?" Durwood said.

"So that's it! Me and Esty is standin' in your way. Is that what you're thinkin'?"

Duke and Esther glanced at each other uneasily. Their father had come upon one of his bad days, as Esther had said.

"You know I'm not thinking anything of the kind, pa," Durwood protested. "It's just that I don't want to get out and leave you to—"

"Now, look here, boy—" John Clarke pointed his fork at his son. "—I been lookin' after the two of you for the last six years, haven't I? Do you think it's goin' to be harder to look after one of you for the next six years?"

"You've got me all wrong, pa," Durwood persisted.

"I'll take care of Esty," John went on. "I'm thinkin' of what you could do for yourself out there, if you take a chance like this offer of Chet's. I been readin' about what's goin' on in California. And I don't mean these movin' pictures and all that. I ain't thinkin' about the garage business so much, either. I'm thinkin' about what's goin' on in this diggin' for oil. It's petroleum that's goin' to be the big thing out there. That's where the money is goin' to be made. I'm as sure of that as I am of sittin' right here talkin' to you. You get out there and go to work with Chet. That lets you in, don't it? Once you're in, you got a chance to look round. It's plain as the nose on your face you won't be fixin' automobiles all your days. One thing sure, you won't get anywhere as long as you stay in this town."

"I know that," Durwood replied. "But Esther needs to get out of Sun Rock more than I do."

"I'll look after that. Esty won't have to stay here a day longer than she wants to. I'll ship her out as soon as she's ready to go. Give her a couple more years to finish her schoolin' and I'll see she goes where she can do whatever she wants to do. It was your mother's idea she ought to do something with that voice of hers. If that's Esty's idea, I'll see that she gets all the voice trainin' she'll ever need. She'll get it if I have to give my life for it! Now you answer that letter of Chet's, Duke, and get the hell out there and see what you can make of it!"

It was clear that he had said all he wanted to say on the subject—or on any subject, for that matter. He had not spoken at such length in days. Durwood, sensing his father's mood, was only too content to avoid further argument. He had only one wish, and that was to finish the meal with as

little unpleasantness as possible and get away from the table in time to reach the theatre before the doors were thrown open for the first showing of the picture at seven-thirty. Old man Krause liked to have music to greet his patrons when they came in from the street.

At last, John Clarke sopped up what was left of his gravy with a crust of bread and moved away from the table. As it turned out, that was the last morsel of food he swallowed in his life.

The explosion occurred when the Eternal City—the picture was *The Burning of Rome*—was blazing furiously, with Durwood doing his frantic best to produce the appropriate sound effects on the tinny piano in the dimly lighted corner of the theatre.

A good many people in the audience anticipated by a decade and a half the arrival of sound on the screen, and believed for an instant that dynamite had gone off among the Seven Hills without benefit of Nobel's discovery. But others, less transported, knew that the deafening noise had come from somewhere closer to home, and made a rush for the doors.

Durwood's playing stopped abruptly. He stared at Esther, who was sitting tense in her chair at one end of the piano.

"They're not blasting in the quarry this time of night," he said grimly, and got to his feet.

He stood for a moment and looked toward the back of the theatre where more than a dozen people were crowding into the street. There was no panic, but the excitement was growing. Durwood could feel it mounting all about him. He grasped Esther's hand.

"Come on, let's get out of here!"

As he spoke, old man Krause came hurrying down the aisle. "Music! Keep the music going!"

Durwood gave him only a glance. "You go to hell! Come on, Esther!"

There was a side door leading to an alley, and through this Durwood dragged his sister. From the front row of seats, where the senatorial togas of the ancient lawmakers of Rome had been all but flapping in his face, Brett Maltby sprang up and rushed after them.

"What is it?" Esther gasped as soon as they were in the alley.

"I think it's the roundhouse," Durwood told her.

"Oh, no!"

“Hurry up!”

Behind them, Brett Maltby called out, but neither of them answered. Esther herself had forgotten all about Brett as she ran down the alley and into the street.

Durwood’s guess as to the origin of the explosion proved only too accurate. Everywhere in the street, it seemed, people were running toward the railway yard. Esther and Durwood followed them. A few minutes later they learned what had happened.

An engine on a turntable had somehow been given too much steam in being shunted to the repair track, and had continued straight on through the brick wall of the building, its boiler exploding at the point of collision. Three men had been killed, among them John Clarke, who was buried beneath the falling debris. His wooden leg was found intact several days later, lying a few hundred yards away beside the trestle that crossed the river—and not far from the very spot in which he had lost his natural leg in the train wreck eight years before, a coincidence that later gave rise to some shivery talk in Sun Rock about the two legs thereafter walking together. And there was a refurbishing of the theory that Mrs. Clarke “wouldn’t have caught the typhoid” had she not fretted so about John’s leg.

Once again the railway company was generous, though the county attorney took to himself the credit for bringing about a prompt and adequate settlement of the case. By the time his fees were accounted for, however, and the funeral expenses disposed of, Esther and Durwood found themselves the richer by something less than eighteen hundred dollars each.

Durwood had looked after all the necessary arrangements, quickly and with a minimum of emotion, and with almost no talk. He had sent for their Aunt Annie, John Clarke’s only sister, who lived in Chicago, where she ran some sort of millinery establishment. Durwood had never liked the woman after her visit at the time of his mother’s death six years ago, when she had offered to take Esther back to Chicago with her. He liked her even less now for the curiosity she had shown regarding the amount of money they might hope to receive upon the death of his father. She had displayed less emotion over the loss of her brother than she had at the mention of benefits that might accrue as a result of the fatal accident.

For weeks, indeed, Durwood had gone about like a man who had lost his power of speech. He was dazed, Esther knew, from the blow that had struck them both so unexpectedly. He had never gone back to the piano in Krause’s theatre, and had never as much as spoken to Esther about it. He had gone doggedly about his work in Coute’s garage and had returned home each

evening to eat his supper in silence while Esther was left to wonder what was going on in his mind.

At last, one evening, just after the high school year was over, and Esther learned that she had managed to scrape through with a passing mark on her examinations, Durwood broke his silence. They were eating supper together in the kitchen when he spoke up.

“How soon can you get ready to leave this place, Sis?” he asked abruptly.

“I don’t know, Duke. You mean—”

“I mean this house—and this town.”

“Duke, what are you going to do?” Esther asked, bewildered.

“I’ve already done it, kid. I’ve made a deal with Humphrey Keller. He’ll give me fifteen hundred for the house and all the furnishings, including the organ.”

Esther was aghast. It was one thing to pray for deliverance from a town she hated, but quite another to be faced with the fact that it had already been arranged.

“But Duke—where are we going? What are we going to do?”

“Don’t get scared, Sis,” he consoled her. “I’ve thought it all out—for both of us. The first thing is to get the hell out of here if we’re ever going to amount to anything. Isn’t that right?”

“I suppose so, but—”

“The last thing pa said was that he wanted me to take the job in Los Angeles, with Chet Minninger.”

Esther brightened. “Are we going to California?”

“Not so fast, kid. We could do it that way, but I’ve got something else in mind. That last night, you remember, pa said he’d see you got your singing lessons if he had to give his life for it.”

“Yes, I remember. But he didn’t know then—”

“None of us knew. We wouldn’t have settled for it that way if we had known. But it has been settled for us, whether we like it or not. We’ve got to go on from here now. If we stick around this town, we’ll blow all that money in a couple of years and have nothing left to show for it. Look what happened after pa lost his leg. One day we had the money, the next day it was gone. What we’ve got to do is to get out while we can and make a new start for ourselves.”

“Well, what?”

“I’m going to California, and I’m writing Aunt Annie tonight about you.”

“Aunt Annie? And you hating her the way you do?”

“I don’t like her. Never did. But the old girl has made a go of it one way or another, and she might be just the one to give you a start.”

“Making hats!” Esther sniffed.

“There’s nothing wrong about making hats,” Durwood replied. “But you’re not going to Chicago to make hats, Sis. I want you to look up the best singing teacher in the city and go to work on that voice. I’ll keep your money in the bank with mine, and send you so much a month to pay Aunt Annie for your board and room, and your lessons. You won’t have to be beholden to the old bitch.”

Something deep within Esther, some tenderness that was to linger through the years in this night’s memory of him, whispered: *Ah, Duke, with your grand ideas of how far the money will go with the best singing teacher in Chicago!* She perceived, in her already sharp youth, that the tragedy-won fortune had gone to her brother’s head as an earlier though more modest one had gone to her father’s. But she did not speak of that.

“Couldn’t you take me with you, Duke?” she pleaded. “I could find a teacher out there just as easily as—”

“You’re too young to go with me,” Durwood argued sternly. “You need a woman to keep you out of trouble for a few years yet. And while we’re talking about that, what’s this I hear about you and Brett Maltby?”

“Well, what?”

“I know you went walking with him along the river that night after pa’s funeral. You told me yourself. But you’ve been seen going around with him since.”

“What’s wrong if I go walking with a boy once in a while?” Esther asked.

“Damn it, Brett Maltby is no boy! He’s twenty-four—eight years older than you are. Don’t you know what he’s after?”

“He asked me to marry him,” Esther flared up.

“He asked you—*what?*”

“To marry him.” Esther’s white teeth came down firmly on her full lower lip, a lip that did not seem to match the straight, narrow upper one. She had cultivated an artful upward twist of the left corner of her mouth that revealed a demure dimple lurking there. Durwood saw the dimple flicker now, but there was no smile behind it.

“Well, for God’s sake!” he exclaimed, as if to himself.

“You don’t believe it,” Esther went on stubbornly. “Well, he did. And he meant it. I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong. Brett has always been decent to me when I’ve gone out with him. I promised to meet him that night of the explosion. But I didn’t go. When he asked me out after the funeral, I went. Why shouldn’t I? We walked down along the river, and nobody could have been nicer. He wanted me to marry him right away—now that I’m alone, he said, except for you. He said we could live with his family for a while till we got a place of our own. And he was so sweet about it I almost cried.”

“Well—well, okay, Sis,” Durwood said gently. “Maybe I was all wrong about him. But you’re only a kid yet and I—do you want to marry him?”

“No, I told him I couldn’t. I told him I was sorry—and I was, in a way. But I don’t feel—Brett isn’t like—”

“You could do worse. He’ll have money, plenty of it. Still, I’m glad you turned him down. You’ve got lots of time to think about getting married, and there’ll be bigger fish in the sea for you someday. I’ve got this idea worked out for us, and I want you to go to work on your side of it. It’d be a crime for you to waste what you’ve got, just to get married.”

He got up and went out to the sitting room to compose his letter to Aunt Annie Clarke, in Chicago.

Chapter Two

Miss Phoebe Larson, the fashionably tailored spinster, halted in her late afternoon walk and glanced back along the broad avenue down which she had come. She hadn't realized how far she had walked. Well, that's what thinking can do for one, she concluded, and was aware for the first time that the air was no longer crisp as it had been when she started out. The sun, in fact, was thinly veiled behind a mist of cloud that darkened toward the horizon.

As Miss Larson stood looking about her at the street and at the sky, an elderly gentleman—quite elderly, indeed, and quite distinguished-looking—emerged from the doorway of a tearoom and paused to look at the sky.

"It'll rain before midnight, my dear," he said, and smiled at her.

She could not resist smiling in response. "It does look threatening, doesn't it?" she said, and moved quickly into the doorway from which the old gentleman had stepped but a moment before.

Once inside, she glanced over her shoulder and saw the old fellow shuffling off with the aid of his cane. *Phoebe Larson*, she said to herself, *you're getting to be more like a skittish old maid every day of your life. The sooner you get busy with your roses, the better!* Feeling silly to the point of actual embarrassment, she stepped to a small corner table and sat down. Now that she was here, she would order a muffin and a pot of tea anyhow. Perhaps she would get a taxicab to take her back to her hotel. Her knees told her she had done enough walking for one day.

It must be understood that Miss Larson was not a superstitious person—certainly no more superstitious than the average woman of her age. She would be the last to attach any validity, for instance, to the ancient adage to the effect that if you talk about angels they are sure to appear. Yet her presence in the tearoom seemed to have something of fate in it, when she looked across the narrow room straight into the eyes of a woman seated at another table with a lovely young girl.

True, she hadn't been *talking* about Esther Clarke, but she had been thinking about her, very intensely. And, "If that isn't Esther Clarke," she said audibly to herself, "I'm a singing giraffe!"

No two human beings on earth could ever have eyes exactly like those. They were of a soft olive shade, with dark veinings in the iris, veinings that resembled those in the Sun Rock granite quarries when seen at dusk. Phoebe

Larson's hand steadied itself as she picked up the menu and glanced over it. Had Esther Clarke recognized her too, across all the years? The sudden masking of those wonderful eyes could mean simply any beautiful woman's aloof dislike of being stared at by a stranger, male or female. But the masking piqued Phoebe's curiosity. What had Esther Clarke to hide that she did not wish Phoebe Larson to recognize her? Phoebe kept her eyes low for a few minutes. Trained as they were after years of gathering quick impressions, they had absorbed enough in that one brief glance to make staring unnecessary.

Esther was thinner than she had been at sixteen, and beneath the small rosette of a hat her hair was swept severely back into a chignon at the nape of her neck. The hair, without a thread of gray, seemed to be too heavy for the slender white throat, pulling the head back so that it was regally uptilted.

And who was the angel-faced young thing with whom Esther was carrying on such an enveloped conversation? The girl sat considerably taller than Esther, her ash-blond, shoulder-length hair was faintly wavy, her complexion tea-rose, her light gray, large-pupiled eyes almost too widely set. The long, rather narrow, unrouged mouth seemed oddly without animation either when the girl spoke or when she smiled. A remarkable face for a painter, Phoebe Larson thought. An unawakened, sexless face, a Sleeping Beauty face. Phoebe stole another covert look, and saw the resemblance between the older and the younger woman.

The resemblance rode—the verb occurred to Phoebe at once as adequate—in the nose. They were both high-saddled noses, delicately retroussé. Esther's, however, was more fleshy and sensual at the nostrils. Unless Phoebe Larson had lost her dependable powers of discernment, the exquisite child was Esther Clarke's daughter.

Now, again, Esther looked straight across at Phoebe, and this time the quickly searching frown and the veiling of the eyes gave way to an oddly smooth expanse, a composure such as might visit a lake after a slight trouble of fog. Esther Clarke presumably did not recognize Phoebe at all. But at her age, Phoebe enjoyed a bit of devilment, and decided to indulge the impulse for it now. She gave the waitress her order, picked up her bag and gloves, and walked across the room.

It was many years since Phoebe had tried to shrink her height. She strode tall and well-angled in her gray tweed suit with the canary-yellow blouse and the gray *Daché* sailor to the table where Esther Clarke—if it *was* Esther, indeed—and the heavenly child sat.

“Please do forgive me,” Phoebe said in her hearty, forthright voice that had worked better with buyers over the years than any “cultured” tone she had ever heard, “if I have made a mistake. I’m Phoebe Larson, from Sun Rock, Minnesota. Aren’t you Esther Clarke?”

Esther had already drawn up her defenses, whatever they might mean. Her smile was glowing.

“Why, Phoebe Larson! How perfectly wonderful! But—but how did you recognize me after all these years? Do sit down!”

Phoebe took a chair, almost laughing at the memory of her own awkwardness in crowding herself into a seat beside Esther at the Rosebud Ice Cream Parlor, back in Sun Rock in 1913.

“I’ve just ordered tea,” she said.

“Have the girl bring it here,” Esther said. “Oh, dear! I’m quite overcome! Ellen—oh, this is my daughter Ellen, Phoebe. Phoebe Larson was my very best friend in high school, darling, back in Sun Rock. I must have told you about her. I know I did. Oh, goodness, I’ll have to catch my breath!” She tinkled a gay laugh.

Phoebe, meanwhile, had shaken Ellen’s hand, fearing by the languid look of the girl that her fingers would be boneless and limp. They were far from boneless, however, and Phoebe was so agreeably surprised that she scarcely heard Esther requesting the waitress to bring the muffin and the pot of tea from the other table.

“Ellen and I,” Esther proceeded then, “always come here for tea when her classes permit. She’s at the university—she graduates next month. Sometimes she has late laboratory work, and then I have to stay at home and see to it that she has a good substantial dinner ready for her. The young get so hungry. She’s taking science—and all those rats and things—it’s quite different from the days when we went to school, Phoebe.” Her laugh now, Phoebe thought, was feverishly cosy.

“It is, indeed,” Phoebe said. “We didn’t have the advantages of a college education, Esther.” Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say, she thought. There was some false front to Esther Clarke behind which there might lurk almost anything. She glanced again at Ellen and saw those black-welled eyes with the pewter-gray iris staring at her. Unaccountably, Phoebe felt a chilling qualm, and poured herself a cup of tea.

“You certainly have a lovely daughter, Esther,” she said. “I never did marry. How I envy you!”

Esther laughed again, the same strained, unnatural laugh. “That name—Esther!” she said, with a glance at her daughter. “Ellen and I will tell you

about it later. But you must tell us about yourself, Phoebe. I've been rattling on—I got so excited meeting you. How do you ever happen to be here in Madison?"

Briefly Phoebe outlined her career in the business world, and lighted a cigarette before she noticed that there was no ash tray on the table. Esther and her daughter evidently did not smoke. Both of them had their eyes fixed upon her in concentrated silence as she told of having worked for a year or two in Hanson's Mercantile, in Sun Rock, before she met a traveling saleswoman who had started her on her career. Her sales territory included Madison now, and she was resting over-night to catch the plane to Minneapolis in the morning.

"What a thrilling story, Phoebe!" Esther exclaimed, clasping her hands and then quickly thrusting them beneath the table.

The gesture was not lost to the keen eyes of Phoebe Larson. Apparently Esther wanted to hide her hands, as though they wore soiled or ragged gloves. "It isn't very thrilling, I'm afraid," Phoebe remarked, "but I've managed to get along."

Esther's eyes held a distant look. "Who would have dreamt, back there in Sun Rock, that you—that you and I could ever have come so far from that little valley? You see, Ellen?" Her laughter tinkled toward her daughter once more. "As I've said so often, dear, you don't have to be *born* to city ways in order to become city-wise. Look at Phoebe and me—both Sun Rock expatriots—"

Ellen glanced at her mother indolently, touching her napkin lightly to her rougeless lips. The girl had not spoken a word since her polite "How do you do?" to Phoebe. She did not speak now, except with her eyes.

"Oh, I mean *expatriates*, of course," Esther wailed. "Ellen and I have *such* a time with my terrible vocabulary, Phoebe. I do my best, but—"

"Now, mother dear," Ellen spoke up for the first time, "you always express yourself beautifully, and you know it. You are all excited over meeting an old friend."

Phoebe was startled. The child, this store-window mannequin apparently was no deaf-mute. Phoebe glanced at her again, and was touched to the heart by the wistfulness, the delicate anxiety and sweetness in those grave eyes directed at her mother. And Phoebe Larson felt a true stab of regret. With a daughter like the young Ellen, life would be a structure ever building upward toward the sun, for there was that in the girl that met the eyes only upon a deeper searching—a strong and noble process of spirit and body not to be superficially observed.

"I *am* excited!" Esther said. "It's such a bridge—or something—to the past, isn't it, Phoebe?"

"I think it's fun," Phoebe said. "But you haven't told me anything about yourself, Esther."

"Oh, that name! Ellen and I always laugh at it. You see, when I was in concert work in the east, I had to change it. I had to have something more professional—more glamorous, sort of. So I took the name of Ronda—Ronda Cameron. I never liked Esther for a name. It sounds so—so biblical."

"It isn't so different from Ellen," Phoebe remarked. "They're both good solid names. But—your married name?"

"Oh, I should have told you that! It's Southflagg. My husband was Milton Southflagg. He was a textile manufacturer, back east, in Connecticut. He was a wonderful man, Phoebe. We lost him when Ellen was only five, but she remembers him very well, don't you, Ellen?"

"Quite well," Ellen said absently.

"It's so thrilling meeting you like this, Phoebe," Esther went on. "Look—we have so much to talk about. Can't you come to dinner with us tonight, since you're going to stay over until tomorrow?"

"Why, yes, I'd love to, if it's no trouble to you."

"None at all. We have a little apartment not too far from here. Ellen and I have always felt we shouldn't be far apart, even while she's in school. We'd love to have you spend the evening with us, wouldn't we, Ellen?"

Ellen was swinging her long hair back from her shoulders as though she felt warm. Her eyes now thoughtfully met Phoebe Larson's.

"Why, yes, mother—of course. There's the chicken left over from last night, and Lucy can throw a salad together. I ought to telephone her now and let her know we're having a guest. And I'd better order a taxi while I'm at it."

"Do that, dear," her mother said quickly, and the tall girl got up with an infinitely graceful, faintly circling motion that at once fascinated and puzzled Phoebe. What did it remind her of? A slow, golden eddy in a stream? A young willow curving and lifting in the wind?

"Ellen may not have much imagination," Esther said, her eyes following the girl, "—creative, I mean. But she always thinks of the practical things, especially when I'm in a dither. And she goes right ahead and does them. We have a car of sorts, but it's laid up for repairs just now. It's just like her to think of a taxi. But she is lovely, don't you think?"

“She’s beautiful!” Phoebe said sincerely. “Has she any Hollywood ambitions?”

Esther’s face seemed to close like a suddenly shut fan. “None at all. She doesn’t even care for the movies. Or the stage. She has a good speaking voice, I think, but the poor child can hardly carry a tune. She doesn’t take after her mother much in that respect. And I’m rather glad she doesn’t. Music isn’t an easy career. There’s so much professional jealousy and—oh, just everything.”

“I seem to remember a bit of jealousy back in Sun Rock,” Phoebe smiled. “You can find that anywhere.”

“I suppose so. It may sound funny to you, Phoebe, but I never think of those days any more. I’ve told Ellen a little about it, of course, but—here she comes now.”

Ellen Southflagg, with her wonderful hatless head and her costume of severely tailored blue jacket, white linen blouse, and the new-look swirl of skirt that on her was not clumsy, seemed to approach the table on the wave of some mysterious tide. People stared at her, but she appeared quite oblivious of the stares.

“Lucy got some asparagus in, mother,” she said as she came to the table, “and she’ll make a hollandaise, so we’ll make out. The taxi will be here in two minutes.”

“Thank you, dear,” her mother said. “We don’t know what we’d do without our Lucy, do we, Ellen? We’ve managed to keep her for nearly twenty years, only because she was devoted to Ellen when she was a baby.” As she spoke, she beckoned to the waitress, and in a moment Phoebe found herself out of the tearoom and seated in a taxicab between Ellen and her mother.

“Perhaps Miss Larson would like a cocktail before dinner, mother,” Ellen said in her slumbrous voice. “I don’t think we have a thing left in the house. Uncle Durwood finished the bourbon when he was here last week.”

Uncle Durwood? Of course, Phoebe remembered. They used to call him Duke, back in Sun Rock. And how Phoebe had admired him!

“You mean Duke?” she asked eagerly. “Is he still on the scene?”

“Very much, indeed,” Esther said, and leaned forward to speak to the driver. “I’ll have to tell you about him. Driver, will you please take us by way of a liquor store? Or—you *do* take a cocktail, don’t you, Phoebe? One never knows nowadays whether—”

“Oh, anything at all, but don’t bother on my account,” Phoebe said. “A good home-cooked dinner will be treat enough for me, after weeks of hotel

fare.”

“But we have to celebrate our reunion,” Esther said. “Perhaps a dry sherry—”

“Anything at all,” Phoebe told her.

Esther turned again to the driver. “Do you know where Brown’s is—in the middle of the next block?”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you want to stop there?”

“Just for a minute, please.”

A few moments later, the car drew to the curb and Esther got out. Phoebe noticed that her apple-green spring suit was not too modish to conceal the slender grace of her legs. Her ankles, above the stilt-heeled suède pumps actually did twinkle in the afternoon light as she stepped across the sidewalk and into the store.

“Mother doesn’t look fifty, do you think, Miss Larson?” Ellen asked.

The girl’s voice conveyed no more animation than when she had mentioned the asparagus.

“She doesn’t look a day over thirty,” Phoebe said. “In fact, the two of you might be taken almost for sisters.”

Ellen smiled. “I hear that all the time. I think it’s because she devoted herself so entirely to her music. Singing keeps one young, they say. I hate to think of what I’ll look like when I’m fifty.”

“There are lots of things to keep one young besides singing, my dear,” Phoebe said.

“But you’d think anyone on the concert stage would become—well, sophisticated. But mother has always been so unworldly, and still is. In some ways she seems younger than I am. She lost her voice, you know, in a terrible illness. That was before she met my father.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hadn’t known about that.”

But Ellen was staring, gray-eyed, straight ahead of her. “In our psychology class last year, we discussed cases where people suffer from shock and remain at the same age for years—or until they’re cured. Sometimes they even revert to an earlier age and never grow up. I don’t mean that mother is one of those. She isn’t, of course. But here she comes. We mustn’t be talking about her. That’s one thing mother dislikes.”

Esther was all apology as she got back into the cab. She couldn’t be waited on at once, and then the man had to go to the cellar for the particular brand of sherry she preferred.

Ellen patted her hand. “You don’t have to be upset about it, mother. We won’t starve to death within the next hour or two. I don’t know when I’ve seen you so jittery.”

“I don’t think I’m jittery,” Esther replied. “I may be excited, but who wouldn’t be? And the way some of these salespeople act nowadays—”

“All right, mother,” Ellen soothed her. “Just forget about it.”

As they entered the apartment, a raw-boned, elderly woman, crisp in a white apron, greeted them at the door and took the parcel Esther gave her.

“It’s sherry, Lucy. Open it, please, and let us have a little before we sit down to eat. Oh—Phoebe Larson and Lucy Miller—my two oldest friends, just about. I *do* want you to know each other!”

The woman bowed without speaking, relieved Phoebe of her hat, and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Look after Phoebe, dear,” Esther said to Ellen as she hurried off down the hall. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

The living room into which Ellen led Phoebe had slate-gray, deep carpeting, and walls of an olive-green stippled plaster. On two opposite walls were incomprehensible panels of flowing figures done in Chinese red and silver oils. The Adam mantel was chastely ivory.

“What a striking room!” Phoebe said as she seated herself in a small house of a chair that was covered with slate-gray velvet.

Then she saw something humbly nameable—an exquisite spinet style piano, a gnome of an instrument with a gray finish that matched the carpet, thrust almost into oblivion by the tyrannic walls.

“We think it’s different,” said Ellen, spiraling down to the Chinese red velvet sofa. “The panels were done by an old friend of mother’s, quite a famous portrait painter who doesn’t do this sort of thing as a rule. He did that portrait of me over there on the other wall. But when we got the apartment, he did the murals as a birthday present for mother. You may have heard of him. His name is Oliver Whittle.”

Phoebe hesitated for a moment. “I may have. But I find very little time for keeping up with art.”

“Your work must be rather demanding,” Ellen said, and pronounced the word *rah-ther*, in a voice that was both listless and luminous at the same time.

“It is, a little,” Phoebe admitted. “But it’s work—and it’s a living. Have you decided what you’re going to do after you graduate?”

“Oh, yes, definitely. I’m going to be married and have a family.”

“Well!” Phoebe laughed. “You have a nice husband already picked out?”

“Oh, no—but he’ll come along. I’m not the career woman type. I’m not the least bit artistic, and business would simply bore me.”

Phoebe was not affronted by the remark. She was forced, however, to rack her brains for some adequate retort to the girl’s challenging frankness.

But at that moment Ellen’s mother entered the room. She had changed to a long housecoat of pearl-gray satin, with clasps of coral, and had evidently freshened her make-up and brushed her hair. As though the transformation had been merely a quick change between scenes, she made no reference to it, smiling only as she sat down on a crescent-shaped, flame velvet pouf near the little piano.

“You see, Phoebe,” she said, with the whimsical upcurve of her left lip that still showed the beguiling dimple Phoebe remembered, “I’m still looking *up* to you the way I did when we were kids in school. What a shrimp I used to feel myself then! You were so—so statuesque alongside poor little me!”

For an unbelievable instant Phoebe Larson experienced some contracting impulse throughout the length of her body as she used to do years ago, and then she wanted to laugh out loud. Here, finally, was at least a remnant of the Esther Clarke she had known in Sun Rock.

The maid brought the sherry in on a tray fashioned of leucite and silver. There were canapés—avocado paste on potato chips and cream cheese rolled in chipped beef and appropriately tooth-picked.

“No little-pigs-in-blankets?” Esther asked.

“There wasn’t time,” Lucy explained briefly.

“And I wasn’t home in time to help,” Ellen spoke up.

“Lucy and Ellen love fussing with canapés and hors d’oeuvres,” Esther said, “but I’m no good at it at all. My husband used to say that I was just meant to sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam.” Her laugh tinkled again like a music box, but with modest self-deprecation.

“These are very nice,” Phoebe said as she helped herself from the tray that Lucy held before her. “And what dainty sherry glasses!”

“That’s another thing,” Esther went on. “Milton was so particular about using the proper glasses when he served drinks to his friends. I tried to remember which was which and what was for what, but I’m so hopelessly dumb. If I hadn’t had a husband who spoiled me, I don’t know what I would have done. He never let me do a thing for myself. He wouldn’t even let me

help him close the windows in a storm. Poor dear, he knew how terrified I was of thunder.”

That was certainly not Esther Clarke talking now, Phoebe thought to herself.

“He died from a heart attack, trying to shut a window that was stuck when the rain came,” Ellen observed, and sipped her sherry.

That was certainly Ellen talking, at any rate, Phoebe thought. She was appalled in spite of herself, not at the revelation but at the girl’s calm delivery of it.

Esther swept to her beautiful little silver-shod feet. “Ellen, it isn’t like you to shock people with such remarks,” she said. “Besides, we’re not at all sure that’s what brought on the attack. You were only five at the time. And besides, the doctor told us your father didn’t have a strong heart. Anything might have—”

“I’m sorry, mother,” Ellen apologized.

Esther turned toward the dining room. “I think I hear Lucy getting ready to serve dinner. Maybe you’d like to visit the bathroom first, Phoebe. It’s just down the hall, to the left. Ellen and I will wait for you here.”

Alone in the bathroom, Phoebe Larson not only took in the luxury of detail, from monogrammed towels to crystal bottles of perfume and toilet waters, but pondered on the unit which in this brief time had come to name itself irresistibly in her mind as Ellen-and-I. At this moment, Esther was probably coaching her daughter on what to say and what not to say in Phoebe’s presence. The eastern manufacturer must have left his widow and child well provided for, if he had died when Ellen was only five, perhaps fifteen years ago. But what were they doing in Madison, Wisconsin? Surely there were schools enough in the east where Ellen could have gone.

The dinner was beautifully prepared, candle-lit. Phoebe enjoyed it, in spite of the somewhat disturbing glances Lucy Miller leveled at her as she came and went. A sense of disquiet gradually crept over her. Did the woman regard her as some sort of nemesis out of the past, come to work its evil designs upon her mistress? Had Phoebe herself been led here by some dark fate to fill out a phantasy that had its beginnings perhaps in a stone quarry or in the haunted ravine back in Sun Rock? The past couple of hours had certainly provided enough to excite one’s imagination. An old gentleman accosting her in the street, though scarcely with evil intent; the incredible happenstance of her meeting with Esther Clarke; the girl Ellen, with her startling beauty and grace—and with her equally startling outbursts in conversation; the woman, Lucy Miller, who eyed her as if she were the

original unwelcome guest; and finally Esther herself, who obviously and as if by instinct kept her hands almost out of sight, even while she ate, and who talked as if she were afraid of someone asking a question she could not, or would not, answer. It was like trying to put together the parts of some mechanical toy, one part of which was missing. *Oh, pshaw!* Phoebe laughed wryly at herself, *I've been reading too many mystery stories on Pullmans.*

Still, Lucy Miller's darting eyes were too sharp for comfort. She had been with Esther, of course, ever since Milton Southflagg's time, the trusted family servant, the shielding ever-watchful servant. Watchful over Ellen, or over Esther? Phoebe found it almost impossible to concentrate upon the dinner table talk that seemed to be rather aimlessly flitting about Ellen's laboratory work at the university.

She was perplexed, too, at Esther's continuing to urge more food upon her daughter when the girl appeared already to have despatched quite enough to meet all normal requirements. Ellen ate with a kind of legerdemain delicacy, as if she thought there was something vulgar in the function. Her hand, in its manoeuvring of a chicken wing was certainly quicker than the eye.

"And did you remember your vitamin pills today, dear?"

"Yes, mother."

"I wish you'd move that candle a little to one side. It's catching too much breeze. Lucy must have the outer door to the kitchen open."

It would have been just as easy for Esther to have moved the candle herself, Phoebe observed, had her hands not been under the table.

The telephone rang in the hall, and Lucy came to report that the call was for Ellen. There followed a dead silence at the table as Esther, head thrust to one side, listened to the girl's voice at the telephone.

Ellen returned almost at once and swung her hair back from her shoulders in an impatient gesture.

"It was Eunice Wilmont, mother," she sighed as she sat down at the table. "She wants me to go out tonight on a blind date, of all things!"

"A blind date!" Esther was prettily concerned. "Well, dear—I don't approve of blind dates, as you know. But Eunice Wilmont—"

"She's so dumb!" Ellen said. "She picked the easiest course she could find last year, and then flunked it."

But Esther smiled at Phoebe. "And her family sent her on a cruise to South America for the summer—as a reward, I suppose."

"Just a rich bitch!" Ellen declared.

“Why—Ellen Southflagg!”

The rebuke passed over the girl’s serene head. “I told her I didn’t think I could go. Irene Reid was supposed to go, but she came down with a cold and Eunice wants me to take her place.”

“Who is the boy?” Esther asked.

“It’s a *blind* date, mother,” Ellen reminded her. “I have no idea who he is—somebody from the engineering school at the university, Eunice told me. Quite tedious!”

“I don’t think you should have been so hasty, dear,” Esther said. “The Wilmonts are really a nice family. Mr. Wilmont is quite prominent in business and—”

“And politics,” Ellen added. “And his wife is a socialite. I don’t find them interesting.”

“You’re just being silly, dear,” Esther said. “I’m sure the boy Eunice wants you to go out with—”

“Do you want me to go on the party, mother?” Ellen put in. “They’re going to dance at the Swashbuckler, out on the lake. It’ll be the same stupid business of drinks and smokes and bathroom jokes. It’s all so pointless! But if you want me to go—I told Eunice I’d call her back.”

“Well, dear,” Esther said, seizing the advantage, “it won’t be much fun for you to sit around and listen to Phoebe and me for a whole evening. We’ll have things to talk about—”

“Very well, mother,” Ellen said as she got up and sauntered into the hall. “I’ll call Eunice.”

“You mustn’t be out after one, dear,” Esther called after her, then leaned toward Phoebe and lowered her voice. “Bringing up a daughter has its problems these days. Not that Ellen has ever caused me a moment’s real anxiety. Sometimes I feel she is almost too trustworthy. She doesn’t get out enough—doesn’t seem to care about meeting new people. I didn’t mind it so much when she was younger. So many things happen to young girls nowadays. Besides, she was all I had, and we’ve always been so close. But she’s getting to the age now when—”

Ellen came to the doorway. “I’ll have to get ready right away. They’ll be here to pick me up in ten minutes. I’ll wear my forget-me-not organdy, mother.”

“Just as you wish, dear. Don’t forget to take enough money with you, just in case. And please don’t drive with anybody who has had the least bit too much to drink. And—one o’clock, remember—no later, now.”

Ellen disappeared, and Esther glanced toward the window. Phoebe peered between the curtains and saw pearly-blue thunderheads low to the left.

“I do hope it doesn’t blow up a storm,” Esther said, her brows knitting briefly. “Let’s have our coffee in the living room, shall we?”

While they waited for Lucy to bring the coffee, Phoebe opened her purse and found one lone cigarette in a silver case she carried for sentiment’s sake. A man had wanted to marry her once . . .

“Is that your last cigarette?” Esther asked.

“I’m afraid it is. I forgot to get more—”

“We have lots,” Esther said, getting up quickly. “Ellen and I don’t smoke, but Lucy keeps the cabinet well stocked. *She* smokes. Come and pick out your favorite brand.”

It was a beautiful little rosewood cabinet, over-shadowed, like the piano, by the looming murals and the powerful modern furniture that gave Phoebe an uncomfortable feeling, now that she expected to spend the whole evening in the room.

“This is where Milton always kept his pipes and tobacco,” Esther explained as she opened the cabinet. “That’s a photograph he had taken ten years before his death—when he was forty-five.” She took the picture out and held it near a floor lamp for Phoebe to look at it. “For a business man he was very romantic. He told me that if anything happened to him—he knew he might go suddenly, I’m sure—he wanted his picture kept here with his pipes and things. He didn’t want it hanging around always in sight, because I might want to marry again. But I had Ellen, and I never did want to marry again.”

Phoebe looked intently at the likeness of Milton Southflagg. It was an undistinguished face, somewhat meek despite the square jaw, the prominent nose, and the thick, curling iron-gray hair. The suggestion of diffidence resided, Phoebe thought, in the smallish mouth that was not rendered more masculine by the clipped mustache. There was something timid too about the deep eyes set beneath eyebrows that were sparse in contrast with the strong hair. A most paradoxical face, Phoebe decided, and could not tell whether or not she would have liked the man.

She found her favorite brand of cigarettes and went back to her chair as Lucy came in with the coffee.

“You might bring in the sherry too, Lucy,” Esther suggested as she sat down to pour the coffee. “We’ll want it later. Oh, there’s the doorbell! That’s probably Eunice now. Go and let her in, Lucy, please.”

But Ellen came rushing in from the hall. “Never mind, Lucy. Eunice isn’t coming up. I told her I’d meet her downstairs. I’m wearing your pearls, mother. They’re so nice with this dress.”

“Do be careful with them, won’t you, dear?”

“More careful than you are, mother,” Ellen retorted. “When I went to look for them they weren’t in the cloisonné box. I finally found them in the bathroom cabinet.” She stooped and kissed her mother’s cheek, smiled at Phoebe and fluttered her fingers as she hurried to the door. “I took one of your nice hankies, mother—mine look so clumsy with this dress.” And then she was gone.

“I’ll be so glad when she’s through with her university work,” Esther sighed. “She’s so taken up with her books. Well, I suppose it’s perfectly natural, in a way. I could think of nothing but my work before I met Milton. When I had my career, I devoted myself to *that*. It was my greatest mistake, I know now. No woman should leave marriage off till she’s thirty—if she’s thinking of marriage at all. If she gives everything to a career, of course, as I did—but Ellen isn’t ambitious for a career.”

“She told me as much,” Phoebe said. “She seems bent on getting married as soon as she finds the right man.”

“I’d like nothing better,” Esther said, “—when the right man comes along, of course. I’m not sorry I waited for Milton, even if I was thirty before he came into my life. Oh, dear, life can be so unpredictable! Who would have dreamt, thirty-five years ago, that you and I would be sitting here together—like this—drinking our coffee in Madison, Wisconsin?”

“I still can’t believe it,” Phoebe said. “If you called me *Phoeb*, as you used to, it would seem even more unbelievable.”

“*Phoeb*, of course! Why, I had almost forgotten. But I’ve forgotten so much—” Esther seemed to check herself. “But then, everything was so new and strange after I left Sun Rock. My time was never my own. Aunt Annie gave parties and had me meet the nicest people. And then, my studies took my mind off everything else. Anything that happened in Sun Rock just seemed like an awful dream. Madame Druré, my voice teacher, took me under her wing, and Aunt Annie was like a mother to me. For the first time in my life, I was really happy. . . .”

Madame Druré was not Madame Druré, nor had she ever thus garnished her name. She was Mayme Drury, a saloon keeper's daughter whom Nature had endowed with a true ear and a sense of absolute pitch. She could guide others in their use of their vocal cords, even though her own voice was far from melodious. She had set herself up as a teacher of singing in the theatrical district of Chicago's Loop where, if she took any pupil under her wing at all, it was to squeeze what money she could out of him. She was also a friend of Aunt Annie Clarke.

Aunt Annie—she had never heard herself called Annie by anyone—met Esther at the Chicago station early one steaming hot morning, and ritually sobbed over her.

“Poor little orphan! Did you have something to eat on the train?”

“Yes, I brought some sandwiches with me, and a couple of oranges, and some cake Mrs. Flathe gave me when I left. But I haven't had breakfast.”

“Well, then,” said Aunt Annie, flashing a yellow-toothed smile, “we'll treat ourselves to a taxicab this once and go straight home. Have you got a trunk?”

“No, just these two suitcases.”

“All right, then. No, thanks, porter, we can manage. If you've got any money in your purse, Esther, you'd better let me take care of it. We go through a rough district on the way home.”

Esther handed her the fifty dollars Durwood had tied into a handkerchief and tucked away in her red imitation leather pocketbook. Her board and room at Aunt Annie's was at once established at five dollars a week, a rate that would rapidly eat into the initial allowance Durwood had made her, Esther realized. Her singing lessons would cost her an additional two dollars each—a special rate, Aunt Annie explained, that she had herself arranged because of her long friendship with Mayme Drury. There was no guarantee, of course, that Esther's voice would ever develop into anything above the average, or that she would ever be able to make a living out of singing. With that in mind, Aunt Annie was offering her an opportunity to learn the millinery trade under her expert guidance. Her apprenticeship would cost Esther nothing, her aunt promised generously, though three other girls in the *Chapeaux à la Mode* were actually paying her ten dollars a month for their training. It was always wise, even for young people who looked forward to a career on the stage—oh, especially for them!—to have something they could turn to if anything happened.

Had Esther written at once to Durwood and described even temperately the conditions in which she found herself, in all likelihood he would have

somehow made a place for her in his new world with Chet Minninger. As it was, she sketched for him only, in her first letter, the bewildering hugeness of Chicago and how different it was from Sun Rock. Even the weather, she wrote, was larger, though the sky seemed smaller. Oh, yes, Aunt Annie was very kind and was taking her at once to see a wonderful singing teacher. At the age of sixteen, she was doing what she could to spare her brother any anxiety about her. She was also, unconsciously, laying a foundation of pleasant fiction strong enough to bear the structure of ugly fact that was already building. She had already sensed that in the veins of their Aunt Annie blood did not run much thicker than water. Within the first hour after Esther's arrival, indeed, the old girl had expressed her disapproval on learning that Durwood was keeping Esther's money under his own trusteeship. But of that Esther wrote nothing. Within her was the abiding fear that Durwood might insist on her returning to Sun Rock and the guardianship of the kindly Mrs. Flathe. On that point she had made up her mind—she would never go back to Sun Rock.

The three rooms of Aunt Annie's home at the rear of the hat shop were a spill-over from the front. In the parlor, where Esther was given a sofa to sleep on, and in Aunt Annie's bedroom as well as in the kitchen, the furniture was draped with odds and ends of tulle, veiling, ostrich plumes and scraps of straw, felt and velvet. The bathroom was off the kitchen, and even there Esther found that her aunt had left strands of thread and ribbon, matching them in her spare time.

Esther's first assigned duty was to keep the three rooms tidy, an almost insuperable task. Aunt Annie, moreover, required breakfast in bed, to settle her nerves for her strenuous day. It became the care of Esther, then, to rise at seven and prepare pancakes and bacon, or an omelet, and coffee which must be made meticulously with a beaten egg. Before she retired, finally, Aunt Annie must have her temples rubbed with camphor ice to relieve her of migraine headaches. Who had performed these services before, Esther did not know, nor did she enquire.

The *Chapeaux à la Mode* had its being on the fringe of a middle-class residential district, and drew its clientele for the most part from stenographers, salesgirls, and the wives of small tradesmen and office clerks. Activities in the shop began at eight in the morning and ceased long after dark, with brief periods allowed for meals which Aunt Annie cooked, after a fashion, leaving the dishes for Esther to wash. Besides the three paying apprentices, there was a permanent fixture in the place who went by the name of Minerva Blessingham. Minerva, far from resembling her classical predecessor whose proud name she bore, was something less than five feet

tall, not quite as broad, and trundled about among the customers with a fawning alacrity that sold hats even to those who had merely come in out of the rain. She wore a purplish-black transformation in a dusty hair net, and a gold watch pinned to her sausage-tight bosom with a fleur-de-lis of gold.

Aunt Annie compensated Miss Blessingham's selling genius with the handsome salary of fifteen dollars a week, a fractional commission on her sales, and lunch. The poor woman was bitterly grateful for her mistress's munificence. She would never have found a place in any of the more select shops in the city.

The three girls in the shop, Lily, Edna and Flo, might possibly have produced a sort of composite of good looks. Lily had silky gold hair, but her face was pitted with acne. Edna's skin was clear enough, but her left eye roved toward her nose. Flo had good long legs, with neat ankles, and an arresting figure, but a sinus trouble kept her long nose constantly inflamed.

All under twenty, the girls smiled cordially on being introduced to Esther, duly welcomed her into their circle—and with even more cordiality resented her immediately for her flawless beauty. Minerva Blessingham instinctively feared her because she might easily become an ornament in the salesroom and a consequent threat to her commissions.

Within a week after her arrival, Esther was taken to see Mayme Drury. Aunt Annie went with her, on the streetcar, to show her the way. Esther would have to go alone thereafter, but the journey took only twenty minutes, with a scant block to walk after she left the car.

"I'm glad it's no more than a block," Aunt Annie said, "especially if you have to go nights. I don't want you falling into the hands of any of these white slavers. The city is full of them devils, laying in wait for a pretty girl like you. But all you have to do is call a policeman if a man smiles at you on the street."

Esther had never heard of white slavers, and to her enquiries Aunt Annie merely looked severely prim. On the streetcar, several men had already looked at her, if not with actual smiles at least with glances of approval. She stiffened and tightened her grip on her pocketbook. Perhaps it was that they were after.

It was just after lunch when they reached the studio, and Mayme Drury had a few minutes to spare before the arrival of her next pupil. She embraced Annie gushingly at the door, then turned in a frenzy of enthusiasm upon Esther.

"So this is the little heiress! My, my, how pretty she is! Why didn't you tell me on the phone, Annie? She'll have all the boys singing serenades to

her before she's—"

"I'm not an heiress, Miss Drury," Esther choked out. "I don't know how you got that idea."

"Oh, dear-dear-dear-dear!" cried Mayme, and had the grace to redden. "How stupid of me, Annie! I'm confusing her with the Romano girl. It was the same day you phoned, and her grandmother had died—she was in macaroni, you know, and left the child a small fortune. Juliet Romano—odd coincidence, isn't it? She has a pure little soprano. You'll meet her, Elsie—ah, Esther, I mean! Well, shall we go in and sing a little something? I have only a minute, but I want to hear the voice."

Mayme wore a long, scarlet, gold-bordered robe, slued across one shoulder somewhat in the fashion of a toga. She led the way into a room high-ceilinged and bizarrely oriental in decor, with teakwood and Persian brasses and drapes of scarlet silk. She flounced to the piano, a shabby veteran grand of fine tone, and struck half a dozen chords.

"Just a scale or two—up and down—singing *ah*."

Esther quaked, sweat springing out on her palms. She did her best, but her voice was barely audible.

Suddenly Mayme Drury raised her porcelain eyes to the ceiling and gave vent to an arpeggio that might well have lifted a canvas tent.

"Let the voice out, dearie!" she bellowed. "I want to hear it."

Esther tried again, this time with a little more success.

"We'll sing something," Mayme suggested. "How about *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*? You know it, of course?"

Know it? Esther thought of Danny O'Rourke, and sang the song through in a kind of fearless dream, because she had once sung it to him on a granite knoll at home, when sumac brands burned purple in the full moonlight.

Mayme Drury turned from the piano, her hands clasped to her bony chest. "An Irish angel, Annie! The ghost of a colleen!" Then she looked at Esther. "You have a sweet voice, dearie. Small, but true. It'll take work to bring it out, to build it up—work and time and patience."

Esther looked at Aunt Annie and saw the cynical narrowing of her mouth and eyes. "Has it got enough to warrant the time and the patience, do you think?" Annie Clarke asked. "Has it got that *tawmber* you're always talking about?"

Mayme Drury eyed her friend for a moment. "Annie," she said, "you know I don't flatter my pupils—and I don't make promises. As I say, it's a sweet voice, full of feeling and true. There isn't much volume yet, though

that will improve when Esther learns how to produce her tones so as to get the most out of them. And that's what I'm here for. After a few months of hard work, we'll know more about it. For a while, she'll have to come twice a week."

"Well, we'll see," Annie said. "She'll start in—at the rates you gave me over the phone. Two dollars a lesson—two lessons a week. I know you'll do as much for her as any teacher in the city, Mayme."

Mayme Drury smiled. "My pupils are my best advertisement, Annie." She reached out to pat Esther's hand. "Come in at five on Wednesday. We'll have our first lesson and arrange your time. There's the doorbell," she said, and rustled her robe toward the door. "I'm expecting Raymond Bishop and his fiancée, Constance Blaine—a couple of my pupils who are working the Chautauqua circuit for the summer."

In a moment, she ushered in, not two, but six people, all of whom she greeted effusively by their first names. The group seemed to be in a high pitch of merriment and it was at once revealed that Raymond and Constance had been married that morning, and had come from the wedding breakfast with four friends, two young men and two young women who were also pupils of Mayme Drury.

The introductions were a kind of running rigmarole, as though everybody present were a famous person whom everybody else should know—and yet Mayme Drury's personal property. Esther lifted her chin in what she meant to appear a cool appraisal of them all, while inwardly she shrank in terror from the newcomers whom she believed to be sophisticated and very worldly.

Ruby and Adelaide, she was to learn later, sang in Chicago church choirs. Bernard, whose father was a meat packer, was a tenor with aspirations for opera, but his father's opinion was that he had heard many a pig squeal more musically than his son at his best, and had accordingly prevented the boy from leaving Chicago by the simple device of refusing him money to go anywhere else, until he was twenty-one. It was Gilbert Madden, who had been as far away as Detroit in vaudeville, and was in his early twenties, who stared fixedly at Esther when he was introduced.

"Gad!" he exclaimed. "When did you plunder the Louvre of the fair Mona Lisa, Mayme?"

But Mayme was already delving into a pouch beneath her robe. "Run out and get me a bottle of champagne, Bernard," she urged, thrusting money into the young man's hands. "This calls for a little celebration. Just think—

two of my own pupils married—and they met for the first time right here in the studio.”

“Couldn’t we go home now, Aunt Annie?” Esther asked, gripping her pocketbook. She had felt an electric tingling of animosity from the girls in the party as their eyes raked her from head to foot.

“It wouldn’t be polite to leave for a minute,” Aunt Annie whispered. “We’ll be going right away, though.”

Esther went to sit near an open window where a red curtain billowed about her neck, and looked down at the busy street below. When the champagne was finally passed about in thick water goblets, and prune-crested cookies were offered on an antique brass tray, Aunt Annie accepted a bubbling glass for herself, but declined one for Esther.

“She can try a sip out of mine,” she explained, shaking her head.

But Gilbert Madden strode gallantly to where Esther was sitting and offered his glass.

“For Helen of Troy!” he said. “And Cleopatra—and all the sirens of all time!” He smiled then and leaned close to Esther, lowering his voice. “Don’t pay any attention to these hussies, my beautiful. They’re already green with jealousy. Especially that psalm-singer Ruby. It’s a good omen, my dear. When one woman hates another—”

He staggered a bit, the goblet still in his hand, and Aunt Annie hurried across to grasp Esther’s arm.

“We’re leaving now,” she said abruptly, and drew Esther with her across the room, where she bade Mayme Drury a short but cordial farewell and promised that Esther would be prompt for her lesson on the following Wednesday.

“Pay no attention to what went on there today,” she warned Esther as soon as they were on the streetcar. “It was a wedding party, and that Madden fool was just talking smart—and a little drunk besides. You’ll be going there to get your voice fixed up, and Mayme can do it if you have anything to start with. If you can sing, all right. If you can’t sing, you can still make hats. But don’t go getting ideas about how good-looking you are. And don’t listen to what fools like that Madden has to say. That’s what ruins many a girl. You’re all right to look at, but you’re no Lillian Gish, remember that. What you’ve got to do now is settle down to your work.”

Esther wasn’t much concerned about whether she was or wasn’t Lillian Gish. She was thinking more of what Gilbert Madden had said—*When one woman hates another* . . . Why should any woman hate her? And what

would Gilbert Madden have added to that cryptic beginning if Aunt Annie hadn't stepped in to interrupt him?

Chapter Three

“I prefer dealing with men,” Phoebe Larson said as she set her coffee cup aside and lighted another cigarette. “In my business, I have to work with a lot of women, naturally—buyers and heads of departments—most of them women who have come up from the ranks. Many of them are very intelligent, pleasant to meet and easy to get along with. But by and large—”

“We mustn’t be too hard on our own sex,” Esther put in, and glanced at her watch.

“Oh, men can be difficult too,” Phoebe admitted. “Still, the worst of them aren’t as bad as some of the women I have to meet.”

Esther conceded the point with a vague smile. “My own career was so different from yours, of course. Art of any kind, even singing—takes little account of—well, of *people*, I suppose. And I’m afraid Aunt Annie pampered me terribly. I often felt ashamed of myself when I saw how hard the girls in her place worked to learn their trade. I used to drop into the workroom once in a while just to see what went into the making of a hat. And were my eyes opened! The girls’ fingertips were pricked like pincushions. I couldn’t possibly have done such work. I wasn’t clever enough, anyhow. And I never felt comfortable talking to the girls, somehow. They weren’t—well, we didn’t have much in common. They were a rather low-class working girl type. Not that I have anything against girls who have to work with their hands to make a living. But the girls in Aunt Annie’s shop—all except one who came a few weeks after I went to Chicago. Madge Kemp was her name. She was poor and very shy, but she was beautiful—tall and willowy and blond. I used to treat her to a banana split—oh, do you remember how you and I used to save our dimes for sodas or banana splits at the Rosebud? I just thought of it.”

“I still like them,” Phoebe Larson confessed.

“Really? I haven’t had one in years. Let’s have some sherry, shall we? I feel positively giddy tonight—all the talk of old times, and having you here.”

She got up and filled the glasses. For a few seconds then, while the light from a floor lamp flooded the tray and glasses, Phoebe had a close look at Esther’s hands clutching the bottle in sharp relief as she poured the sherry. At first, she could see nothing that could possibly account for Esther’s too obvious effort to keep them out of sight. There was no mark, no scar, no

ugly disfigurement of any kind. The fingers, smooth and seemingly knuckleless, were long and narrowly tapered, the nail polish colorless. Why had she been so careful to hide them? And then, suddenly, Phoebe knew! The nails were curved downward over the fingertips with a claw-like, feline character that was grotesquely disturbing. Phoebe forced herself to look away, feeling that she had gazed, if only for a moment, upon something that was not quite human. She had been curious about Esther's hands even in the tearoom. Their deft use at the dinner table, permitting only the briefest glimpse now and then, had sharpened her curiosity to a point where she could think of little else. Now—she wished she hadn't seen them. She closed her eyes in an effort to rid her mind of an image that would haunt her, she knew, for days to come. Had those hands been shaped so when Esther Clarke was sixteen? At that age one perhaps did not notice such things in a friend.

"I was talking about Madge Kemp," Esther continued as she sat down again and began sipping her wine. "Oh, it can't be very interesting to you, all this, but Madge, besides being very pretty, was ambitious in her way. She wanted to model for women's clothes—I think that's what made me think of her just now, you being in the same business, in a way. She was so envious of me—in a perfectly nice way, of course—because I was able to take singing lessons with Madame Druré. Anyhow, I asked her to come along to the studio with me one day, and Madame Druré offered to give her some free instruction in how to walk—you know, how to make an entrance and how to carry herself the way a model should when she is on display. Madame Druré was the soul of art. I'm sure she would have done all she could for me if I hadn't had a penny to my name. And I might not have had a penny to my name if Duke hadn't done so well."

"I've been wanting to ask you about Duke," Phoebe said. "He was here a few days ago, I understand."

Esther laughed. "Oh, yes. I meant to tell you about him. We've had so much to talk about that I almost forgot. You always admired Duke, I remember, even though he pretended to think we girls were just brats. Well, Duke went ahead as you might have suspected, from the day he left Sun Rock and went to California. You knew he went out there to join Chet Minninger. You must remember Chet, though he was older than the rest of us."

"I remember him," Phoebe said. "I believe some of the family are still living in Sun Rock."

"Really? Well, as I say, there isn't much to tell about Duke except that he seemed to make money out of everything he touched. He invested most of

our little capital in oil, and was very lucky. Or perhaps I should give him credit for using good judgment. *I* was the one who was lucky, because, with him behind me, I never had to worry about money. I've seen so many girls simply throw themselves away—marrying someone they didn't love, and just because of money. It's horrible to think of now, but I might have been tempted to do the same myself if it hadn't been for Duke. My first real beau was well-to-do—at least he was the only son of a very wealthy widow. He proposed to me the third time he went out with me. Can you imagine?"

"Very easily," Phoebe said. "What was he like?"

"His name was Philip Beauchamp," Esther went on. "And what a proper young man. I can't help laughing to myself now whenever I think of him sitting beside me on Aunt Annie's sofa and looking through an old album of snapshots I brought with me from Sun Rock. Not even trying to hold my hand. He was a student at the university—and a poet, of all things! I liked him, but there's such a difference between liking and loving. If I hadn't been so devoted to my singing—but no, I couldn't have married him. I just wasn't in love with the poor boy. He was very attractive and if I had been more interested in—well, in the physical, I suppose you'd call it, I might even have given up my music and put the rest of my life in his hands. I'm glad I didn't, of course. I wouldn't have had Ellen, for one thing, and I never would have met Milton, naturally. I've done my best to convince Ellen that she must be really in love before she thinks of marrying anyone."

"You won't have to worry about Ellen," Phoebe said. "The girl seems quite capable of looking after herself."

"Of course she is," Esther said hastily, and glanced again at her watch. "I wonder why she hasn't phoned me. She usually does when she's out on a party—sort of lets me share her good times. But I was telling you about Philip. He was a poet—oh, I mentioned that, didn't I? He wrote a beautiful poem to me just after we first met. I copied it into my diary. Did you ever keep a diary, Phoebe?"

"No. I suppose I never had anything interesting enough to put in one," Phoebe said.

"Oh, but everybody has, some time or other," Esther said with her sudden, airy laugh.

"Maybe. But I never liked the idea, somehow. I'm always amazed when a diary turns up as evidence in a court trial. Most people aren't altogether honest about what they set down about themselves. And if some are, they probably destroy their diaries before anyone else has a chance to see them—if they're wise."

Esther's laugh was even airier than before. "It's funny you should say that. I've often wished I could have kept mine for Ellen to read. She would have got so much fun out of it. But I lost it when Milton and I moved from the first house we lived in in Connecticut, to a bigger place. The—the moving van was wrecked and—and burned, with all my personal belongings in it. My press clippings, my photographs, and my dear little diary! It was just as if all my early life had been charred with that van, leaving only ash. . . ."

It was not unusual for Esther to crawl into bed at midnight, her eyelids so stiff from weariness that she could scarcely close them, hat trimmings and loops of wire dancing before her the moment she turned off her light. But tonight, with the heat of mid-August turning the darkness into something palpable, she felt as if she might never sleep again. Other days had been bad enough, with the girls in Aunt Annie's workroom turning upon her their sly innuendoes whenever she fumbled a bit of sewing or lost patience with a bow of ribbon.

But today had been the worst of all. Aunt Annie had stepped out immediately after breakfast to do a little shopping across the street, leaving Minerva Blessingham to look after the shop and keep an eye on the girls. Esther had rushed through her kitchen chores, dried her roughened hands thoroughly, and swept the dank hair back from her brows as she hurried toward the workroom. The girls' chatter, bolder than usual in the absence of their mistress, dropped abruptly the moment she entered the room and sat down to her work. She knew—she could not help knowing—that the girls had been talking about her. Flo and Edna, making a great pretense of being absorbed in their tasks, were having a hard time smothering their giggles. Lily looked up with the air of an impudent blue jay challenging a sparrow. She had completed her training and had already received her *diploma*, done in Aunt Annie's handwriting that looked like red crochet on purple paper, but was staying on till the end of the week at Aunt Annie's request, to help finish some work that had been promised for Saturday. Esther had heard whisperings to the effect that Lily was hoping to marry the young man who called now and then to take her home at the closing hour.

At first, Esther strove to apply herself to her work and pay no attention to the others. She was more bewildered than angry, anyhow. Did they resent her merely because she was Aunt Annie's niece? It must be something more

—something more, too, than the fact that they considered her prettier than they. Madge Kemp, the tall, stately blonde who had come to take Lily's place, was prettier than any of them, prettier even than Esther herself. Yet they had not made her the target of their jibes. It was like a vibration in the blood, a kind of astral magnetism within herself against which they could find no defense except in malice.

The feeling that they had been talking about her immediately before she came into the room was momentarily dispelled when Madge Kemp greeted her with a friendly good morning. But almost at once Esther became aware of the feeling that seemed to fill the very air she breathed. She was having trouble with a snarl of veiling when the girl Flo tittered, "Handsome is as handsome does!"

It was a pointless remark, Esther thought, and might have meant nothing if she hadn't grown so sensitive to such apparently innocent asides during the past few weeks.

But Lily, rolling her eyes in a look of comic despair, seized her opportunity. "A stitch in time saves nine—especially with veiling," she contributed.

They all shrieked with laughter, all except Madge Kemp, and went into further gales when Edna managed to gasp out, "Oh, Lily, you've got me in stitches!"

Esther felt the blood rushing to her cheeks.

"Maybe a little rouge would help," Lily suggested. "It does so much for a girl!"

Esther raised her head and eyed the girl coldly. "Do you mean I use rouge?" she asked.

Lily was a bold girl when she had the support of the others. She was especially bold now that she would so soon be freed of the restrictions of her apprenticeship. "If you don't," she said defiantly, "you've got the hottest looking *natural* complexion I ever saw."

Esther's hands trembled as she set her work aside and got up from her chair. In three quick steps she was beside her tormentor. Her fingers curved down like smoothly bent steel hooks and fastened upon the silky, gold hair that was Lily's pride.

"Get up!" she ordered, all but pulling the girl to her feet. "Take your handkerchief and see if you can rub any rouge off my face."

Lily faced her in fury. "You slut!" she screamed. "Take your hands off me. I wouldn't touch your dirty face with a washrag." With a sudden upward flash of her hand she slapped Esther on the mouth. "And that's just a sample

of what you'll get if you don't stop making eyes at Cecil every time he comes here."

Esther backed away, her hand pressed to her stinging lips. "Cecil—Cecil who?" she stammered, aghast, as Madge Kemp moved quietly between them. "I don't know any Cecil."

"He has seen you twice when he came here for me," Lily informed her, "but that was enough for him. He knows what you are, but if you—"

Aunt Annie came bursting into the room, her arms laden with parcels, and halted in the middle of the floor. "What's all this, what's all this?" she demanded.

Lily shrank away, pastily pale now, but Esther stood her ground rigidly.

"She called me a slut!"

Aunt Annie threw her parcels on a table and jerked off her hat. "Oh, my God, why did I ever— Minerva! Where are you, Minerva?"

Miss Blessingham was standing just beyond the doorway from the shop, her plump hands nervously plucking at the gold watch pinned to her bosom.

"I'm here, Miss Clarke. I didn't know anything was—"

"You didn't know! Isn't there anybody here that knows anything? Isn't there anybody I can trust? Are you all half-wits? Can't I turn my back for a minute without—oh, my God! Get back to work, all of you! Take those things out to the kitchen, Esther, and wash that smudge off your mouth. And don't spend all day at it!"

When Esther returned, silence prevailed in the workroom, but it was a silence jealously stabbed by needles piercing velvet and felt. Esther sat with an inscrutable little smile about the left corner of her mouth, where the dimple flickered on and off as she shaped a plush chrysanthemum for old Mrs. Bostwick's turban, a venerable monstrosity that turned up at the Chapeaux à la Mode every year for refurbishing.

Nothing more was said about the affair with Lily until supper was on the table.

"Tell me just what happened between you and Lily this morning," Aunt Annie said as soon as she was seated.

Esther told her everything. When she was done, Aunt Annie sat up stiffly in her chair. "So that's the way of it," she observed. "Well, I admit I haven't much to say for that Lily. Her work was all right, and she got her diploma fair enough, and that's all right by me. But she'll be getting out at the end of the week, and I won't be sorry to see her go. She's a trouble-maker, and she thinks she's too smart for her shoes. I don't think she's

altogether to blame. From the moment I first set eyes on her, I said to myself, ‘There’s a t.b. if I ever seen one!’ That hollow cough she has—and sometimes she looks feverish. The poor thing ain’t altogether responsible for what she does.”

“If that’s true,” Esther said, “I’m sorry for her. And I’m sorry anything happened between us, especially now that she’s leaving so soon.”

“Be that as it may,” Aunt Annie continued, “there’s something wrong about you, my girl. And it ain’t t.b. Why is it you can’t get along with the girls in the workroom? They get on all right with themselves. What’s the matter you can’t?”

“I don’t know, Aunt Annie,” Esther confessed. “I do my best, but—”

“Your best ain’t good enough, then,” Aunt Annie declared. “When you came here, I told you what I wanted. You’d have a chance to do your singing, and I was giving you a chance to learn the millinery trade. I don’t know how you’re making out with your singing—I intend to talk to Mayme Drury about that one of these days—but if you ain’t going ahead faster than you’re going in making hats, you haven’t got much to go on in either. What’s more, if you can’t get along with people you have to work with, you won’t get anywhere no matter what you take up. And I’ve been doing a little thinking about it. I’ve just about made up my mind—if you don’t get on better I’ll have to send you to Sun Rock. You’ll be better off in a small town. Or if Duke wants you out in California, let him do what he likes about it. There’s no sense in you wasting your time here.”

But long after midnight, Esther Clarke, in the darkness and the stifling heat, lay sleepless and defiant as she thought over what her aunt had said, and murmured to herself, *I won’t go back to Sun Rock—I won’t—I won’t!*

Duke’s letter, a week later, said nothing about Esther going to California, but it bore heartening news of another sort.

Dear Sis, he wrote, Well, I’ve made the plunge. I’ve taken most of our money out of the bank and bought into an oil proposition that looks good. Chet knows the guy personally and he swears it’s a lead pipe cinch. It will take a little while to know how we come out, but this is only August, and by Christmas we ought to be sitting on velvet. I’ve left enough in the bank to take care of you until after New Years, so don’t worry, kid.

Glad to know you're getting along so well at Aunt Annie's. Maybe she isn't the old egg-beater I thought she was. I'm changing my mind about her after reading your letters. And I guess making hats isn't so bad, after all, though you won't have to be a milliner if I have anything to say about it. Go ahead with your singing, though, because that's what pa wanted.

Chet's garage business is fine. We haven't touched any of the garage capital, so no matter what happens to the oil well we'll still have our business. We'll get by all right and you haven't a thing to worry about.

The moving picture industry around here is growing fast, though I've been too busy to pay much attention to it. I haven't yet had the honor of meeting Mr. David W. Griffith. Ha, ha! Wait till he meets *me*. And you! That reminds me. A friend of Chet's will be going through Chicago one of these days. He's with one of the moving picture companies out here. Chet wants him to look you up and take what they call a screen test. Chet remembers how pretty you are, though I never thought you looked too good in any of the snapshots we used to take. Your complexion doesn't show up and your nose always seemed to be sniffing at something. But if this guy looks you up, be on your guard and don't sign anything before consulting me about it. This guy's name is Blooman, or something like that. Ray Blooman, I think. Don't get excited about it though. It's all Chet's idea anyhow.

Well, I've got to get out to the garage and look over some swell's crankcase, so I'll have to sign off now. Good luck from your loving brother,

Duke.

P.S. I was only joking about the egg-beater, Aunt Annie, in case you happen to read this. I really owe you a lot for what you're doing for Sis, and I won't forget it when my oil comes in.

Early autumn came to the city, and to Esther Clarke's heart came again the memory of peaceful days spreading their fantasy of colors up and down the length of Stanley's Ravine, where the warrior ghosts danced in the crisp moonlight and the ripe hazelnuts drooped from their brittle stems. It was autumn too on the rim of the stone quarry where Danny O'Rourke had held her close when the rock went plunging downward into the earth's depths, leaving her trembling in his arms.

But in Aunt Annie's workroom, the atmosphere was approaching a state of hysteria. A certain Mrs. Beauchamp had ordered, over the telephone, a

mourning hat that had been promised for six o'clock. There was still a quarter of an hour to go, but the lady was already waiting in the front of the shop, where Minerva Blessingham was doing her best to entertain her until the hat was ready.

"You've got that hind-end first!" Aunt Annie yelled at Flo, who was already on the verge of tears. "Put the cowl in front and hang the veil—here, give it to me! How anyone can help but hang a veil the way it should go, I can't for the life of me see. Esther, go into the shop and talk to Mrs. Booshaw, or whatever her name is, before Minerva scares her away."

Esther arranged her hair quickly, brushed the thread ends from the front of her dress, and hurried out of the workroom. She walked calmly into the shop and found Minerva clasping her hands ecstatically upward from her tub of a body toward a tall, dark young man. Under the beaded lampshade, in the most comfortable chair in the place, sat a raw-boned, gray-haired woman idly turning the pages of a style magazine.

"Ah, Esther—how is modom's hat coming along?" Minerva twittered.

"It will be ready in a few minutes now," Esther said reassuringly. "We're sorry to keep you waiting."

"We're really in no great hurry," the young man said, and smiled at Esther. "Won't you sit down and talk with mother and me, Miss—"

"My name is Esther Clarke," she told him, and with a direct look dismissed him as being too handsome. Danny O'Rourke had not been handsome.

"Please do, my dear," the gray-haired woman invited, as the young man placed a chair for Esther. "You must be tired after working all day. I'm completely exhausted myself. And don't start in by condoning with me over the loss of a sister-in-law I never liked. I've had all of that I can stand for one day. Every salesperson who has waited on me today had to tell me how sorry she was. I felt like telling them all to save their sympathy for someone who could use it, and stop wasting it on me. My brother's wife died of some lung trouble. It seems to be so common now. I don't know why he ever married her in the first place. He must have known—her covering her face with all that paint until she looked more like an Indian than anything human. It's a mercy she left no children. I have one son—do sit down, Philip, you make me nervous standing there gazing at this nice young girl. Don't mind him, my dear," she said through a foggy length of nose as she lifted it to Esther. "Good gracious, but you *are* a beauty!"

"Don't mind mother, Miss Clarke," the young man laughed. "She's a bit of a dragon in her way, but she has a heart of gold."

Mrs. Beauchamp beamed upon her son. "Philip is attending university here. Our home is in the southern part of the state. But it looks now as if I shall have to take over my brother's house here in Chicago and do what I can to pull him together. He's Henry Clayman, the lawyer, you know, and he's quite lost without that silly wife of his. Luckily, I'm a widow, with no emotional anchors except my brother and my son. Well, there, I've told you our whole family history, haven't I? But when I get started talking I never know when to stop. What is your background, my dear?"

"Background?" Esther echoed, glancing at the young man Philip. She saw a glint of amusement in his eyes and replied pertly, "My background, I guess, is mostly backyard."

Mrs. Beauchamp's nose descended. Then she laughed and slapped her thigh. "Well, you're honest, my dear, I'll say that for you. Unless you're joking, of course. Background—backyard! You could use that in one of your columns in the college paper, Philip. What time is it, by the way?"

"Five minutes of six, mother," he told her.

"Well, I must have that hat. The funeral is tomorrow morning. I didn't have time to get a new one before I took the train. You see this hat—" Mrs. Beauchamp stooped and picked a hat from the floor beside her chair. "It's orange and blue. I'd have worn it if my brother hadn't insisted everything had to be so proper. I can't endure black. There'll be plenty of time for that when I pass on myself. But he wanted black, and he recommended this shop, though how he happens to know anything about hat shops—my gracious, here it comes now!"

Aunt Annie swept in with the plumed and veiled mourning hat, her face properly grave and commiserating. "If you'll just step to the mirror, Mrs. Booshaw, we can try it on." She saw young Philip then, sitting with his eyes fixed upon Esther. "If you're not busy, you might go to the workroom and —"

"Stay where you are, my dear," Mrs. Beauchamp interrupted tartly. "You'll give me an honest opinion on how it looks when I get it on."

Esther sat down again, and Philip drew his chair a little closer and prepared to light a cigarette. "You don't mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all," Esther said. "We don't often have men come in, but you can use this." She gave him a glass pin tray from a table within reach.

"Thank you," he said, and looked across the room to where the women were busy in front of a mirror. "Mother will want to have that veil shortened, I'm sure. Her grief over the dear departed isn't *that* long. What do you think, Miss—Madame du Barry?"

“Madame—what?” Esther asked, the dimple coming into play at the corner of her mouth.

“Madame du Barry, of course—the famous French beauty who began her career as a milliner’s apprentice.” He lighted his cigarette and glanced at her again, and Esther saw that his eyes showed none of the bold surveyal she had become used to from men who looked at her. They held a certain shy eagerness, but that was all.

“I never heard of her,” she admitted.

“No? I’d like to tell you about her, if you’ll give me the opportunity,” Philip said. “May I come and take you for a walk—or a drive? I can get my uncle’s Overland, and we could take a spin into the country. The trees are gorgeous right now. We should go soon, while they’re at their best. Perhaps the day after the funeral—that would be the day after tomorrow.”

Esther quirked her lip. “I’ll have to think about it. I may be busy the day after tomorrow. That’s the day I take my lesson, but I might be able to change it to—”

“You’re taking lessons?”

“In singing. If I can arrange it—you could telephone me here and I could let you know. Your mother seems pleased with the hat.”

“She won’t wear it more than once, of course,” Philip laughed. “But you’ll try to get away for the afternoon, won’t you?”

Aunt Annie’s approval came easily, as Esther knew it would, flattered as she was at having her niece invited out by a “swell”—especially one whose mother might become a special customer. Esther and Philip spent the afternoon driving northward along the lake where the woods seemed to be putting on a show of color especially for them. He had told her all the long story of Jeanne Bécu, the little French girl who, at eighteen, became a milliner’s assistant in Paris, won the love of the king, bestowed offices and gifts on her favorites, and finally died on the guillotine. They had driven down a wooded lane that sloped toward the lake, and had sat for almost an hour while Philip read poetry from a small book he took from his pocket.

A week later, he called for her in a taxicab and took her to dinner where they danced till midnight. Then, on a mellow afternoon in early December, with scarcely a hint of winter in the air, they drove into the dune country south of the lake, and Esther told him of the visit of Ray Blauman, who had

talked enthusiastically of her chances for a career in Hollywood, until in the taxicab on the way home she had refused to let him kiss her. Philip promptly proposed to her, all the urgency of his young love becoming suddenly articulate in his desire to protect her from such bounders as Ray Blauman and his kind. She let him kiss her then, rather than have him think she looked upon him as another Ray Blauman. But of course she refused to marry him. It was too soon, she was too young, there were too many other things to think about. And Philip promised to be patient.

And then, four days before Christmas, on the eve of her seventeenth birthday, another letter arrived from California. Snow was falling like wet gray moths in the sooty twilight of Aunt Annie's side street when Esther received Duke's letter from the postman. She took it to the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub while she read it.

Dear Sis, he wrote, This ought to reach you in time for your birthday, and I only wish it could bring you better news. It looks like Chet and I were taken in on that oil deal. The well was a dud. Nothing but gas on grampa's stomach, as Chet puts it. You must be getting short of money, so I'm sending you what I can in a day or two. Hang on to it, kid, and if you're getting anywhere with your voice, maybe you'd better start looking for a job with some money in it. It's too bad that movie test didn't turn out better. That guy Ray thought you were a humdinger for looks. But I guess it's different in the movies where they want nothing but doll faces. You'll probably get over better on the stage anyhow, as I've always thought. So look around and see what you can find, eh?

I'm sending you and Aunt Annie each a gold ring set with a nugget I bought from an old desert rat who dropped in here a couple of weeks ago. I gave him five dollars apiece for them, and maybe they aren't pure gold—the way I've been taken in on the oil well. But they sparkle, and anyhow they're souvenirs from Californi-ay. I've learned a lot out here, Sis. I won't be taken in again by anything worse than a five dollar nugget. Don't you, either. Keep a high price on yourself, kid. And a happy birthday to you—and a merry Christmas to you and Aunt Annie—from your smart brother,

Duke.

P.S. I'm enclosing a little handkerchief for your birthday. Hope you like it.

As the full import of Duke's letter dawned upon her, Esther felt suddenly faint. She gripped the edge of the bathtub to keep from falling, and read the letter again, hurriedly. It meant simply that after a month or so she would have to depend solely upon what Duke could send her to pay for her singing lessons and her lodging with Aunt Annie. Though her voice had gained something under Mayme Drury's arduous coaching, she still had a long way to go before she would be ready to take an engagement that would satisfy her. And as for her work in Aunt Annie's shop, her hands were still all thumbs except in the designing of rosettes and the like. She must, however, keep up the fable of her happiness and success in her reply to Duke, or he might insist on her going back to Sun Rock and Mrs. Flathe.

As soon as Aunt Annie was in bed, she took a pencil and a sheet of note paper from the shoe box she kept behind her sofa in the parlor, and wrote hastily:

Dear Duke, Yours received just now and I'm sorry you've had bad luck. But please don't worry. All is going well with me here. Miss Drury says I'm ready to sing in public any time now, and she'll see to it that I get something really good for a start. Everybody is so kind and nice to me. Thanks for the lovely handkerchief—or is it handkerchief? You know me and my spelling. I won't touch it—the hanky, I mean—till some special occasion, like singing on the stage for the first time, or something like that. Aunt Annie and I bought you a necktie for Christmas. I hope you like it, though it has rather big stripes in it. I don't care about not looking so good in that movie film. That man Ray tried to get fresh with me and when I wouldn't let him he told me the movie life would probably be too hard for me anyhow. So I told him I wasn't interested as I was going on with my singing.

Hope we get those rings in time for Christmas. Aunt Annie is crazy about jewelry—or jewelery, or whatever it is. I must close now, Duke, with much love and best wishes for a Merry Christmas.

I tore up your letter so Aunt Annie won't be worried about you. I know she isn't about *me*, because I'm on my way to big things. And don't you worry about me, either, Duke. More Merry Christmas.

Sincerely your little sister,
Esther.

She addressed, sealed and stamped the envelope, and slipped it under her pillow. She would mail it tomorrow, on her way to Mayme Drury's studio.

In the morning, she found a box of seventeen red roses awaiting her when she went into the workroom—a birthday gift from Philip, who had gone to his home in the southern part of the state to spend the Christmas vacation and help his mother get ready to move into Chicago where they were to live with Mrs. Beauchamp's bereaved brother. But even the roses could not dispel the bleak mood that Duke's letter had induced. Though the Christmas season had already arrived, the girls in the workroom seemed more spiteful than ever. It had been a mistake, she realized, to open Philip's box of flowers in their presence.

"Just goes to show what a girl can get if she knows how," Flo smirked when Aunt Annie stepped into the shop to help Minerva Blessingham placate a difficult customer.

"Oh, you're just jealous," Edna piped up in a mocking voice. "It isn't every girl that can pick roses in December."

"We *could*," Rita, a new girl, observed archly, "but we *don't*."

Esther bit her lip to keep from saying anything. But a full hour before her usual time to leave for her lesson, she put on her coat and went out. She walked all the way to the studio, hoping the brisk air and the sight of hurrying Christmas shoppers might bring some relief to her taut nerves.

But it was of no use. For ten minutes or so, Mayme Drury labored and pleaded without avail. She finally turned from her piano and threw up her hands in a gesture of despair.

"Stop, stop—it's hopeless! What's the matter with you today? You're worse than you were the first day you came. Go on home and come back next week. You're wasting my time and your own, the way you're going today. Why don't you find yourself a young man or something—do something to get you out of yourself. You're all tied in knots. Go on home."

And Esther, quivering with hatred for everybody and for everything within Mayme Drury's scarlet draped walls, walked to the corner of the boulevard where she squandered her day's carfare and an extra dime on a double banana split at a soda fountain. When she came out, she strode defiantly down the boulevard for half a block, and paused before a cigar store. Digging into her red imitation leather pocketbook, she took the lace handkerchief Duke had sent her in his letter, hesitated for a moment, then with a regal air blew her nose in it.

"So—all right," she said to the painted wooden Indian in front of the shop, "nothing is too good for Esther Clarke!"

“You’re late,” Aunt Annie said when she arrived home. “But I suppose it being your birthday and all, Mayme had a little something for you.”

“I didn’t tell her it was my birthday. I just felt like walking.”

“You walked home! Well, it’s still light, so I s’pose it was all right. But I’ve warned you about being out alone in the streets.”

They were in the kitchen and Esther could smell a token of baking. “Something in the oven?”

Aunt Annie turned her back with a sudden surprising snuffle. “I made a cake for your birthday, but it fell!”

It would, Esther thought, but she said, “It’ll prob’ly taste good just the same. And thanks, anyhow, Aunt Annie. It was nice of you to go to all the trouble.”

“The trouble was nothing, but—wasting four eggs!” Aunt Annie muttered, and hurried off to the shop as the tinkle of the doorbell suggested the prospect of a new customer.

Christmas and New Years had gone by, and a soft cloud wrack half obscured the stars above Lake Michigan. Philip Beauchamp had the curtains of his uncle’s roadster fastened down.

“If snow gets on the leather,” he explained to Esther when they first started out, “it exudes a most unpleasant aroma. Perhaps it isn’t real leather—or perhaps it isn’t real snow.”

Esther laughed appreciatively and told him about the less expensive cars her brother Duke had enjoyed keeping in running order back in Sun Rock.

“I think I’d like that brother of yours,” Philip said, and then had driven expertly among horse-drawn vans, sedately paced electrics and various other automobiles until they were out of the city and following the highway that ran northward along the lake.

“Where are we going?” Esther asked.

“A very profound question, indeed,” Philip replied, “and one the whole world might well be asking. The only difference—and what a difference!—is that I happen to know the answer. I know where we’re going. I’m in a sentimental mood tonight, Jeanne Bécu. We are going to seek out the little lane we found that first night we came driving along the lake. There was a moon that night, do you remember? And there’s a moon tonight, even if the clouds obscure it now and then. Shall we try to find the place, Miss Clarke?”

“Of course, Mr. Beauchamp,” said Esther, and they laughed together at the nonsense of calling each other by their last names. But Esther’s fingers were laced and curved tightly into the palms of her gloved hands.

Philip found the lane, oddly enough, or one quite like it, and among the drily whispering hardwoods upon which some leaves still clung, there was an occasional evergreen bearing shelves of blue-white from the last snow. It was a silent place, and the silence caught Esther deep within her body, as once before she had been caught near the quarry in Sun Rock. Then it had been May, and she had set eyes for the first time upon Danny O’Rourke as he strolled, unaware of her, through the woods below the rock on which she was lying in dappled moonlight.

Philip helped her out of the automobile and spread a plush rug for them to sit on beneath the trees. Snowflakes as big as the pads of white cats had begun their cat-stealth descent against the sky.

“It reminds me,” Esther said, “of dogwood blossoms falling in a place I remember, through moonlight. But it was spring then.”

“Oh, Esther Clarke!” Philip said, rough and low. “That’s sheer poetry. It has rhythm, free verse rhythm. Like Walt Whitman. Or maybe it’s your voice, with its infinite rise and fall, like a young tide in a newly born world.”

He threw the cap off his head, then, tugging away one of her gloves, rubbed her hand in the snow and pressed it to his temples.

“Your head feels hot, Philip,” Esther said.

The white flakes were pawing down softly across the now strange, mottled light of the sky. They were in snow, Esther and Philip, still really unknown to each other, and yet in the obscure way of nature already tremblingly intimate. He kissed the palm of her hand, then laid it softly against his cheek.

“Esther, Esther,” he breathed, “you are sheer poetry itself! What an ecstasy to be together like this in the young morning of our lives!”

He drew his arm about her, and Esther felt her heart beating fast beneath the pressure of his hand under her breast. In a moment now he would kiss her, she thought, and was taken aback when he asked solemnly, “Who is your favorite poet, Esther?”

She sighed. “Why—why, I don’t know that I have any. We had to do a lot of memorizing in school. I liked *The Ride of Paul Revere*. I recited it once—with gestures.”

Philip muffled a groan. “Oh, my God! Weren’t there some others you liked better?”

Esther considered. He was so far beyond her, this young man who talked as if out of a book, and yet he had told her he loved her, he had kissed her, he was the only person she had met in Chicago with whom she could find escape from the meanness and suspicion all about her. She was grateful to him and she wanted to please him if possible. Even if he was going to talk poetry instead of kissing her—well, she would talk poetry.

“I liked *Evangeline*—I think I liked it best. It was so sad.”

“It is beautiful,” Philip agreed encouragingly. “Simple narrative, of course. And I think it’s pronounced *Evangelin*—not *line*. Not that it matters. Your teacher probably had it wrong.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Esther laughed. “She wore pincher glasses and had whiskers.”

Philip suddenly threw himself on his back and laughed aloud. “Oh, Esther Clarke, you’re wonderful!” He turned over, pillowing his head on her knees, and gazed up into the silver-shot revery of snow. “Look, Esther, the moon has coasted clear, and the stars are looking through at us. How arrogant of the astronomers—mere men—to give names to the royal coteries that gather in the firmament! Ursa Major—Ursa Minor—ugh! As if the stars give a damn whether they’re a big bear or a little bear! Am I boring you, darling?”

Esther had moved restively. “Oh, no Philip! I love to hear you talk. But—there’s snow inside my collar.”

“I’m a thoughtless brute!” he exclaimed, and sat up. “Here, let me put my muffler around your neck.” He dusted the snow—only a few flakes, after all—away from her collar, and then pressed his lips to her warm throat. Esther trembled but kept her face turned from him. He tucked the soft cashmere scarf tenderly about her neck, then nestled his head against her cloaked knees once more.

“In school, weren’t you ever exposed to Shelley or Keats, Esther?” he murmured.

Exposed? Esther didn’t like the word. It stirred vague and nasty connotations in her mind. You were “exposed” to measles, and a tramp had once “exposed” himself, according to Mrs. Flathe, to some girls on the brickyard road.

“Why, no, Philip—I don’t think so,” she faltered.

“‘Silent, upon a peak in Darien’—I’ll have to introduce you to the great lyric poets, darling. And some of the lesser ones—myself included. Oh, we have such a wonderful life ahead of us! I’ve been struggling with a new poem of my own this past week, but I haven’t quite—” He hoisted himself

so suddenly that Esther's breath caught in her throat. "I have it, darling, I have it!" She was startled, but his voice came out, soft and strong.

"'To Esther,'" he said. "Listen, now." He cleared his throat. "Ah, my love, this do I know, Thou art white fire to my white snow! My tyrant brain will drive me forth To the cold poetry of the north—no, that meter is jerky. To poetry's encrystalled north—that's better. *Encrystalled!* But thou, my love of honeyed mouth, And wordless poems of the south, Alas, if it's my fate to be That north am I and south is Thee—no, that's not grammatical, even if the Quakers do use it. Let me think a minute, Esther. I had it a moment ago, but—"

He held her cold fingers to his eyes. She was mutely stirred by his recitation, even though she did not immediately grasp its full meaning. But it was beautiful, the words were beautiful; it was like a song, a winter song, and it had been composed especially for her, she perceived with awe, not merely something he remembered.

"I could say," Philip went on, "I could say, 'Alas if it's my fate to be That north am I and south is she,'—as a sort of detached couplet to the poem, a resignation. Or, 'Alas, perhaps thou e'er wilt be South to my north, thou soul of me!'"

And in abrupt rapture at his own words, he flung his arms about her. Her brown velvet toque fell off into the snow and he buried his face with wild aimlessness in her hair. She dug her strong fingers into Philip's black curls and shook his head from side to side, then lay back and brought his warm mouth down to her own.

Esther did not bounce out of bed at the sound of her alarm clock the next morning to prepare a hot breakfast for Aunt Annie. When her aunt finally called out querulously from her bedroom, Esther stretched her toes luxuriously and said to herself, *At last I'm precious to someone. I don't have to get up if I don't want to. I am Madame du Barry.*

Still, she did get up, if tardily, and she did make breakfast. On her finger she wore the ring Philip had placed there while they lay together under the trees and the stars. It was a thin gold ring he had worn on his watch chain, with an amethyst in an old-fashioned setting his grandmother had given him shortly before her death, when Philip was twelve years old.

"It's my dearest possession, Esther," he had told her. "I want you to wear it and wait for me until I have graduated and we can be married."

Since his graduation was still a year and a half away, Esther had said, “I’ll wear it, Philip, and I’ll wait, and I’ll read poetry and do anything you say to improve my mind, if you’ll help me. And I’ll work harder than ever on my music so that when you’re a famous poet I’ll be a famous singer.” She had been so touched by her own tremulous murmur that she had almost believed what she said.

“My sweet!” Philip had all but choked on the words, and since it had stopped snowing, the moonlight betrayed a glint of tears in his eyes. “Let’s never be sorry for tonight. Let us be glad it happened just like this. Let’s *always* be glad, my darling. We’re still in the morning of life—nothing has passed but the moment of dawn. I’ll write you a song about that, and you’ll sing it—you’ll sing it all down through the years we’ll be together. Do you realize I’ve never heard you sing?”

“I’ll sing for you whenever you want me to, Philip.”

“You’ll sing for me tomorrow night, then,” he said, “because you’re coming to dinner at our house. I want Uncle Henry to meet you. And both he and mother love music.”

“My voice is still small, Mayme Drury says, but—”

“I know it’s beautiful,” he declared and gathered her hands into his own. “I’ve never been in love before, darling. I’ve never known before what the ultimate—” He hesitated shyly. “Have you, sweet?”

“No, Philip, I never have.”

When he left her at Aunt Annie’s door, he had kissed her lightly, reverently. He was, Esther thought uneasily, a gentleman.

“What’s that ring you’re wearing?” Aunt Annie asked as soon as they sat down to breakfast.

Esther glanced down at the little amethyst that was turned to the light. She lifted her hand. “It’s my engagement ring, Aunt Annie. It was his grandmother’s, but he says it will do until he gets me a diamond.”

“Engagement ring?” Aunt Annie spluttered.

“Why, yes. Philip and I are engaged.”

Aunt Annie all but collapsed against the back of her chair. “Well, cross my eyes!” she gasped. “All I hoped for was an order for a few more hats from Mrs. Booshaw. Now her son buys the whole shop!”

Esther didn't quite see what her aunt could possibly mean by that. "Philip doesn't want to buy anything as far as I know. He wants to marry me, that's all."

"Well, I *do* declare! And when is this wedding going to be?" Aunt Annie had recovered her equilibrium, and with it some levelheaded doubt.

"Not until Philip graduates—in about a year and a half. That will give us plenty of time to get really acquainted, and he wants me to go on with my singing."

"*Acquainted!* Acquainted, and you're already engaged? Now see here, Esther, I've done my best to keep you respectable living here with me. I'll not stand for any monkeyshines, mind, or back you go to your brother, or to that Mrs. Flathe in Sun Rock. Does Mrs. Booshaw know about this?"

"Philip was going to tell her when he got home last night. And I'm to dine at their house this evening."

"*Dine*, indeed!" Aunt Annie hooted.

"And eat, too," said Esther. "Philip wants me to sing for his mother and his uncle."

Aunt Annie's eyes flickered over Esther's dress and narrowed in calculating thought. "Listen, my girl, you go out now first thing and get that ruby-colored velveteen I saw yesterday in the window of Marie's Shoppe. You know where it is—right around the corner. It's just your size, I'm sure. I'm not going to have my brother's daughter visiting swells in rags. I've kept ten dollars out of your money, and the dress is a special at seven-fifty. It's really an evening outfit, and it's a bargain. If you want some perfume or powder, get it out of the two-fifty you'll have left."

Esther went to Marie's Shoppe, tried on the ruby-colored velveteen, which gave her high little bosom a marching look, and bought the dress. At the drug store, a few doors away, she bought a small bottle of lilac eau de cologne, delicately fresh in scent.

She was about to leave the drug store when she saw a small, green-covered book with gilt lettering on it: *My Diary*. The price was ninety-eight cents, and a tiny pencil was tucked into a loop of leather on the front cover, its point sharpened and alert as if eager to be used. Esther bought the diary and had enough left still to treat herself to a double banana split at the soda fountain before going home.

Excerpts from Esther Clarke's diary:

January 9, 1914

Dear Diary, Though I can't spell *cat*, nobody is ever going to see this except me, so I don't care. I have a lock on my suitcase, and I'll keep you there, away from Aunt A. I really enjoyed having dinner with Philip's mother and uncle tonight, and wasn't a bit self-conscious even at the table, because I watched what knives and forks the others used before I even lifted one. Philip introduced me to his uncle and his mother, though I'd already met her, and said, "This is Esther. I told you about her last night." He kind of choked when he said that, but they were so nice. And that snippy black waitress of theirs didn't scare me any either. Maybe she thought I was what they call *white trash*. I'll never forget the first negro I ever saw, that great big porter on the train when I came to Chicago. He was sort of coco-colored, with big teeth like smiling white piano keys, and he was so polite, and his voice was plushy and wine-colored, like hearing ripe sumac clusters. Duke told me to give him fifty cents before I got off the train in the morning, and I did, and he brushed me up and down, even my shoes, though I saw a woman give him a dollar for the same, and he didn't give her any change. Well, at the Beauchamps tonight I wondered if I should tip the waitress, but something told me that wasn't the right thing to do. Anyway, we had an awfully good supper, only they call it dinner. There was a cream soup with little round things the size of rabbit droppings floating in it and a leg of lamb with mint sauce and some funny big leathery bud-like things I never ate before that you had to dip with your fingers into a sour-tasting sauce I didn't like much. They are called arti-chokes and you got a glass dish of water with a rose petal in it afterwards to dip your fingers in. To save the napkins, I suppose. The slippery elm us kids used to chew tastes much better, I'd say, than that arta—oh, I don't know how to spell it right. But anyhow, the desert was wonderful. Philip said he hoped I liked peach melba. Golly, I could eat six of them! After dinner we went into the parlor and we had coffee in the cutest little gold cups. No cream, though, just sugar if you wanted it. Then Mrs. B. and her brother Henry Clayman—his name made me want to laugh when I first met him because he looks just like it, as if you could poke a finger in him and make a hole. Well, they wanted me to sing, and Mrs. B. said she would play the piano, so I sang Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes and Pale Hands I loved, and then Mr. Clayman wanted something gay so I sang Casey Jones, which I had to play for myself because Mrs. B. couldn't play it. They all applawded like

everything and wanted me to sing again, but I was polite and said I'd like to hear Mrs. B. play because she played so beautifully, though she doesn't. She got through something I never heard before, I guess it was classical, and I bet that old piano had a toothache all night afterwards. Well, diary, I'm getting sleepy, so I'll just tell you one more thing before I ring off. Just before I left, Mr. Clayman got me to himself for a minute and told me he was glad his nephew had picked a nice, clean, wholesome girl like me. I didn't tell Philip about that, though. Am I in love, diary? I don't know. Philip is nice, but he isn't Danny O'Rourke. That I do know. Oh, Danny, Danny, where are you right now? P.S. Mrs. B. said she hoped I'd come to their house again soon. Good-night, diary.

January 18, 1914.

I haven't written in you all week because I have really missed Philip, who has been in bed with the grippe. There's another reason too, and it's the most important of all. This is Sunday, and I was supposed to have dinner again with the Beauchamps, but Philip isn't feeling too good yet so they called it off. I'm just as glad too, because I didn't like what Mr. Clayman said that night about Philip having a nice healthy girl like me, and so on, as if I was a kind of a field or something for him to walk on. I know Philip doesn't feel that way, but anyhow—and that isn't all, dear diary. All week I've been thinking about me and Philip. He's awfully nice and he's good to me. And Mrs. B. gave Aunt Annie an order for two new hats, a purple velvet turban and a picture hat of leghorn straw covered with bluebells for Easter, imagine, and it weeks away yet. And Aunt Annie has been nicer to me lately because of that, and I don't bother much any more about the girls in the shop. They are beneath my notice, the way I look at it. But I can't help worrying about Philip because I don't know whether I love him or not. I suppose I should love him after what happened that night near the lake, but I know now that it was all my fault, because Philip cried about it afterwards. If it had been Danny O'Rourke I wouldn't have any trouble making up my mind. But with Philip, I don't know. I wish you would tell me, diary. I have his ring and all that, and it's nice being with him, even when he recites poetry I never even heard of, and writes me a poem which I'm going to copy out on the next page, because he wrote it down and sent it to me. To make things worse, I haven't heard from

Duke since before Christmas and I suppose before long I'll be through at Mayme Drury's. I wonder what Aunt Annie will say when she finds out I'm not an *heiress* any longer. Ha, ha, she'll probably give me the *air*! She's having her Sunday afternoon sleep, with no doorbell ringing in the front of the shop to wake her up. Oh, I almost forgot—Tony Salvio, a tenor at Mayme Drury's, asked me out to dinner with him last week, but I refused because his ears stick out like fish gills, and anyhow I was too worried over Philip and me. Good-bye, diary, I think I hear Aunt Annie in the kitchen. Maybe she dreamed the doorbell was ringing. Ha, ha!

(The doorbell, Esther Clarke? You didn't write in your diary anything about how queer doorbells could be. You didn't write in your diary about that night in February, 1914, when the doorbell startled both you and Aunt Annie sitting in the kitchen, where you were working on the straw braid finishing for a hat. Truth to tell, you wrote very little in your diary after that Sunday afternoon, except for the poem you copied, and a few dates and places, and a few names with exclamation points that could have meant almost anything or nothing. You probably locked the diary in with your other young accumulations that February night, not thinking that the misspelled words clothed the bright, inner flesh of you, a flesh that you could not discard without leaving a skeleton. And you were not yet that, Esther Clarke!)

The doorbell at Aunt Annie's was one of those tinkly things on a spring ribbon above the street door. But on this night in February it did more than tinkle. It all but tore itself out by the roots.

Aunt Annie leaped to her feet and started for the door. "My God, is there a fire somewhere?"

It was a fire, indeed, but the fire was Philip's mother.

"Where is that niece of yours?" she demanded. "I want to see her at once!"

Esther's nostrils tensed as she walked deliberately into the shop. Aunt Annie, pale in the glare of the overhead light, stood helplessly speechless before the obviously irate Mrs. Beauchamp.

"Were you asking for me, Mrs. Beauchamp?" Esther asked politely.

"Get your things on. You're coming with me."

"What's—what's happened, for God's sake?" Aunt Annie quavered, wringing her hands.

"Ask her—ask your niece!" the woman raged. "Ask her what she has done to my son. Ask her why my poor Philip tried to take his own life

tonight—and would have taken it if his uncle hadn't found him in his room just in the nick of time."

"What *is* this?" Aunt Annie demanded, a trifle more coolly.

"I suppose it's because I sent Philip's ring back to him this afternoon by special delivery," Esther said in an absent voice, but with her curiously black-striated eyes direct upon Mrs. Beauchamp.

"And without warning!" Mrs. Beauchamp cried, her voice now approaching a whimper. "Without warning! He took you to a poetry reading just the night before last, and came home enthralled. He came into my bedroom and sat beside me and talked about you, poor boy, as if you were the most precious thing in the world. Thank God, he has found you out for what you are before it was too late! You ungrateful little—I won't use the word—you know what you are! Callous, ruthless, without conscience—" The gaunt woman swung out an arm that just missed the beaded lampshade.

Esther smoothed the sateen work-apron over her slim hips. The left corner of her lip quirked into its dimple, but no smile was there. She ignored Aunt Annie, who had turned to her for an explanation of what she had done.

"Why do you want me to go with you, Mrs. Beauchamp?" she asked.

"Philip is asking for you, isn't that enough? You're coming with me to talk to the poor boy and make him understand. God knows I wouldn't have him set his eyes on you again if it didn't mean saving his life."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Beauchamp. I just decided last night that Philip was too good for me. And I mean too *good*. You could tell him that as well as—"

"I've told him that, never fear. Don't try to tell me what's best for my own son, young woman. Get your things on and come with me immediately."

Esther bent forward and sneezed, then straightened and coughed. A shiver went through her body, and she pulled the lace jabot of her serge dress up against her throat.

"Please—Mrs. Beauchamp! I know I'm catching a terrible cold—and with me a cold might be very dangerous. I'm sure I have a fever. It isn't safe for me to go out in this weather. Won't you just let me go back into the workroom and telephone him? I know I can make him understand."

Esther left and the two women shared a silence of incongruous components, maternal anxiety and rage on the part of one, calculating apprehensiveness on the part of the other. When Esther returned, the petal-flushes on her cheekbones were deeper than usual, but her piquant face bore a look of melancholy renunciation, her heavy eyelids and her mouth drooping.

“Philip wants to talk to you, Mrs. Beauchamp,” she said softly.

Mrs. Beauchamp blinked and swept into the back room.

“Aunt Annie,” Esther began, poignantly resigned, “I can tell you—”

“I’ll talk to you later,” her aunt snapped, and sank into a chair.

Mrs. Beauchamp finally came from the workroom and paused for only a moment to glare at Esther. “Oh, you wicked, wicked creature! This is my punishment—this is my brother Henry’s punishment—oh, merciful heaven, let me out of this pest-house!” She jerked her fur coat up to her ears and rushed for the door. “May God forgive you!” she breathed, and slammed the door behind her.

For a moment Aunt Annie sat and looked at Esther as though she were seeing double. Then, the object of her gaze coming into focus, her eyes narrowed acidly.

“Well, what have you to say?” she managed to ask.

“Please, Aunt Annie, don’t be so upset,” Esther pleaded, doing her best not to laugh. “I told Philip I had t.b.”

“You—you little tramp!” Aunt Annie stuttered. “You haven’t got t.b. any more than I have. What made you say a thing like that?”

Her breath left her completely, and Esther felt an instant’s compunction.

“I had to think of something quick, and I did want to be kind to Philip. I decided I just wasn’t in love with him, so how could we go on being engaged?”

“Engaged, my foot! Don’t you see what you’ve done? She was one of the best customers I’ve had in years—and she’d have brought me others. Besides, you’re a liar, and a trouble-maker, and there’s no place here for either. You can pack up tonight and take the morning train back to Sun Rock. Maybe that Mrs. Flathe can do something with you. God knows I’ve tried hard enough, but I can’t go on with it. It’s all the thanks I get—don’t stand there like a dummy! Say something—move!” Aunt Annie was all but incoherent, her equine grimace making a caricature of her features.

“There’s nothing to say,” Esther told her composedly. “I thought you’d understand why I did it, but I was wrong. It’s all silly and I should have known better. But I’m not going back to Sun Rock, Aunt Annie. I’ll ask Mayme Drury if she’ll let me stay with her till I can find a job.”

“Go to her—and disgrace me!” Aunt Annie whimpered. “As if you haven’t done enough to me already!”

“I ought to have told you,” Esther added, “—Duke and I are just about out of money. He had some bad luck. So I can’t go on with my singing

lessons, and I can't go on paying you board and room, even if you wanted me to. But I'm not going back to Sun Rock—tomorrow morning or any other morning. That's all, Aunt Annie."

She turned to the door leading to the workroom, leaving Aunt Annie undone by this final shock and clutching at her dishevelled hair.

Chapter One

FOR the past hour there had been faint rumblings of thunder, but Miss Phoebe Larson showed no signs of nervousness. Storms had never frightened her. In later years, indeed, their fury had served only to heighten the feeling of well-being and creature comfort that came to her in the security of her hotel room or in the company of friends whose talk provided a welcome relief at the end of a long day in the department stores.

She glanced at her watch, however.

“I can phone for a cab from here, I suppose?” she said.

“Oh, but you’re not thinking of leaving yet!” Esther objected. “It’s only a few minutes past ten.”

“I’m never in a hurry to go home,” Phoebe laughed. “I’m quite a night owl when I get the chance. I just don’t want to be stranded when the time comes.”

“We can call a taxi, of course,” Esther assured her, “but there’s plenty of time for that. When Ellen is out on a party, I always wait up for her. She has so much to tell me when she comes in. Have another sherry, Phoebe.”

Above the distant thunder, Lucy Miller’s radio blared from her bedroom at the rear of the apartment.

“I hope Lucy’s radio doesn’t annoy you,” Esther said as she refilled Phoebe’s glass. “She’s a little deaf, you know, and I haven’t the heart to ask her to turn it down. I’m more or less used to it, of course, but sometimes it’s a little too much even for me. I can’t stand the radio myself, except for the symphony or when there’s some really good singing. Neither can Ellen. This—is it boogie-woogie they call it?” She gave a helpless little laugh.

“I believe so,” Phoebe smiled.

“Anyhow, all that kind of thing simply bores Ellen stiff. I’m afraid a good deal of the classical music bores her too. But that’s just one of those little things a mother never can account for in a daughter, no matter how well they understand each other.”

The telephone rang, and Esther jumped from her chair—then, as if she had bethought herself, she walked very deliberately into the hall. “That’s probably Ellen now,” she said. “Excuse me just a minute, Phoebe.”

But it wasn’t Ellen, and into Esther’s lilting voice there came at first a note of irritability. “Who? Oh, yes, Mrs. Pilmer! Yes. . . . At four, next Friday? Yes, we’d be delighted to come, of course. . . . Really? How exciting! Ellen will be thrilled, I know. . . . Oh, no, not at all! These things have a way of happening nowadays. I’ll probably have to whip up something over night myself one of these days, if Ellen suddenly takes it into her mind to . . . Yes, yes, of course. Friday at four then. Thank you so much, Mrs. Pilmer. Good-bye!”

Esther came back into the living room, making a little moué of annoyance that did not quite conceal a certain elation.

“That was Mrs. Horace Pilmer, no less,” she explained in an offhanded way. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of the Horace Pilmers, but they’re quite the cream of our Madison society. Their daughter Clarinda got home tonight from a finishing school in the east, and announced to her family that she’s going to marry a young man they’ve never met. I don’t think Mrs. Pilmer is quite happy about it, from the way she spoke. She sounded rather embarrassed over the telephone. And I must say I can’t altogether blame her. Anyhow, she’s giving a tea for Clarinda next Friday afternoon to announce the engagement. Ellen and Clarinda were such good friends before she went east. Honestly, what young people will do these days! I do hope Clarinda hasn’t gone and made a fool of herself. She has always been on the flighty side. And the young man in the case—I do hope he’ll fit into the picture. Marriage is such a hazardous thing at best. And the Pilmers are so—well, so select!”

“How old is the girl?” Phoebe asked.

“Twenty—a bit older than Ellen. But they’re so different in every way. I can’t imagine Ellen doing anything so—” Esther’s voice trailed off absently. “I was sure it was her call—I *could* phone that night club, I suppose—but she’d feel guilty about not calling me—and her friends might think me an old fuddyduddy. No, I’d better not!”

“You’re worrying far too much about Ellen,” Phoebe said. “After all, she’s four years older than you were when you started out on your own.”

“Of course. It’s so hard to realize that. I can hardly think of her as grown up. I’ve sheltered and protected her all these years—and she’s still like a child in so many ways. Maybe, if her father had lived—but I don’t know. I’ve been able to give her all my love, and I’ve had all hers.”

“That might easily have its disadvantages for both of you.”

“I know. I’ve read a lot about such things—the magazines are full of it. But I don’t always entirely agree with what they have to say. Ellen, too, comes home with some of the wildest ideas from her psychology class. I believe a daughter needs the love of a mother more than she needs anything in the world—the love of a mother she can love and respect in turn. Respect for her mother, of course, must come first. I feel so sorry for girls whose mothers—”

An ear-splitting crash of thunder broke suddenly over the house. The heavy damask curtains of the west windows billowed inward at the same instant, and a flash of lightning laid a garish enamel across the shadowed room.

Esther was out of her chair. “Heavens, that was close!” She rushed to close the windows. “I do hope Ellen isn’t—but no, she wouldn’t be out yet. It’s only ten-thirty. She wouldn’t have started home so early. But she loves storms, and she might just dash out into it all by herself from that roadhouse. I shouldn’t have let her go. I—I really had a queer feeling about it, and if you hadn’t been here—I get those feelings sometimes. Goodness, listen to that rain! We have some birch logs left in the kitchen, and our fireplace really works. It isn’t just an ornament. I could have Lucy make a fire for us, but I can do it just as well, and I don’t want to disturb her. I’ll get it going, and we can have toast and tea. We have a long toasting fork—no, don’t get up, Phoebe. Let me show you I can do things on my own when I want to.”

She had been talking so fast that Phoebe’s ears had trailed only after her words. But now Phoebe saw the well-remembered dimpling at the left corner of Esther’s mouth, and she could not tell whether it was a smile or a memory-ghost risen in the rain. She had, moreover, a distinct sense of not being in the room at all in fact, while Esther busied herself with the small birch logs, a bottle of kerosene, and finally a struck match. She turned her eyes upon the midget piano, standing back in the shadow, with a sincere fellow-feeling.

Esther, getting up from her knees in front of the fireplace, spoke as one who might have been gifted with second sight.

“I’m sure you’ve been wondering about our little piano, Phoebe. Milton bought it for Ellen when she was three years old. At that time she was quite precocious—she loved to listen to music on the radio. She used to make up dances to it, all by herself. Her father, of course, encouraged her, and it was so funny to see him taking those fast, jiggling steps with her. I don’t cry about it now, but I did for a long time, remembering. Milton played the

piano a little himself—simple, popular airs and old ballads, and before he died he taught Ellen to play a few things, simplified for children—like the Brahms Lullaby. She could carry a tune very well, too, when she was quite young. I don't understand it—I mean, why it is she can hardly follow the simplest tune now. She did have measles, of course, just after Milton died, and doctors have told me that measles can do almost anything to the senses. Oh, do you remember the time we had measles in Sun Rock, Phoebe?"

"I certainly do," Phoebe said. "We felt so important because we both broke out in school and had to be sent home."

Esther laughed and folded her arms as she stood looking down into the fire, then hugged herself as if the room had suddenly turned cold. "Have you ever felt a terrible chill, really from head to foot, when there was no earthly excuse for it? I mean—the room was warm and everything, and you had no cold coming on, but all at once everything inside you seemed to freeze?"

"Often," Phoebe said. "We used to say it was someone walking over our grave."

But Esther seemed not to hear her, though her head was tilted in a listening attitude. There had been a screeching of tires on the wet pavement below, and then the car had gone on. Esther stepped back from the growing flames.

"There—it'll be ready for toasting in a few minutes." But she stood musing into the fire. "We had a pianist in our concert group, on my first tour. She was a remarkable person. She was quite blind, but a real artist. Her husband was the tenor, and was carrying on an affair with the contralto—or so the basso told me. There were just the four of us in the troupe, you know—besides the pianist—and we did popular numbers from Gilbert and Sullivan and a couple of scenes from *Madame Butterfly*, and things like that. It was really quaint, when I think back on it now." She smiled faintly. "Anyhow, the poor woman—the pianist, I mean—used to suffer the most terrible chills now and then. We became great friends, but it was a long time before I had the courage to ask her about it. She confided to me that it was the only way she knew when her husband was being unfaithful to her. The way she said it was really frightening. It got so I couldn't stand it any more. I used to lie awake nights imagining what she might do to her husband and the contralto, if she ever got the chance. I could see myself a witness—a *material* witness, isn't that what they call it?—to a murder. It frightened me so that I packed up one Saturday night and left on the train for New York. I never heard what happened, or if anything did happen, but that was the end of my first concert tour." Esther's heavy lids drooped. "I'll go fix the tea and

we'll start the toast. Goodness, how that rain keeps on! I don't think Ellen will stay out late on a night like this. . . ."

On that day in February, in 1914, Mayme Drury helped Esther Clarke carry her luggage up from the taxicab to her studio apartment, and with blustering indignation at her friend Annie, moved a couch into a dressing room as a temporary arrangement until they could make plans for the future. Annie herself, furiously "washing her hands" of the whole affair, had not spoken to Mayme on the telephone, while Mayme, on her part, decided to let the air clear a little before going to Annie about it. Mayme laughed heartily when Esther told how her jilting of Philip Beauchamp had led to the trouble, and openly declared that Annie Clarke was "an old fool" who had lived a virgin too long to have any sense of humor left.

"Many a woman has made a fool of herself over a man," she observed, "but she makes a bigger fool of herself if she thinks she can get along without one."

It was not until the next morning that Esther told her that her next, and probably her last, check from her brother Duke would be for about fifty dollars. Mayme's show of wholehearted hospitality made an about-face which she did decently enough try to conceal. She explained her position quite clearly, however, while they sat together for a few minutes after breakfast.

"I understood—from what Annie told me—that you had a little money of your own laid away," she said tentatively.

"I had some," Esther told her. "There was a little from the railroad, after pa died, but Duke lost it in a bad investment—in oil."

"Did Annie know about that?"

"She knows now. I told her last night."

"That makes it more of a problem," Mayme said, and added hastily, "I don't want you to take me up wrong on that, dearie. It's just that we have to look at things as they are."

"I know," Esther replied. "You've been very nice letting me come in here, but I don't intend to be a burden to you. I'll get a job of some kind and find a place to live. I thought maybe I could do some singing somewhere—enough to pay for my lessons, say, and work at something that would pay for my keep."

Mayme Drury tucked her robe about her and shoved her empty coffee cup farther back from the edge of the table. She was setting herself for something, Esther sensed, and that something was not going to be pleasant.

“You’re a brave little girl, Esther,” she said after a weighted pause. “And you have ambition of a sort. You have beauty, and that will carry you part of the way. Besides, you have a nice little voice—a very nice little voice. You lack one thing, though. I’ve been watching you for over half a year now, and I know your points, good and bad.”

Esther looked at her out of those amazing eyes that had more than once forced Mayme Drury to look away in baffled discomfort. “I know I’m not perfect,” she said.

“Who is? I’m not talking about perfection. You don’t have to be perfect, but you do have to be *dedicated*. And if you’re dedicated, you work at it. You don’t work, dearie. In fact, you’re just plain, damn’ lazy! And there’s no call for you to cry about it,” she added, seeing the tears start from Esther’s eyes.

“What should I do?” Esther complained brokenly. “I try, but I—”

“I don’t know what you’re to do about it,” Mayme said. “I wish to God I could tell you!” She moved away from the table. “Well, I’ve got a lesson to give.”

Thus it was that out of her quandary Mayme Drury leaped into sheer inspiration later that forenoon. While nursing her ire against Annie Clarke for having so feelinglessly shunted her niece off upon *her*, Mayme not only maintained toward Esther all the sympathy the calamity called for, but racked her brains ceaselessly for some answer to the girl’s—and now her own—problem. In an interval between lessons, and when Esther had gone out to post her letter of enlightenment to Duke, the flash of solution came upon Mayme. Lorenzo and Lotta, of course—the vaudeville juggler and his blind pianist wife, who had only last week told Mayme that they were putting together a new act with a novelty in it that called for a singer. The singer would have to be pretty, and one who could learn to juggle her voice—that was the way Lorenzo had expressed it—to the rhythm he set in his own juggling of the balls, Indian clubs, canes, top hats and lighted cigars that made up the larger part of his breath-taking act. Mayme flew to the telephone, and by the time Esther came back, her career had taken its first step in the company of Lorenzo and Lotta, who in plain and happy married life were Herbert and Tulip Smith.

The Smiths arrived at the studio in the middle of the afternoon. Mayme had arranged Esther’s hair in a mature psyche knot at the back of her head, a

style shrewdly designed to reveal best the mahogany glow of her dark hair. She had also found a frilled white silk gown with dropped shoulders, which some amateur Ophelia had discarded in a huff on learning that in Shakespeare's day such creations were not in vogue. In the exclamatory presence of Mayme, the Smiths and Esther Clarke met.

Esther, from her vantage point on the red plush chair Mayme had chosen as the one most favorable to enhance her beauty, saw the Smiths enter the studio, Tulip carrying a slender, white-painted cane, Herbert guiding her tenderly with an arm about her waist. Tulip Smith was perhaps thirty—she might have been forty, for there was no way of guessing her age from the sightless, pale and beautiful innocence of her face. Her hair was like a gilt casque painted on a classical skull, and coiled heavily at the nape of her neck. She was tall, towering over her husband despite the droop of her shoulders which she had probably practised in deference to her mate. Herbert was wiry, of medium height, with shredded-tobacco hair, a several-jointed, surprised and surprising nose, small icicle-blue, long-lashed eyes, and a mouth smooth and as unused-looking as a child's.

Esther stared at them, and Herbert—The Great Lorenzo—stared back at her while he pressed his wife's arm in a signal that all was well. His wife smiled angelically in the general direction of Esther, and then Mayme convoyed the two of them to chairs near the piano, where sheet music was already set up in preparation for Esther's tryout.

It is quite likely that some final ember of emotion warmed within Mayme Drury that afternoon as she listened to Esther Clarke, while the blind woman leaned forward, her long hands clasped, her lips moving in silent and eager appreciation of the sound of the young voice singing. It is quite likely that when Tulip Smith caught her husband's hand and murmured, "Yes, she's the one we're looking for!" Mayme started out of her tight cubicle of self-interest to wonder if she hadn't made a terrible mistake. If even a blind woman could see that Esther Clarke had something that—but it was too late now.

The Great Lorenzo signed Esther on the spot to a contract for what they called the Great Lakes Circuit, an elastic continuance of three months, depending upon such circumstances as acts of God, labor strikes, and the financial success of the venture—at twenty-five dollars a week and traveling expenses.

Esther telephoned Aunt Annie immediately to give her the news, but one of the girls in the shop informed her that Miss Clarke was too busy to come to the telephone.

“Then will you tell her that her niece is going away,” Esther requested nicely, “and wishes her a happy Easter.” The girl at the other end of the telephone gulped, and Esther replaced the receiver.

There was a week of rehearsals before the newly organized troupe journeyed by day coach to Milwaukee, their luggage and appurtenances balanced as precariously as the “props” of Lorenzo’s juggling act, in the racks above their heads. The day before their departure, Esther received her final check from Duke, with a letter urging her to use it for her return to Sun Rock if she failed to find things working out to her liking. If she returned to Sun Rock, he would manage somehow to send her enough to satisfy Mrs. Flathe—which would be much less than she would require in Chicago—until he could send for her to come to California. Duke’s check was for fifty-two dollars, and had been forwarded from Aunt Annie’s. Esther paid Mayme Drury five dollars for her stay in the studio, then wrote to Duke, thanking him for the check, giving him the happy details of her contract with The Great Lorenzo, and instructing him to write her in care of Mayme Drury who would forward her mail.

It was with many a God-bless-you-my-child that Mayme bade good-bye to Esther on that frosty February day.

“Don’t forget to write, dearie, and remember—I’m expecting great things from you.”

“I’ll write often,” Esther promised, “and thank you again—for everything!”

Her reassuring post cards to Mayme Drury, as well as to Duke, went forth each week, and in return she received occasional letters from both of them, Duke’s full of optimism and broad hints that ere long he and Chet Minninger would have more than recouped their losses in their first gamble in the world of big business; Mayme’s full of admonitions and encouragement, and something else that Esther read between the lines—self-reproach, not for having cast a young girl out upon a tawdry and hazardous world, but for having been penny-wise and pound-foolish. . . . “Ah me, had I but had the money, I should have kept you with me, and one day you would have repaid me tenfold in pride that you were once my pupil!” Pride, indeed, Esther thought—that was a beaner! There was more purse than pride in Mayme’s repentant heart.

It was not until the first week in April, however, when they were in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that Esther regaled Duke with a detailed description of the act that had launched her on her career.

Dear Duke, she wrote, I've just come back to our hotel from the matinee, and there's a feeling of spring in the air, a kind of smell of it from the nice slush in the gutters, just like there used to be back in Sun Rock—only last year, imagine! It seems so long ago. A lot has happened to us since then, hasn't it, Duke? Funny, though, how the smell of spring is the same, in a small town or a big town. Summer is different, and so is autumn and winter. I don't know why. Well, anyhow, now that I've got time, I want to tell you more about our *act*, and maybe give you a laugh, Duke, which might do you good right now. For comedy effect I have to sing in time with Lorenzo's juggling, speeding up or slowing down with whatever he's doing. I have to take a few silly jig steps and pretend to just about fall over when he almost misses a catch, though of course he does it on purpose. Lotta keeps the same tempo on the piano, which I can't hardly understand because she's blind, like I told you in my first letter from Milwaukee. Of course we rehearse everything, and Lorenzo doesn't miss except when he wants to make the act look harder, but sometimes it doesn't quite work out that way, but Lotta seems to know everything that's going on. It's like she had a kind of second sight or something. One of my songs is *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, which sounds really funny when we speed it up. I sing *When You Wore a Tulip*, too, but that doesn't seem so funny to me because Lotta's real name is Tulip, and she never saw a tulip in her life, which is too bad because she loves flowers and Lorenzo always has a little bunch of them in their room no matter how hard up they are. She has the strangest eyes—kind of pearly, but when she looks right at you it's hard to believe—*believe* she's really blind. She plays entirely by ear and has made some arrangements of her own, of some classical things. I like her a lot more than I do him. He sort of gives me the creeps. She's awfully nice to me and I think I have a real woman friend at last. Don't worry about how Aunt Annie treated me, Duke. We're well out of *her* life, both of us. It's just about supper time, so I'll have to close for now. Oh, yes—do you remember the balancing stone back in Sun Rock that finally fell over one night in the wind, off the bigger one? Well, it's kind of funny, isn't it, that my first part on the stage should be in a

balancing act? I hope it doesn't topple over too soon, because we're eating all right and that's something. I wear your gold-nugget ring for luck, and it has worked so far. I wonder if Aunt Annie is wearing hers now, ha, ha! Much love.

E.

She was sealing the letter when a knock sounded on her door. She called "Come in!" over her shoulder, and turned half way round in her chair as the door opened and Gaby Charmante, a ballroom dancer who worked with her brother Jacques on the same bill with Esther, stepped into the room.

Gaby was a tiny, red-headed wisp, but Esther had come to know there was nothing frivolous about her, nor about her tall, dark brother, who bore himself with an elegant unawareness of Esther's existence, within the theatre or without. They were by origin Mary and Thomas Donahue, and their ballroom dancing was patterned after that of the Vernon Castles, with certain original innovations—or so their press notices read—of the one-step, the lame duck, the maxixe, and the tango. Their mother, Esther knew, had been in a home for incurables now for several years, and brother and sister had carried on their dancing in order to secure for her the best of care. Somehow it had got about that Mary intended leaving the stage upon their mother's death, to become a nun.

"What are you doing about supper?" Mary asked. "Are you going to eat with Lorenzo and Lotta?"

"I don't have to," Esther said. "We usually—"

"I know, but Tom has a date somewhere, and I thought we might eat together for a change. I hate eating alone."

"Fine!" Esther said. "I'm practically ready to go down. I've just finished a letter to my brother. I'll phone Lotta and let her know."

"I have to write to mother tonight," Mary said as she seated herself on the edge of the bed.

"How is your mother?" Esther asked. "Have you had any word lately?"

"She isn't any better," Mary sighed. "Worse, if anything, the doctor says. We had a letter from him this morning."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Esther said, getting up and going to the mirror of her dresser to brush her hair and touch up her lips.

"Yes, but if it's the will of God, it isn't for us to say what's for the best. If He takes her from us, it will mean a change for Tom and me, of course. But we've gone all over that a hundred times. In a way, I'll not be sorry to turn my back on all this make-believe."

“You like the theatre, don’t you?” Esther asked. “When I see you and Tom working together, I always think you—”

“We’re Irish,” Mary put in. “Isn’t that enough? I love it, and I always will, but it’s not my place. I decided that before I was twenty. I’m twenty-five now and I haven’t changed my mind.”

Esther gave a final touch of rouge to her lips and went back to her chair. “How did you ever decide you’d become a nun?” she asked abruptly.

“I don’t know any more about that than you do. We’re just what we are, I guess, that’s all. Before I was your age I got the feeling I wanted to do something for humanity. Where the feeling came from, or how it came, I’ll never know. But I’ve still got it and I hope I’ll never lose it. I know I won’t.”

“Don’t you ever think of all the things you’ll miss?” Esther asked.

Mary’s blue eyes narrowed. “Do you think I haven’t? I’ve seen a good deal, and I’ve been in love, and I’ve had to resist temptation. With you, Esther, I don’t think temptation *is* temptation. It’s just a yearning you can’t resist. You’re more flesh than spirit. It comes out in your voice, in your eyes, in the way you walk, even in your hands. Don’t think I’m finding fault with you. I’m not. It’s just the way you are, and you can’t help it, I suppose. I love your voice—and your eyes—and the way you walk. You may be great some day. You may even make the Metropolitan, if you know how to cash in on what you’ve got.”

Esther gripped the arms of her chair. “I don’t think I’ll ever be great, Mary. Something in me doesn’t want to—or doesn’t want to enough. Sometimes I think I’d rather be like you, born a Catholic and all that, asking forgiveness for sins I’ve never committed, or repenting before I even commit them.”

“I don’t believe you are ever really repentant or ever want forgiveness. But let’s go down and eat before we get all tangled up in an argument.”

“I’ll phone Lotta,” Esther said, and reached for the receiver.

Mary Donahue had meant no offense in anything she had said, as Esther told herself that night, but her words had gone deep, nevertheless. They had at least awakened some sort of conscience within her as she lay awake and thought back over what had happened between her and Herbert Smith since the day they left Chicago. Soon after Milwaukee, Herbert, inspired by the Arabian Nights beauty of Esther in her black and gold chiffon Turkish

trousers and her cusp-toed gold slippers, began to work with a kind of mad fury that defied mischance. His errorless manipulation drew wild outbursts of applause from his audiences and even Lotta thrilled to what she sensed was a new perfection in his art.

But Esther, in spite of the heady excitement of their success, began to notice the juggler's gleam toward her while they were together on the stage, his eyes like blue-dusked snow beneath their long, dark lashes, his mouth soft as a sleeping child's. At first she considered it nothing more than a deserved tribute from The Great Lorenzo. She was too fond of Tulip, and too sure of Herbert's unwavering love for his wife, to regard that look in his eyes as anything more than proud approval.

It was not long, however, before she felt rather than heard a listlessness in her voice, the lack of spirit that Mayme Drury had sometimes complained about to the point almost of despair. At midnight, she frequently suffered from inexplicable headaches, and Tulip came to give her aspirin, heat milk for her over the etna stove, and gently massage her temples until she fell asleep.

But the fury of Herbert's juggling hands became even more inspired, the baby pout of his mouth more anxious, the frozen, long-lashed stare of his eyes more hungry when they met Esther's during their turn upon the stage. And Tulip Smith rose to every occasion, performing as faultlessly as her husband, her long, purple velvet gown lying in ripples about her feet. At the fall of the curtain, she glided up tall, pale and exquisite, to acknowledge her share of the plaudits.

It was on a Saturday night in Grand Rapids, Michigan, after a singularly successful week, that Esther complimented Tulip as they sat together over a late supper in a small restaurant near the theatre.

Tulip was in high spirits. "I'll tell you a secret, dear," she replied to Esther's words of praise, and smiled upward with her large-pupilled, silvery eyes. "Love is the only thing that brings the best out of any woman. I never discovered that until I met Herbert."

Esther glanced across at Herbert, and suddenly the hunger in his eyes reminded her of Philip Beauchamp. At the same moment, a certain fullness came into her throat, and—more to cover her embarrassment than anything else—she reached for the salt shaker. Her fingers touched Herbert's, not by intent, but when she looked at him a wave of color rushed across and as swiftly ebbed from the fine skin of his face. She dropped her hands beneath the table and, quite unthinking, began rubbing with her napkin at her fingers where they had touched Herbert's. All at once she felt his hand boldly

seeking hers under the napkin. Astonishment at first made her think she was dreaming, but the warm, firm pressure of Herbert's hand was not a dream. With a degree of reluctance that perplexed her, even angered her as she thought of Tulip sitting beside her, she drew her hand away and avoided Herbert's eyes. She tried to think quickly of something to say, but Tulip spoke up.

"Oh, dear," she said, drawing her arms closely about her, "is there a door open somewhere? I'm having a horrible chill."

"Let me put your coat over your shoulders," Esther said, and lifted the garment from the back of Tulip's chair.

"I'm not really cold." Tulip shrugged her shoulders under her coat. "It's the silliest thing! I don't think I ever felt one before—not like this. It's gone now. I hope I'm not coming down with something."

"Somebody walking over your grave, dear," Herbert remarked, and Tulip laughed.

"I'm too healthy for that, darling," she said. "You're going to have me on your hands for a long time, so don't plan on getting along without me yet for a while."

The moment passed, but it marked the beginning of Esther's knowledge that her physical being had need of something to feed upon. Later, she could not remember the first time Herbert Smith had kissed her, nor how often he had kissed her in dressing rooms or in the dimly lighted hallways of third-class hotels. She only knew that the luster of her voice was nourished on love—love illicit, undisciplined, or tragically romantic, even when she herself could not give her love in return. Herbert Smith was not Danny O'Rourke—as Philip Beauchamp had not been Danny O'Rourke—but his homage sufficed for the restoring of the full, dark goldenness of her voice.

Was it in an amusement park in Schenectady, or in Elmira, that it rained that night in May, 1914? Esther had tried so hard to forget the place, and had so nearly succeeded, that it didn't matter.

The Great Lorenzo's tour was to have terminated at the end of April, after a week in Cleveland, but the act had received such a good press that Herbert Smith's agent had with little effort secured further billing eastward, all the way to the Bronx, the very threshold to Broadway. But even before this dazzling rise in prestige, Herbert had been convinced that his lucky star

sharpened its points directly upon him the day in February when Mayme Drury had introduced him to Esther Clarke. And now it was May.

The amusement park had recently opened for the season, and despite the fine mist of rain that filagreed and made softly spectral the glittering lights of the various concessions, the midway was thronged with seekers after thrills and hilarity. Following their final performance of the evening at the theatre, Esther and Tulip and Herbert strolled three abreast and arm in arm among the jostling crowds, Tulip in her sightlessness laughing with delight at the sounds of carnival all about her.

And when Esther and Herbert tried their skill at Hoop-La, and Esther succeeded in ringing a “genuine bronze” Statue of Liberty, Tulip clapped her hands with the artless joy of a child. They bought bags of popcorn and clouds of pink cotton candy, the smell of which enchanted Tulip, as did the heavy aroma of the Python Pit, a side show in which a female snake charmer deftly averted what seemed like inevitable strangulation in the coils of a jungle monster.

Hard by the Python Pit was the entrance to the roller coaster, its name arched and blazing across its skeleton-like scaffolding: *The Whizaroo*. It towered dizzily up into the black fog which the nimbus of lower light could not penetrate, soared upward in coils and undulations not unlike those more modest ones of its neighbor, the python, and to the accompaniment of shrieks and hysterical laughter plunged almost vertically back down into stygian dark, wildly tangented off curves as if into unspeakable space, only to whip back again to a breath-restoring instant of straightaway.

Tulip listened for a moment to the roar of the giant structure overhead and said excitedly, “You know, I’ve never been on one! It must be—oh, I just can’t imagine! Herbert—could we?” She laughed, a tremulous yet daring, childlike laugh as her hand touched Herbert’s sleeve and her eyes became more silvered in the rain.

Esther glanced at Herbert, saw him shake his head, then stare up as if suddenly hypnotized by the mad tumult of sight and sound above him. Slowly he brought his tranced eyes back to his wife, and Esther with a vague alarm saw then, although she could not have named it, the spontaneous effect of the hypnotic dream that had suddenly clouded Herbert Smith’s mind. He did not look at her.

“We’ll go, if you want to,” he said.

“But—it’s quite safe?” Tulip asked, momentarily holding back.

“Yes, yes, it’s perfectly safe,” Herbert assured her, and patted her hand. “We’ll all go. Come on, Esther!”

Their fares were paid, they were through the turnstile and out upon the platform beside which the cars paused to take on passengers, three cars to a section.

“Well sit in the last section, where we won’t get jerked around so much,” Herbert said with authority. “Tulip and I will sit in the last seat, Esther, and you sit in the seat in front of us.”

The cars had come to a halt, and the more sensation-loving lads and their girls were already climbing into the lead cars. With Herbert’s hand to guide her, Tulip stepped into the last seat and sat down. The starter moved along the platform, casting an eye over the seated couples.

“Set your guard bars—set your guard bars! Step lively, young lady,” he said to Esther. “Set your guard bar there, mister—you in the back seat!”

Herbert leaned forward and drew the bar toward him and Tulip. “Come on, Esther, get into your seat!”

“Oh, I don’t want to be pinned in!” Tulip cried in disappointment as she tried to thrust the bar from in front of her.

“We’ll fix it the way you want it as soon as we get started,” Herbert said. “I’ll keep my arms around you.”

He turned his face to Esther with the jerk of a sleepwalker just awakened, and she saw his eyes, dreadful and shining with their intent like the glow in the dead phosphorescent wood she had once seen in the dark above the big quarry at home. *Tulip*, she thought, *will sit so tall and light upon the seat open to the high black rain, with only Herbert’s arms to hold her.*

“All aboard!” sang out the starter.

“Come on, Esther, get in!” Herbert called impatiently.

“What is she doing?” Tulip asked. “Aren’t you coming, Esther?”

“Oh, Tulip,” Esther wailed dismally, backing away from the edge of the platform, “I can’t go! I feel sick at my stomach all of a sudden. Don’t leave me—take me back to the hotel!”

“Hey, what’s the matter, lady?” the starter asked.

Esther had swayed toward the man and he put his arm about her shoulders to steady her. “I’ll be all right in a minute,” she said, and brushed her hand across her eyes.

Herbert and Tulip were beside her in a moment. “What’s wrong, Esther?” Tulip pleaded.

“The little lady is sick,” said the starter. “You’d better take her away. Step back, please.”

The roller coaster started toward its upward climb, and Tulip, hearing it, stretched her hands toward it in dismay. Then she turned toward Esther.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear! We’ll go back to the hotel right away. Are you very bad? Herbert—maybe there’s a ladies’ room—”

“No. Tulip, I don’t need that,” Esther said. “It must have been all that popcorn and candy junk I ate. I’ve spoiled your fun, haven’t I? But it came over me all of a sudden. I couldn’t help it.”

“You haven’t spoiled anything, dear,” Tulip said. “It was only a silly notion of mine anyhow. I’m glad we didn’t go. To tell you the truth,” she laughed, “I was scared to death of the thing. Are you feeling a little better now?”

“I think so,” Esther said, “but I’d better go to the hotel and get to bed.”

“Of course, dear. Find a jitney, Herbert. Hold on to my arm, Esther.”

Esther risked a fleeting glance at Herbert. His hands were extended before him, palms upward, the deft, strong fingers moving through a shadowy routine as they sometimes did when he practised without the implements of his juggler’s trade.

“All right, I’ll look for a car,” he said, and fumbled his way ahead of them into the street.

He knew that Esther had guessed, if only vaguely, what had been in his mind when he had taken his place beside Tulip in the back seat of the roller coaster, promising to free her of the guard bar and keep his arms about her. Mad as his design had been—and its madness had begun to dawn upon him now—its frustration at the last moment angered him. It would have been so easy—so very, very easy—to have let his arms slip from Tulip on some lofty, dizzying curve; and no one would ever have known! But Esther, who had taken his kisses in secret, giving nothing in return save a certain soft yielding of only a part of her—the little baggage had tricked him! Not only had she tricked him in averting his attempt to simplify what had become so intolerably complicated, she had tricked him into revealing what he had scarce dared to put into thought. She had made a fool of him. Always now there would be between them the dark cloud of their own guiltiness—a guiltiness that, to her at least, had been trivial until tonight.

On the drive to the hotel, Tulip sat as usual between Esther and Herbert, as had been their custom wherever the two with seeing eyes could report anything amusing in the world they were passing through. Esther leaned out toward the air, Tulip comfortingly held her hand, and Herbert sat hunched and silent in his corner of the seat.

“I’ll go right to bed,” Esther said as soon as they were in the lobby of the hotel, where Herbert had left them for a moment to buy cigarettes. “Don’t worry about me, please. I feel all right now. But I’m sorry I had to spoil everything for you. It would have been fun on the roller coaster. I’ve never been on one myself either, Tulip.”

But Tulip laughed gaily. “We’ll go together the next chance we get. It must be sort of like riding in an aeroplane. I suppose we’ll all be doing that some day, too. What’s keeping Herbert so long at the cigar counter? He’s still there, isn’t he? Oh, dear, I wonder he doesn’t sometimes get tired of me having to wait for him while he—”

“He’s coming now,” Esther told her, and moved with Tulip toward the elevator.

In her room, Esther hurried to pull down the window, where the rain had begun to beat in on a sudden veering of the wind. The sash stuck for a moment, and when it finally came down, her heart seemed to thud with the thudding descent of the window.

Herbert and Tulip had come into the room with her, but Herbert had paused just inside the door. Esther tossed her coat aside.

“I’ll be all right now, Tulip,” she said. “I’ll go right to bed—see you in the morning.”

Herbert stepped out into the hall without a word, but Tulip came close to Esther and took her hands. “Good-night, dear. If you need me for anything, don’t be afraid to call me. And I don’t want you to feel badly because we didn’t take the ride. You know—it probably sounds silly to you, but I can *see* that roller coaster as if it was somewhere inside my head. I’m as thrilled right now as if I’d been on it. I can *see*, Esther, really—in a strange way I can see! Good-night, dear, and get yourself a good sleep.”

“Good-night, Tulip,” Esther said, suddenly weary, and went as far as the door, where Tulip smiled once and went down the corridor to where the Smith’s room was only three doors away.

The grip of terror that had held Esther released its hold, and in its place came the need for immediate action. When she heard the door of Tulip’s room close softly behind her, she quickly locked her own door from the outside and sped up a flight of stairs on trembling legs.

It seemed an eternity before Mary Donahue opened the door to her light but rapid knock. Mary stood, wet-eyed, with a black string of rosary beads in her hand.

“Oh, it’s you, Esther!” she said a little sharply. “I thought it was my brother. He went out to send a telegram.”

All about the room hung stockings and underwear to dry—Mary’s and her brother’s.

“A telegram?” Esther said. “Have you had bad news?”

Mary closed the door. “We got a wire just before we went on tonight,” she said. “Mother isn’t expected to last more than a day or two. I’ve been doing a little laundry.” She stretched a pair of her brother’s socks that hung above the wash basin. “We’re going to take the train first thing in the morning.”

“Oh, Mary, I’m so sorry!” Esther said as she went to sit on a chair beside the writing desk, which was littered with envelopes and paper. *Duke*, she thought—she would have to write him at once, although she had nearly a hundred dollars from her own savings and from what he had recently sent her. She would have to dissemble again—he could not be told the truth about what had happened between her and the Smiths.

She looked up to see Mary observing her from the corner of her eye.

“Is there something wrong with you?” Mary asked.

“It doesn’t seem so bad, now that I’ve heard about your trouble,” Esther said.

“Well, whatever it is—”

“It’s Herbert,” Esther told her.

“I had a hunch,” Mary said. “I’ve seen him looking at you.”

“It isn’t as bad as you think,” Esther replied in a mere thread of a voice. “We’ve never done anything really wrong. I—I’ve let him kiss me, but I’ve never let him come to my room alone, or—or anything! He knows I’m not that kind of a girl. Besides, I love Tulip, and I wouldn’t do anything in the world to hurt her.”

“But you let him kiss you,” Mary said.

“Oh, I don’t know how to say it, but—yes, I’ve let him kiss me, but it wasn’t as if I really kissed him.”

“No, of course not! You were merely feeding on him, weren’t you, without giving him anything in return?” Mary, as if already gravely in her novitiate, looked hard at Esther. “And you don’t think you’ve done anything really wrong? Some girls have gone to bed with men and been less to blame for it than you are.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was wrong, but—honestly, Mary, it isn’t as if I gave him nothing. I know I have inspired him. The act has been better because I—”

“Because of *you*, of course. You’re probably right, but that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m not trying to defend Herbert. He’s older than you and he has a lovely wife who adores him. He ought to know better. And if you weren’t so young, I’d feel like showing you the door. What brought you up here to talk to me? What has happened?”

Her arms folded before her, Esther plucked at the sleeve of her dress. “Don’t ask me what has happened, please. I can’t tell you—or anyone. But I’ve got to get away—from them.”

“What good will that do you? It’s a question of how you intend to get away from yourself. I don’t think you realize it, but you’re a selfish little—” Her voice ceased abruptly. “You want to get away—where do you want to go?”

“I want to go to New York—right away. I have money for my fare, and enough to do me till I get another job, any kind of a job.”

Mary sat on the bed and regarded her for a moment in complete silence. “Well,” she said at last, “it might be a good thing at that. That all depends. I fancy New York wouldn’t be much of a struggle for you, though I don’t know what you’ll make of it—or what it will make of you. I might be able to do something for you, if it’s a fresh start you’re thinking of. Tom and I will be in New York after the funeral. He’ll have a better chance there when he has to go along on his own. But I happen to know some people there—people I think you ought to meet. I should warn you, though—they won’t be soft with you. They have produced some of the best talent there is on the stage today. She’s a voice teacher, and he teaches anything in dancing from ballet to acrobatics. They have an old brownstone-front house on Thirty-seventh Street. The top floor is a dormitory where pupils who haven’t too much money can stay for next to nothing. I don’t imagine you’ve ever seen anybody like them. Their name is Trome—Q. Victor Trome and his wife Tomasina. The Q stands for Querentius, but he’s never been called anything but Victor. Tomasina is about six feet tall and built in proportion. She’s so masculine she’s almost effeminate. Victor is a half a foot shorter and thin as a rapier. They have five children, from seven to sixteen, all being groomed for the stage, and sometimes the place is bedlam. But the Tromes create—they *give*! They aren’t *takers*, Esther, and they don’t like people who are. If you keep that in mind—”

“But I want to give, Mary,” Esther protested weakly. “I don’t always know how to go about it, but I—”

“I’m just warning you,” Mary put in. “When do you want to go?”

“Right away. I couldn’t stand another day with—”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“What about your arrangements with the Smiths? Isn’t there some kind of contract?”

“Herbert won’t do anything to hold me to that,” Esther said.

A ghost of a smile touched Mary Donahue’s gentle lips. “It’s as bad as that, then?”

“No, not in the way you think,” Esther said. “I don’t want to talk about it. I just want to go. I can leave a note for them at the desk. I’ll tell them I’ve had a wire from my brother asking me to go to California. Tulip will be sorry, but Herbert won’t do anything about it.”

“Well,” Mary observed, “a kind lie is often better than none at all, as Father Brian used to say. If you like, you can take the same train with Tom and me. But you’ll have to be packed and ready to leave by seven-thirty.”

“I’ll be ready,” Esther promised.

“We’ll look for you, then. And now, I’m tired, dear, and I think you ought to be in bed. You’re not looking so good.”

And to Esther’s bewilderment, Mary Donahue put her arms about her and kissed her cheek.

Chapter Two

Phoebe Larson pushed her teacup aside. “Living in hotels and on trains, as I have for so many years,” she said, “I’ve never run into anything very exciting. Besides, the people I have to deal with don’t live what you would call dramatic lives. They just go on from day to day.”

“I don’t think living in hotels and on trains has much to do with it,” Esther said. “I’ve done my share of that, after all, but wherever I am I always seem to be on hand if anything happens. That blind pianist was just a sample, though I managed to get away before that reached a climax. But when I went to New York, it was the same thing all over again. I lived for a while in a lovely residence for young artists, where a ballet dancer would have thrown herself out of a window one night if I hadn’t been there to stop her. Another girl would have thrown herself in front of a speeding truck if the young man I happened to be with hadn’t jumped out in time to save her. I moved away from a little studio apartment I had for a few months in Greenwich Village, after coming home late from work one night to find a woman writhing on the stairs. She had taken some horrible poison and died the next day in the hospital. I really believe some people are destined to be witnesses to such things.”

“And you’re one of them?” Phoebe asked.

“I began to think so—until I married Milton, of course. He took me out of all that. But even now I’m never quite sure that something won’t happen right in front of me when I step out of the house. It’s a horrible feeling.”

The siren of an ambulance, a fire engine, or a police car wailed at a considerable distance, and Phoebe saw Esther’s alert fear.

“Honestly, you’ll think I’m a parcel of jitters!” Esther said as she relaxed back into her chair and laughed apologetically. “I’m such a morbid idiot!” She glanced at her watch again. “I’ve always been superstitious, for example, about eleven o’clock, night or day. It was eleven o’clock in the morning when my mother died—I remember my father telling us about it. And poor Milton died at eleven o’clock at night. Oh, a lot of things have happened, but—” She turned to the radio, niched and incognito on a bookshelf beside her. “You must be getting tired listening to me talk.” She busied herself adjusting the dials. “I do hope my thinking about eleven o’clock hasn’t brought bad luck to someone I don’t even know.”

The strains of a band playing *The Bells of St. Mary's* crept into the room, and Esther spent a few moments modulating the tone.

“That song always brings back the summer of nineteen-eighteen,” she said finally, “when I was twenty-one. I had a small part in an operetta that was too artistic to be a financial success. During the war, you know, shows had to be on the boisterous and patriotic side. I might have had a part in one of them, I suppose, but I never was aggressive enough to win a role that paid big money. Tomasina Trome—she was my voice teacher in New York—used to tell me that I could have made a name for myself if I had only had a little more hardness in my make-up. I don’t know, of course. I used to tell her that I couldn’t help being what I was and that I got more real satisfaction out of singing for the men who were going overseas—many of them never to come back—than I could ever get out of making a lot of money. There was one young man—” She hesitated a moment, her lids drooping as if on a still too poignant memory, “—who came night after night to hear me sing. He was a captain in the infantry and he was killed just before the armistice was declared. The poor boy loved me, and I loved him—in the way we all loved in those days. It was more loneliness than love, really. They were all like big brothers to us, and they treated us just as if we were their own sisters. Oh, I know there were some who were carried away by the excitement of the moment, and did foolish things they were sorry for afterwards. But we weren’t all like that. The young captain and I might have fallen in love if we had met with no war on, perhaps, but I was dreadfully convinced he’d never come back, and he didn’t, of course. I didn’t get over his death for a long time. It seemed such a waste, somehow. When I heard he was dead, something just seemed to die in me, too, and my voice—” She paused, her eyes sliding their lashes aside.

Phoebe was not permitted to ask about what had happened to her voice, for just then the telephone rang and Esther’s eyes flew wide. “That *must* be Ellen now!”

Phoebe leaned shamelessly forward to listen to the telephone conversation. But, again, it was not Ellen, and now Phoebe began to share Esther’s concern in spite of herself. It was a long distance call, evidently, and finally Esther said, “Oh, it’s you, Durwood!”

The talk was brief, and Esther returned to the room with a wearily forbearing smile.

“That was Durwood. He just wanted me to know that his plane had landed safely in Los Angeles. He sounded as if he had been drinking too much, but that’s not unusual with him. I worry a lot over Durwood. But then, he has so much money, and no children—his wife died shortly after

they were married—so I suppose he thinks it doesn't matter what he does with himself. And maybe it shouldn't matter so much to me. He comes to see us once in a while when he's on his check-up tours for his oil company, and he's as kind as a brother can be. I must admit his drinking doesn't seem to affect him at all. He just gets mellow and generous and reminds us that his will makes Ellen and me his sole heirs. Poor, dear Duke! Well, fancy—I don't think I've called him Duke since Ellen first met him, after her father died. He never knew Milton, you know. For some reason, he seemed to resent my getting married at all, though he got over that long ago. He simply dotes on Ellen, and she thinks the sun rises and sets on her Uncle Durwood. *Duke*—” The dimple appeared again at the corner of her mouth. “The name sounds so—so gangsterish, don't you think? Though it didn't when we were kids.”

“It suited him perfectly,” Phoebe smiled reminiscently. “And I'm glad he has done so well, and that you're so attached still. Families have a way of drifting apart when they grow older and scatter over the country. I often feel the lack of anyone close—relatives, I mean. I have a few distant cousins here and there, but I rarely see them. When we do meet, it's wonderful!”

Wonderful, Esther thought bitterly. And wonderful that she and Duke were so *close*, and that once or twice a year he could drop in unexpectedly and spend a week-end with them. Wonderful, too, that for every hour he was with them her nerves were stripped raw with fear that in his whimsical cups he might reveal to the child some juncture of her mother's past utterly unknown to Ellen! Wonderful that he had, only last week, sat in the very chair where Phoebe Larson sat now, his bottle and glass on the table beside him, tormenting her with a sly skirting of the past, from Aunt Annie on, with playful near-slips of the tongue, as he called them later in mock apology when Ellen was out of the room—*wonderful* that her brother Durwood was a living threat to her secure happiness with Ellen!

“Durwood and I didn't see each other for years after he went to California,” she said. “He was so busy, and I was just as busy as he was. I almost saw him once, when I was on tour with a concert company that took me to Arizona. I would have gone all the way to California, but I had a wire from Tomasina urging me to return immediately to New York for a better engagement she had lined up for me. It was a great disappointment, but there was no refusing Tomasina. She was a big woman—really huge—and you just didn't say no when she asked you to do something. It's funny, when I think of it, but nearly all the women I've ever had anything to do with have been big women. Even you, Phoebe, were far bigger than I was at school. My old teacher, Madame Druré, wasn't so tall, but she was big-boned. The

blind pianist I told you about was a tall woman. Tomasina Trome wasn't fat. She was just big! And she had a way of attracting big people—I mean important people. It was at her place that I met Oliver Whittle, the artist, who did the walls on our apartment here, and that portrait of Ellen.”

“Ellen told me about that,” Phoebe said.

“He always comes to visit us when he happens to be in this part of the country,” Esther said. “And when we go to New York we always call on him.”

Yes, Oliver Whittle came to see them as often as he could, and it was his cynical silence during his visits that had been even worse than Duke's playful hints about her veiled past. She had come morbidly to fear that his mind and Ellen's, both so sensitive and, as Oliver said, so *en rapport*, might commune without words.

If she could only break down now and tell her old friend Phoebe the whole truth, what a relief it would be! The truth as Esther Clarke knew it, not as Ronda Southflag had fashioned it, fold upon fold of a glossy fabric that might in any hour of a warningless day crack wide and expose its frail web . . .

Spring had come to West Thirty-seventh Street, where Tomasina and her husband, Q. Victor Trome, conducted their school of song and dance. It was a New York spring, with the gold hieroglyphics of forsythia traced upon it. The small backyard of the brownstone-front Trome establishment was made less mean at this season by the forsythia bushes and the two ailanthus trees feathering into transparent fronds of yellow-green like tender ears listening to the traffic of Manhattan.

The Tromes were giving a tea party for their pupils, new and old, in the garden. On a lawn encouraged by Q. Victor and Tomasina, grass blades stood individually valiant between the ailanthus trees and the forsythias. Tomasina sat, vast and beaming, at the batik-covered tea table beneath one of the trees, and chatted with Oliver Whittle, the artist.

“I'm not quite sure what you have in mind, of course,” Tomasina was saying, “but I'd like you to see her anyhow. Three or four years ago, when she first came here, you probably wouldn't have taken a second look at her. Not that she wasn't pretty, but she had nothing more than thousands of pretty girls have—the kind you meet on the street every day. I've come to the place where I can't stand a pretty face, if that's all there is to it. I'd have

turned her away if Mary Donahue hadn't begged me to take her on and see what I could do with her. Even now, I'm not at all sure she is what you're looking for."

"I have no objection to a girl being pretty," Oliver Whittle said. "Some of them can't help it."

"But you're looking for more than that," Tomasina said. "I'm not in the business of supplying artists with models, but—well, look her over when she gets here. A few years have made a big change in Esther, though you can't expect too much of a girl of twenty-one."

"Age has nothing to do with it," the artist said. "I've seen girls of twenty-one who—"

"There she is now," Tomasina said. "You can judge for yourself."

He looked across the little garden to where Esther Clarke had come from the rear of the house, dressed in a schoolgirlish white sailor blouse, blue serge pleated skirt, and white straw sailor hat with blue streamers.

"Come over here, Esther!" Tomasina called, and as Esther stood before her, "I've just been telling Mr. Whittle about you. This is Oliver Whittle, the artist, dear. And Oliver, this is Esther Clarke, a naughty and lovely girl who has a voice but won't work at it."

Oliver Whittle acknowledged the introduction. "I'm not going to ask you to sing, Miss Clarke. I detest singing—and most of the singers I've had to meet. Sit down and relax."

"Don't let him scare you, Esther," Tomasina warned. "And don't take him too seriously, no matter what he says. She *does* look like a Degas, doesn't she, Oliver? I think that's why I've put up with her for so long—getting her small parts in musical comedy and second-rate road companies."

Esther had seated herself unconcernedly in a wicker chair while Tomasina was talking, and now permitted her eyes to idle over Oliver Whittle, who laughed and said, "You talk too much, Tomasina. Why not let the child speak for herself?" He regarded Esther quizzically. "She's not unlike a Degas—though I'm sure she doesn't feel like one. Do you, Miss Clarke?"

"I've never heard of it before, Mr. Whittle," Esther said. "Is it some kind of animal—like a puma?"

Oliver burst into laughter and Tomasina paused abruptly in the act of pouring a cup of tea. "No, darling, it's a painting, not like a—a puma, whatever in the world that is!"

“Oh!” Esther said, coloring a little. “I’m sure I’d far rather look like a puma. At least a puma is alive. I saw one last year in New Mexico. In the moonlight. The desert was wonderful in the moonlight, and the puma had wonderful eyes, and it stopped all of a sudden and stared at me.”

Esther appeared not to notice the upward, amused twist of Oliver Whittle’s eyebrows as he looked at her and listened to the soft monotone of her voice. She had long since made a practice of not seeming to notice how she affected people on meeting them for the first time. She had cultivated a manner of cool indifference behind which she managed to conceal her own feelings. But this artist, this Oliver Whittle, of certainly over thirty, was disturbingly different—so different, in fact, that his eyes looked blandly indifferent to her own indifference.

She leveled her glance at him across her teacup while Tomasina, pouring herself another cup of tea, said, “Whatever you think you are—or whatever you’d like to think you are, my dear, I’ve never thought of you as an animal.”

“But she *is* an animal, Tomasina,” Oliver Whittle said, “—and an uncommonly beautiful one.”

“She’s a *plant!*” Tomasina argued. “She gives herself like a hungry song to the air, and takes from the air what she needs—another song, a ray of light, a dash of rain. She’s a moonbeam with blood in it.”

“My God, Tomasina, control yourself!” the artist admonished. “Impressionable youth—”

“Esther is as old as the Sphinx!” Tomasina retorted.

But Esther was listening with only one ear. She had some time ago grown used to Tomasina’s outbursts. She was looking across to where two young people had just stepped into the garden. Tomasina’s husband, the little dancing master whom Esther had despised from the instant of her first setting eyes upon him, was ushering the two strangers through the chattering crowd of younger girls who were pupils of the Trome school. The newcomers were a tall young man in an army captain’s uniform and a plump apple-blossom of a girl who clung to his arm.

Victor Trome introduced them as Captain Nevin Blue and Miss Daphne Crane, and explained that Miss Clarke was a rising young star of the stage, a singer.

“Oh, dear, you’re a singer!” Miss Crane murmured. “I’m sure I’ve heard of you.”

Esther was just as sure that she hadn’t, but she smiled and said, “It’s nice of you to say so.”

“If I could only be an artist of some sort!” Daphne Crane said.

“You’re very lucky that you’re not,” Esther said. “You’re very beautiful—isn’t that enough?”

Four years ago, she knew, she would not have thought of making any such reply. She would have been incapable of it. But four years can work changes in one as naive and untutored in the social graces as Esther had been when she first came to New York. Now she would probably have said something equally flattering whether the girl was beautiful or not. But she *was* beautiful.

Daphne grew even more pink at the compliment, and gave an upward proprietary glance at the tall young officer, who was far from handsome and obviously suffered from an awkward shyness in the presence of women. He was quite different though, Esther mused—almost as different as this sardonic-looking artist, Oliver Whittle, yet much younger. And Daphne Crane, with her fair, fresh beauty, fitted well into the green-lit innocence of the spring garden.

At that moment, there was a shrill commotion at the trellised gate leading from the alley, and the two youngest Trome children, Isadora—named after Isadora Duncan—and her brother Eustace made their appearance, doing cartwheels and trying to crowd each other out of the way. They were greeted by the laughter and applause which they had, like true Tromes, expected as their due, and then Isadora came sedately up to her mother and made an elaborate curtsy.

“May we of the coming generation have a cup of diluted tea and three cookies each, *ma-ma*?”

Oliver Whittle murmured something in an aside to Tomasina who laughed and replied audibly, “No, darling, I’ve never been pregnant enough to have twins.”

Daphne Crane blushed in an anguish of embarrassment, her eyes frantically averted from Nevin Blue’s, then ran toward the children.

“How adorable!” she cried. “Oh, Mrs. Trome, I love children!”

“I like kids myself,” Oliver Whittle said, rising to his bony height to follow Daphne. “They’re so damned uncivilized!”

Tomasina moved away to mingle with her guests, and Esther found herself alone with Nevin Blue. She turned upon him a smile of veiled brilliance and asked, “Are you interested in the theatre, Captain Blue?”

He seemed to be taken aback at her abrupt notice of him. “Well—ah—yes, of course! But I—ah—I come from a small midwest town where we didn’t have a chance to see many shows. A Gilbert and Sullivan opera

company came to the opera house a couple of times but—ah—I guess they were pretty much what you'd call ham actors, though I'm not much of a judge."

"A small town!" Esther said quickly. "I came from a small town too, Captain Blue—probably even smaller than yours, because we didn't have an opera house."

The young man laughed. "Well—ah—that's what we called it. It was nothing but a big hall that was used for everything."

"Oh, I know—how well I know! You'd be surprised if I told you how many of them I've played in when I've been on tour. But now that you're in New York—you are in New York, aren't you?"

"I manage to get in about once a week. Our camp—"

"At least you have a chance to see a good play now and then?"

"Why, yes—ah—Daphne has—I mean Daphne and I have been to several. She used to live in my home town, you see, but her folks moved here, and I looked them up, and they've been awfully hospitable to me. They always put me up when I come in from camp."

"I think she's very sweet," Esther said. "And beautiful—I told her so."

"I think so, naturally. We're—well, we're sort of engaged, I suppose, but with the war and all—ah—it doesn't seem sensible to get married right away." He writhed self-consciously, and if it hadn't been for his uniform he might have looked ridiculous. But Esther smiled encouragingly.

"Tell me more about Daphne and you. You're so beautifully matched—she's so blond and you're so—so masculine!"

"There isn't much to tell," Nevin said, rubbing his chin. "We've known each other for—"

"How did you happen to meet the Tromes, for instance?"

"Oh—ah, well, Daphne's father put some money into a charity show that Mrs. Trome was giving for war orphans, and we—say, weren't you—didn't you—say, that's where I saw you before! I knew I'd seen you somewhere. You were in that show last winter!" His nut-like eyes took on a polish of excited discovery.

"How nice of you to remember me!" Esther said, and knew from the look in his eyes that her conquest of Captain Nevin Blue had been almost too simple to be worth-while.

She was not even irritated when she saw Oliver Whittle coming back from the other side of the garden, where he had left Daphne Crane with the precocious Isadora and her brother Eustace. But she managed a smile of

resignation when Nevin Blue, seeing the artist approach, muttered a word of apology and went off to join the fair Daphne.

“I want to talk to you,” Whittle said. “I’m expecting a friend of mine to stop by for me in her car in a few minutes, and I’ll have to be going.” His head was cocked to one side, and he seemed to be deliberately studying her hands. Esther set her teacup aside and placed her hands lightly, palms up, on her lap in the attitude Tomasina had taught her to minify their too-smooth, fluid bonelessness.

“I wouldn’t think of keeping you, Mr. Whittle,” she said, her gaze resting indolently upon the young captain, who stood talking now to Daphne Crane close beside a forsythia bush.

“You’re no more proof against a uniform than any other woman, I see,” Whittle said.

Esther turned her head and met his cold scrutiny. “I was just looking at Miss Crane. She has the cutest pink legs under those black stockings.”

Daphne’s legs were an unfortunate deep pink, and definitely thick about the ankles.

Oliver Whittle glanced once more toward the forsythia bush, then looked down at Esther with a cynically understanding smile, and said, “Your own, I notice, are very beautiful.”

“I wasn’t aware that I was calling attention to my legs, Mr. Whittle,” Esther replied icily.

“A woman is never unaware, Miss Clarke,” the artist retorted. “I wish you could meet this friend of mine—the one who is coming to pick me up in a minute or so. She has a good deal of money now, but in her childhood she almost starved to death and as a result of malnutrition she lost all her teeth. She’s a handsome woman, for all that. If you ever met her, you’d probably tell her that her teeth are so perfect they might be artificial. And she’d tell you that’s exactly what they are. You see she’s one of those rare specimens, my dear—an honest woman.”

Esther thought for a moment, then lifted her chin in cool disdain. “You’re very clever, aren’t you, Mr. Whittle?”

“Not very. I rate myself a fair average—perhaps a trifle better, since the average is so hopelessly low. What I am, I think, is sympathetic. For instance, I have known you for something less than an hour, Miss Clarke, but I’ve already seen how you dislike women. I’m not blaming you a bit. The sympathetic side of me tells me that women have made you that way. You can’t help yourself.”

“Is that what you had in mind when you said just now that you wanted to talk to me?”

“On the contrary, it was farthest from my mind. As a matter of fact, I came to ask you if you’d be willing to sit for me. I’m getting ready to put on an exhibition next winter and I’d like—”

“You want to make a portrait of me?”

“Precisely that—and nothing more than that, in case you harbor either suspicions or romantic expectations.”

Esther laughed. She was definitely sure now that she disliked him with a stimulating ardor, and that having him paint her portrait might be very amusing.

“How soon do you wish to start?” she asked him.

“I have no time to lose,” Oliver Whittle told her. “I’d like to start as soon as you find it convenient.”

(How you relished hating Oliver Whittle during your sittings that summer, Esther Clarke! How you loved to complain every time you toiled up the three long flights of stairs that brought you finally to his shambles of a studio under the roof with its slanting skylight! And how you flared up at him in scorn when he lightly enquired as to the progress of your affair with the young captain! Because you were in love with Nevin Blue, and Daphne Crane had faded like a pink mist from his youth, and in her place he knew for that brief interval the moonlit flame that was you. He and you had come from the same humble, small-town roots, after all, and for a time you thought he might actually be the Danny O’Rourke of your dreams.

But you didn’t tell Oliver Whittle that Nevin came every night he was in town, to eat his dinner in Shanley’s, on Times Square, where you appeared three times nightly as a *chanteuse*—came and ate and sat and drank throughout the long evenings, waiting only for the moment when he could have you to himself. You didn’t say anything, either, about the nights you walked together in the streets, like two in a single dream, nor of the mists that wrapped you about as you held hands on top of an open Fifth Avenue bus, all the way up Riverside Drive to the end of the line, and back down again to Greenwich Village, where you had a small apartment of your own. You couldn’t tell Oliver Whittle that, of course, any more than you could tell him how Nevin, a devout Catholic, kissed you good-night almost as if you were some sacred relic. Most of all, you could not tell him of that one night, your last night together before Captain Nevin Blue was to leave for service in France. . . .)

Esther had taken the evening off, to spend it with Nevin. When she stepped down from the bus that had brought her from Washington Square, she stood for a moment at the curb and looked across the flood of traffic to where Nevin stood waiting, in accordance with the arrangements they had made over the telephone, on the steps of the Fifth Avenue Library. In that moment the wonder came to her again—as it had come many times before—that two mortals could, in a vast city of hurrying millions, effect a meeting as simply and as precisely, with respect to time and place, as if their rendezvous were a bend in the river or a village drug store on the corner. She had never quite shed the bewildering uncertainty, the fluttering apprehensiveness of the small-town girl launched suddenly upon the heedless tide of the great city. Always, in the moment before the first handclasp, before the first words of greeting, the utter absurdity of her expectations held her in almost unbearable suspense.

And yet, there was Nevin, waving his hand briefly toward her as he stepped down to make his way across the avenue. In another moment he was incredibly beside her, his strong arm encircling her waist. She leaned against him, her cheek pressed to his shoulder.

“Oh, Nevin, you’re here!”

He stood away, laughing at her. “Wasn’t that the idea?”

She crooked her arm into his and drew him with her toward the corner. “Yes, I know, but I get to thinking the silliest things when I’m all by myself.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, like how impossible it is that we should really meet just the way we planned.”

“We met a month ago without planning it at all, didn’t we?” Nevin asked.

“But that was just luck.”

“If luck could do it, a little planning ought to do a lot more, the way I figure it. And maybe there wasn’t so much luck in it either. It could have been fate, couldn’t it? But I’m willing to settle for it your way. We met in May—we meet today! How’s that for a rhyme, Miss Clarke? Set it to music and sing it for me when I come back.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it, Captain Blue,” Esther replied with mock dignity, and they laughed together.

Who has not lived through a brief moment that seems to have been lived before? As if a little ghost of time returns to haunt the mind only to escape

—why, that winter night in Chicago, ages ago, Esther thought in a flash. . . . “*Shall we try to find the place, Miss Clarke?*” “*Of course, Mr. Beauchamp!*” The sheer nonsense of it and, later, the sheer madness of a young poet striving to capture the perfect line! Philip, too, had wanted to write songs for her to sing. Not that Nevin Blue was serious about her turning his jingle into a song. He would have squirmed at the mere thought of it.

With a grateful sense of release from all that had threatened her back there when she was so young, she hugged Nevin’s arm and said, “It’s fun to be with you!”

He beamed happily down at her as they waited for a halt in the traffic before venturing to cross the street to where an idle taxicab stood at the curb. Nevin had just lifted his hand to signal the driver when a young woman brushed past him and sprang into the path of an oncoming truck. Nothing could have been more deliberate, Esther decided in that brief instant that was given her to think before she realized that Nevin had leaped after the woman and had knocked her clear of the truck and into the narrow lane between the streams of traffic. She caught only a glimpse of the figure sprawled upon the pavement at Nevin’s feet, before the huge truck came to a halt with screaming tires directly in front of her. But in that brief glimpse she had seen the woman’s pink legs in their sheer black stockings. A cry froze in her throat. She stood rigid, her knotted fists pressed to her mouth, while the crowd, hungrily curious, massed about her. She looked up at the truck driver, who turned from a cursory survey of what was hidden from Esther’s view, grinned down at her, and leaned to release his brakes. He winked at her as the truck moved slowly away, and there at last was Nevin and a bored-looking policeman, with the young woman between them. As they came toward her, Esther’s eyes went over the disheveled figure. How could she have mistaken the woman for . . .

“Get back, now! Keep movin’!” the policeman ordered, using his night stick to open a passage across the sidewalk.

Esther caught Nevin’s arm. “Nevin—are you all right?”

“One side, young lady!”

“She’s with me, officer,” Nevin explained, and to Esther, “Sure, I’m all right. Pull yourself together, you’re shaking like a leaf.”

“We’ll step inside here a minute and get out o’ this mob,” the policeman said, and led the way into a cigar store on the corner.

To the officer’s enquiries, both Nevin and Esther gave their names and addresses, but the young woman refused to supply any information about

herself. In an interval between fits of almost inaudible sobbing that came from deep within her and shook her whole frame, she looked once at Esther out of eyes half-closed and without expression, then gave Nevin a twisted smile that was almost a sneer.

“All right, miss,” the officer said finally as he closed his little book and thrust it into a hip pocket, “I’ll just take you along with me where you can cool off and think it over. You can do your talkin’ later.”

In the taxicab, Nevin took Esther’s hands. “Come on, snap out of it! You’re not going to drag that around with you all evening, are you?”

She leaned against his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I was so scared for a minute when I couldn’t see you, with the truck standing in front of me.” She couldn’t tell him what had really forced her to the verge of panic.

“Well, I’m here now. Don’t you remember me? And I came out of it without a scratch. What’s more, *you’re* here—and this is our night. Let’s start all over again. As I was saying—what was it I was saying?”

Esther laughed shakily as she drew away from him. “Am I supposed to remember?”

“You were saying something about—it’s fun to be with me, that’s it. Lord, what fun! Never a dull moment, eh?”

To Esther, one of his most endearing traits was the small-town simplicity that remained with him in spite of an experience that must have thrown him into contact with all kinds and conditions of men. His proximity to New York, where he was able to spend his liberty, had left upon him no mark of urbanity, no facility with the lively retort that was the badge of the pseudo-sophisticate. He was still capable of the hackneyed quips that passed for humor on Main Street in his own home town. He made no pretense at anything else. And because he spoke a language that was her own, after all, she was almost cajoled into forgetting all that had happened back there in the street.

Yet, when they were seated opposite each other at the small table in a supper club less than a block from Fifth Avenue, where the food was excellent and the music was good, with a small patch of floor for dancing, Esther said, “Do you think she did it deliberately?”

“Deliberately—oh, that! I thought we were going to forget it. However, just to clear the air, I don’t think she meant to kill herself, if that’s what you mean. I think she jumped out in front of the truck deliberately, but she took good care to nudge me on the way, as if it was an act we had rehearsed. And of course I fell for it. I have a darned good hunch she wouldn’t have tried it if she didn’t think there was at least a fifty-fifty chance she’d get out of it. If

she really wanted to do it, there's a hundred ways better than inviting a truck to run over you. You can't always tell about these so-called suicides. I know a girl who sat all one afternoon on the edge of a bridge before she jumped off—just as a tug-boat came along to pick her up. She was having trouble with her boy-friend. They're married now and have three or four kids. You females pull the darnedest tricks to get your man. And we poor saps of men fall for it nine times out of ten."

Esther laughed, but her eyes rested upon him with sober scrutiny. The first time he had kissed her good-night, he had brushed her hair with his lips as if she were something too precious for his touch. Night after night she had left him at her own door and had climbed the stairs to her small apartment with a feeling of frustration and defeat. His too obvious restraint tortured her at the same time that it challenged her to break through the defenses that guarded his personal integrity. Had he been the same with Daphne Crane? Had she been arch without success, coy without effect except to turn his thoughts to somebody else? And what if the girl whose life he had saved less than an hour ago had been none other than Daphne herself?

The questions were a swift flight of shadows over the surface of Esther's mind. She was still smiling when she said, "You don't really mean it, of course. If somebody told you you were a poor sap—"

"I'd be the first to admit it, where women are concerned," he interrupted.

"I don't believe it and I don't believe all attempts at suicide are put on for show—tricks, as you call them. Some really do it, you know."

"Accidentally. It doesn't always work out the way they plan it."

"And women aren't the only ones. What about all the men—"

"How did we get into this?" Nevin asked abruptly. "Here we are on our last little party together for God knows how long, and all we talk about is people cutting their throats or turning on the gas because they're tired of it all. Let's order dinner and have a dance while they're bringing it on."

A waiter hovering above them produced menus and began making suggestions.

"We're in no hurry tonight," Nevin said. "Bring me a scotch and soda and—a dry martini?" He looked questioningly at Esther.

"That will be fine."

She rarely drank anything, even when she was out with Nevin. She didn't like the taste of any cocktail she had ever tried, and had failed to notice any appreciable effect from it, exhilarating or otherwise. But tonight

was a special occasion. A drink together would be something in the nature of a ritual.

“Let’s dance,” Nevin said as the waiter left them.

Even their dancing was a part of the ritual, Esther thought as they moved together around the table-top rectangle of floor space grudgingly relinquished by the management to the younger patrons, and to such of the older ones as refused to make concessions to age. Any pleasure that came of the performance was shared only by the frankly Cyprian who clung together in a none-too-private orgy of the senses, or by the few who were still young enough to think of love as one of the unfathomable mysteries of their heritage.

Esther was no novice to love. The memory of Danny O’Rourke was still a burning flame within her, a flame that would never die. With Philip Beauchamp, she had been a neophyte to passion, nothing more. She had been aware of that even in the midst of their embrace on that winter’s night beside the lake. But with Nevin Blue she was not so sure. Perhaps she was really in love, she told herself. It was not the love that had come to her there in the moonlight, on the wild escarpment of the stone quarry. Nor was it the ruthless physical hunger that had fed itself upon the starry-eyed Philip. It was a glowing complex that partook of the nature of both, a tender yielding and an urgent demand for consummation.

Yet throughout it all he had borne toward her a cautious perversity that was infuriating. She felt almost relieved that he was finally being called away. His absence would be hard to bear for a time, but it could be no worse than having him come to her now and then only to disappear like some pleasant emanation that was not quite real. The fault with most of the men she had known in the past four years was the brutal immediacy with which they made their intentions known—the exploring hand, the trite declaration, the blunt suggestion, and the final struggle from which she had so often extricated herself only by sheer physical exertion.

But Nevin Blue was more like a boy who was still enthralled by the mysteries of a groping adolescence. No wonder he had said, on their first meeting, that he and Daphne Crane had been “sort of engaged.” Poor Daphne!

That was why she was startled later that night when Nevin said something so unexpected that she halted suddenly in the midst of their dance and looked at him incredulously. It was eleven o’clock, and for minutes they had not spoken while they moved about the floor to the tom-tom of the drums and the murky moaning of the saxophones. The band was playing a

dance version of *The Bells of St. Mary's*. Nevin drew her to him impulsively and as quickly stepped away from her.

"This can't go on, Esther," he said, and looked down at her from brooding eyes.

"There doesn't seem to be much choice," she said. "You're going away tomorrow."

He looked gravely into her eyes and drew her close again. "You're too beautiful!" he breathed, his lips close to her ear.

She tried to laugh lightly. "Nevin, you've been drinking too much."

"I've been drinking," he admitted, "but not too much. Just enough so I'm able to tell you what I've wanted to tell you from the first day I saw you."

This was no time for pretense. "You can still tell me," she whispered.

"You're too beautiful to leave without—" He hesitated and buried his face in her hair. "You know I love you—you've known that as long as you've known me."

"Oh, Nevin, why have you waited so long?"

"So long? Gosh, it's been—such a short time!"

It was all she could do to keep from laughing. He was still the small-town boy, justifying himself in the very moment of his declaration. But she tilted her head back and looked at him. "Darling, you're so funny I could laugh if it wasn't so serious. I love you, Nevin—I've loved you ever since that day at Tomasina's. And now you're going to leave me—"

"I don't think you understand me," he put in. "I love you—and I want to marry you."

"But there won't be time now," Esther said. "Tomorrow—"

"I know. We can't be married before I leave, but we can give our promises and we can wait, can't we?"

"Darling, I can wait. I'll be here—waiting for you—when you come back."

"It might be quite a while," he reminded her.

"I don't think so," Esther said, "but it doesn't matter. There isn't anybody else, and there won't be."

They were in a corner of the dance floor, and Nevin drew his arms strongly about her and kissed her uplifted mouth.

It was midnight before they left the supper club. There was so much to talk about all at once, and there was a bottle of champagne which Nevin

insisted on ordering so that they might renew their pledges again and again, their eyes meeting above the bubbling glasses.

When they stepped into the street at last, the lights were huddled in a thin fog. From the harbor and beyond, muffled warnings of fog-horns nudged their way into the city, deep-throated and sinister.

“Let’s take a bus,” Esther suggested when Nevin began looking about for a cab.

“Starting to economize already?” he asked her. “We’ve been engaged only an hour by the clock.”

“I’m not being practical,” she said. “I’m being romantic. All the time you’re away I’ll be thinking of the bus rides we used to take on nights like this.”

“I thought I’d have a chance to kiss you on the way home.”

“I don’t like being kissed in taxicabs, Captain Blue.”

“If you prefer it on top of a bus, Miss Clarke—”

They were laughing as they hurried to the corner and raced across the avenue to a bus that was waiting for the light to change. They climbed to the upper deck and found themselves alone.

“I’m giddy from all that champagne,” Esther said, dropping into a seat as the bus started away.

“I’m giddy myself,” Nevin replied as he sat down and took her in his arms, “but not from champagne.”

Almost before they knew it, they were in Washington Square and the scant dozen of passengers were getting down and scattering hastily away under the fog-enshrouded trees.

It was less than a block to Esther’s apartment on the south side of the square, but before they had gone half the distance they became aware of confusion ahead of them, the muted confusion that always attends an untoward happening when night and fog are allied in a city street. The headlights from two squad cars crimsoned the mist, and an ambulance gloomily preempted the curb.

“It’s right in front of my place, Nevin,” Esther said on a breath. “What in the world—”

“We’ll know in a minute.”

Perhaps a score of curious bystanders had gathered in front of the three-story house in which Esther had her apartment. The little man who discharged the duties of superintendent of the building leaned against the

stone balustrade at the bottom of the half-dozen steps that led upward to the front door. The door itself stood wide open.

Esther pushed her way to the little man's side. "What has happened, Celestin?"

He stirred himself and glanced at her over his shoulder. "Oh, it's you, Miss Clarke!"

"Is somebody—sick?"

"It's Lolita, the girl on the top floor. She took poison. She's dead."

As he spoke, two men in white uniforms came from the open doorway, bearing a stretcher on which a sheeted figure lay motionless.

Esther clung to Nevin until the white-clad attendants slid their burden into the rear of the ambulance and closed the door.

"Don't leave me yet, darling," she begged as the ambulance moved away and the small crowd began to disperse.

"I'll go in with you," Nevin said, his arm about her. "Good Lord, can't we get away from this stuff? They'll have me trying it."

Slowly they went in from the street and up the flight of stairs to Esther's door. When they were in the apartment at last, Esther tossed her hat and jacket aside and went toward Nevin standing in the middle of the floor. She moved into his outstretched arms.

"You knew this—this Lolita?" he asked her.

"Not very well. She was a dancer. We used to speak when we met on the stairs, and she came down a couple of times to borrow things."

"What are you shaking about, then? If she wasn't a friend of yours—"

"Don't be so heartless!" Esther burst out. "Even if I scarcely knew her, she was somebody that *lived!*"

"Yes, that's right. But I wasn't trying to be heartless, darling. I just don't want you to go to pieces over something you couldn't have helped anyhow."

A cold shudder passed over her, like an omen of ills yet to come. In that evil moment she became convinced that she was looking into Nevin's eyes for the last time. He was going away tomorrow, and he was never coming back.

She clung to him in an agony of despair. "Nevin, darling—don't leave me tonight," she pleaded.

(Nevin Blue stayed the night with you, didn't he, Esther? Though it didn't make his leave-taking any easier for you to bear when he finally had to rush from your arms in the early morning. But in the weeks that followed

his going, you sang with such full-throated ease that even the exacting Tomasina began to hope that her patience might still be rewarded.

Then, when the crushing news of Nevin's death just before the armistice reached you, you donned black and moved in a somnambulistic way when anyone was looking at you. But it was not all sham, was it, Esther? Your grief was real. And for a while your singing was the wandering, hushed plaint of a soul in search of its lost mate.

It was too bad that a few who knew you very well—like Oliver Whittle, for instance—saw only that your clinging black gown seemed designed more to reveal the allure of your young body than to express any grief you felt over your loss. And those long, black gloves you wore, bedizened to the elbow with paste diamonds, rubies and emeralds! Oliver himself had suggested—tactfully, through Tomasina—the long gloves, after he had completed his portrait of you, in profile, with the hands charitably folded and unobtrusive. He had called his picture *Sans Gants*, a title cryptic to the people who viewed it at his exhibition the following spring. He didn't tell you, of course, what ironical twist in his mind had brought forth the title. He didn't tell anybody, in fact. He didn't even chide you for the cheap diamonds and rubies and emeralds. You see, Esther, you were very, very young, and Oliver was really very kind. He wouldn't have hurt your feelings for anything in the world.)

Chapter Three

Ellen was on the telephone at last.

“But mother, it isn’t twelve o’clock yet. I had no idea you’d be nervous—with Miss Larson there to talk to and—”

“It wouldn’t have hurt you to telephone me. You know how terrified I am of storms.”

“I’m sorry, mother. I was having such a good time I just didn’t think. Anyhow, the reason I called you now—one of the girls on the party wants to go home tonight instead of going back to town. She lives about twenty miles north and my date has offered to drive her out if I go along for company. We’re leaving right away, but it will be almost an hour before I get home, and I thought I’d let you know.”

“I suppose it’s all right, dear, but I do think somebody else might have taken the girl home. However, if you don’t drive too fast—that north road is so winding, and with Friday night traffic and all—”

“We’ll be careful, mother. Please don’t worry. Miss Larson will wait till I get home, won’t she?”

“Well, I don’t know, dear. She’s still here. I’ll try to persuade her to wait.”

“Tell her she just *has* to wait. Tell her I have something pretty special to show her when I get back. Tell her—oh, tell her anything, but don’t let her go. Good-bye now—I’ve got to rush!”

When Esther returned to the living room, Phoebe Larson was standing in front of the fireplace gazing down into the crumbling embers.

“Well, that was my precious child at last,” she said with an uneasy laugh.

“So I gathered,” Phoebe said, and noticed the wild-rose flush beneath the pallid make-up on Esther’s cheekbones. “I couldn’t help overhearing a little ___”

“She wants you to wait until she comes in. I promised to do my best to keep you.”

“I was thinking it was about time I was calling a cab. But it doesn’t matter, really. I have nothing important to do tomorrow before I take the plane. I can sleep late if I feel like it.”

Esther had paused halfway across the room, a distant look in her eyes. “She said the strangest thing. She said she had something pretty special to

show you when she gets back.”

“Just making me curious so I’ll stay,” Phoebe smiled. “Even so, I’m quite flattered.”

“I think she really meant it. I wonder what—”

“Maybe she wants to give me a look at her blind date,” Phoebe said.

“No, it couldn’t be that. Why, she never saw him before tonight. It couldn’t be anything so silly. I just hope she hasn’t been drinking—she didn’t sound like herself at all. She talked so fast—and so *strange*. Without any of the poise she usually—”

“Could it be that your little girl has fallen in love at first sight?” Phoebe suggested mildly.

“At first sight—with a blind date?”

Phoebe laughed. “It doesn’t seem possible, the way you put it—except that love itself is supposed to be blind.”

But Esther apparently saw no humor in Phoebe’s remark. “Oh, my goodness, no! Ellen wouldn’t fall in love at first sight. Sometimes I wish she *could*. I get so impatient with her everlasting tearing things to pieces before she can accept them—always analyzing everything. Why, she even made some sort of psychoanalysis of a Scottie pup we had a couple of years ago before she would permit herself to love him.”

“Now, really!” Phoebe protested.

“It’s true. I—I suppose she’s lucky, in a way, because she—” Esther bit her lip and then added, “The little dog died of distemper, anyhow.”

There was a soft shuffling of feet in the hall, and the dour housekeeper, Lucy Miller, presented herself without apology in the doorway, where she stood for a moment silently surveying the room. Unprepossessing as she had seemed to Phoebe earlier in the evening, she was even more so now. By removing her teeth, Phoebe thought to herself with cruel humor, she had added to the forbidding character of a face already ill-favored, and by the addition of countless twists of paper curlers to her head, she had taken away the one touch of softness that might have remained in spite of the fact that her thinning hair could no longer be thought of as a crowning glory.

But the woman was obviously indifferent to the sort of impression she made upon others. She stepped into the room, a long dressing gown of red chenille drawn closely about her spare frame, her thin hands folded over her stomach.

“I heard you talkin’ to Ellen,” she said, looking directly at Esther.

“Yes, Lucy. She won’t be home for another hour or so. They’re taking one of the girls home first—about twenty miles into the country somewhere up north—and Ellen is going along for company.”

“That’s all she said?”

“Y-yes.” Esther hesitated, whether from embarrassment or from some nervous fear, Phoebe could not be sure.

“She shouldn’t have been let go,” Lucy observed in a dull monotone, and again Phoebe was left to guess which of them, the woman herself or Ellen’s mother, should have prevented the girl’s going.

“She’ll be all right, Lucy,” Esther said brightly. “She sounded very gay.”

But Lucy Miller was looking about the room again. Without a word, she stepped to the coffee table beside Esther’s chair and lifted the tray with its two glasses and its half-empty sherry bottle. Esther put out one hand involuntarily and appeared to be on the point of saying something, but Lucy gave her a look the meaning of which was clear even to Phoebe Larson. Esther was to have nothing more to drink.

“Perhaps I’d better go back to my hotel after all,” Phoebe said as soon as Lucy disappeared into the kitchen. “Ellen won’t really mind, I’m sure, and that—that Lucy makes me feel I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“No, no, Phoebe, for God’s sake don’t go!” Esther cried, and all but collapsed forward with her head in her arms.

Phoebe went to her, grasped her trembling hands, and gently shook her. “What’s the matter, dear? Something is worrying the life out of you. I’ve known that ever since Ellen left. You haven’t been yourself, and you know it. What is it? Come on, now—we’re from the same old valley, and we used to tell each other everything way back there.”

Esther straightened back with a suddenly evasive smile that baffled Phoebe almost to anger.

“If I told you, Phoebe, you probably wouldn’t believe me. There’s no use in my telling you I’m worried about Ellen, because I can’t tell you why I should be. I don’t *know* why I should be. I have no reason to be. But I worry more or less about her all the time. I don’t often feel the way I do tonight, somehow. I—it’s something like—well, like having that second sight I was telling you about. Maybe seeing you again has made me think of all that has happened since we were kids at school together. Could anybody have been more innocent than we were in those days? And Ellen is just as sweet and innocent as we were. I don’t mean that your life—or mine, for that matter—has been tragic or anything like that. But we had no idea then what was ahead of us—what we would have to go through—”

“You’re working yourself into a state,” Phoebe said firmly. “No one knows what’s ahead, and I don’t think we’d be any better off if we did. Ellen will have to take her chance like all the rest of us. What do you want—how would you have it different even if you could? There wouldn’t be much to live for if we—”

“All I wanted in the beginning—don’t laugh at me—was a few acres of land somewhere, to raise corn and potatoes and chickens—and children,” Esther declared, with an air of belligerence that was directed against fate and destiny and life itself. “I know that sounds ridiculous to you. But I didn’t want the stage, and I didn’t want—*this*.” She waved a hand toward the room. “I didn’t want a well-to-do husband like Milton Southflagg. I didn’t want a well-bred child like Ellen. I didn’t want love affairs with poets and army captains and—and grand apartments in New York, and . . .”

Fog-horns moaned on the Hudson beyond Riverside Drive, but their sound bore none of the feeling of comfort and cozy warmth Esther had known on that night three years ago when their low complaining crept in at the open windows of the little apartment on Washington Square. Here the sound of traffic was a spectral, looming thing, almost more sight than sound, eerily almost tangible within the walls of her apartment on West End Avenue. She had drawn the velours drapes, and the cannel coal fire was burning rosily in the black marble fireplace, and yet the blind white outer presence reached in and felt across the gold brocade sofa, the antique, soft flush of the Persian rug, the rosewood grand piano. It was Esther Clarke’s twenty-fourth birthday, and two people were with her to celebrate it in this wraith-filled December night.

Tomasina Trome was preparing tea in the Russian samovar, and Oliver Whittle was talking to the two love-birds in their intricately wrought cage. The tiny devoted pair had come this morning, a birthday gift from Degraff Horten, with a card upon which he had written simply *Me and You* over his signature.

“Quite inane!” Oliver said, glancing up from the card which still dangled from one of the bars of the cage. “How do you know which is *Me* and which is *You*?”

“I call them *Lapis* and *Lazuli*,” Esther laughed.

“Why not *Flotsam* and *Jetsam*?” Oliver asked. “It would seem quite as appropriate, don’t you think?”

“Oliver!” Tomasina chided.

Esther, pretending not to hear, was bending above a small incense lamp, a green Buddha. “I know how you hate this, Oliver,” she said, “but please let me have it just for a little while to take the smell of the fog out of the place.”

Oliver turned from the love-birds. “Pinch-hitting for the great Degraff—the fog, I mean. By all means let’s have incense, my dear!”

“Why don’t you like Degraff, Oliver?” Esther asked, sliding her long white satin skirt beneath her as she seated herself cross-legged on a large black velvet floor cushion.

“My child—”

“Don’t be so patronizing,” Tomasina interrupted. “After all, you’re only ten years older than Esther.”

“It isn’t my being so pitifully young that annoys you, my dear Sina,” Oliver retorted. “You’d have said the same thing if I were ninety.”

“Probably,” Tomasina replied, “though why you should set the limit at ninety—”

“Confidentially, I have decided not to live beyond ninety. Ninety appeals to me as a pleasant age at which to die. Now, give me a cup of tea.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Esther said. “Why don’t you like Degraff?”

Oliver laced his steaming cup with a stout measure of rum from a bottle that stood beside the samovar.

“Sina steered us adroitly away from that subject,” he said. “I had no intention of coming back to it. But since you insist, let me make it clear first that I do *not* dislike Degraff Horten. I do not dislike plum pudding. I just don’t eat it. If I disliked Degraff, you wouldn’t find me spiking my cup of tea with his rum. There are limits, after all. On the other hand, I do not have to *like* him in order to enjoy his excellent Jamaica. The distinction may be finely drawn, but perhaps you follow me.”

“No, I don’t follow you,” Esther admitted frankly. “Besides, it’s *my* rum you’re drinking, not Degraff’s.”

Oliver eyed her over his teacup. “A distinction I find equally difficult to follow,” he observed, and pursed his lips for another sip.

Tomasina set her cup down with a small clatter. “Oliver,” she said, “your patronizing manner is hard enough to take, but when you try being facetious you’re unbearable.”

“I have said nothing that could possibly offend anyone within hearing,” Oliver replied. “Above all, I have said nothing against Degraff Horten, who

seems to be holding the center of the stage at the moment—through no desire on my part, I assure you. In his way, Degraff is all right, I suppose. As music publishers go, especially wealthy ones, he's quite bright. His wife, Beatrice, is a nice woman, though plain to the undiscerning eye, and very decent. Like most really good people, she's a bit dim, but she's one of the few women who have sincerely liked Esther and given her friendship. But when you add that all up, I still can't find enough in it to make me like the fellow. And it doesn't matter, either to him or to me, whether I like or dislike him. The two of us exist in separate worlds, that's all, and I'm content to have it so—as he undoubtedly is."

"I think it should matter to you—a little," Tomasina observed. "He's in love with Esther, after all."

"We all are!" Oliver declared. "I just don't happen to see how that places me under any obligation to—"

"He put her in his revue last winter, when we were about ready to give her up as hopeless," Tomasina argued.

"He has the advantage over me there," Oliver said.

"And he intends to marry Esther just as soon as he can get his divorce," Tomasina concluded. "You might compare him with something a little more interesting than a pudding."

"Gad, what a conniving duenna you have become!" Oliver said, heaving himself up from the chair into which he had settled only a moment before. "I wouldn't have thought it possible when I first knew you, Tomasina."

"Oh, please!" Esther implored. "I didn't mean to start a quarrel when I asked about Degraff."

"This is not a quarrel, dear," Tomasina tried to reassure her. "Periodically, Oliver and I have to clear the air between us. I find him quite insufferable from time to time. Tonight happens to be one of the times."

Oliver turned from gazing down into the flames in the fireplace. "Sina is quite right, Esther. This is not a quarrel. But it is a little more than an attempt to clear the air between us, as she expresses it. It takes in a little more territory than that. It takes in all three of us—and at least two others who aren't here at the moment. When I appear to be patronizing, as Sina puts it, I'm just having fun aping some of my sophisticated friends. Nobody seems to mind it much except Sina. But when I'm being facetious, I'm not having fun. To begin with, I'm not good at it. I don't come by it naturally. I'm as insufferable to myself as I am to Sina. I think she knows that. But facetiousness is my only defence against something else which I find quite as insufferable to me as I seem to be to Sina."

"I suspect there are depths to you that I have never before dreamed of," Tomasina goaded him. "I should like to hear more about that—that mysterious 'something else' you've been keeping to yourself all this time."

Oliver's eyes flashed. "Very well," he said. "But first I'd like to ask Esther a rather personal question. It has a direct bearing on what I have to say."

"Oh, dear!" Esther said wearily. "All right, I'll try. What is it?"

"Are you in love with Degraff Horten?"

Esther's fingers played for a moment with the white satin folds of her long skirt. "When I was fifteen," she said at last, her voice sounding plaintive and distant, "I was in love with a boy back in Sun Rock, Minnesota. I have never told you about him. There's nothing to tell about him even now, except that my love for him was the realest thing I have ever known. He went away and I have never seen him again. When I was twenty-one, there was Nevin. You know about him. I think I was in love with Nevin—though he wasn't quite—quite Danny. There have been others—but they've all been—just others. And they've all been the same. And now there's Degraff." She lifted her shoulders, sighed, and let them fall again. "Degraff has been kind, he has been generous, he has helped me when I needed most to be helped. If I could really love him—even as much as I loved Nevin Blue—it would be little enough return for all he has done for me."

"But you are going to marry him?"

"When he is free to marry me."

"He hasn't started action on his divorce yet, I understand."

"He intends to as soon as Beatrice gets back from Florida in the spring."

"On what grounds?"

"They've been married for ten years and have no children," Esther reminded him. "And Degraff wants a family. He and Beatrice haven't really lived together for a long time and he's sure she won't put anything in the way of his—"

"Does she suspect there's anything between you and Degraff?"

"How could she?" Esther asked innocently. "She knows we're very good friends. She has been here herself a couple of times—at my house-warming in June—and at that little dinner party you and Tomasina came to the night after the show closed. And she dropped in last month, just before she left for Florida."

"How does she account for this snug little harbor, do you suppose?"

“Now, after all, Oliver,” Tomasina broke in, “the revue had a good run, and Esther’s salary—”

“And she knows my brother is able to send me money whenever I need it,” Esther added.

Oliver threw back his head in a raucous laugh. “That hypothetical brother of yours again! He comes in handy in a variety of ways, doesn’t he? I have begun to wonder if there really is a—”

“And I wonder just where you’re trying to lead us with all this catechizing,” Tomasina spoke up. “You started out to ask *a* personal question. You end up like a prosecuting attorney.”

“You’re quite right, Sina,” Oliver said coolly. “If, to my first question, Esther had answered that she was sincerely, seriously in love with Degraff Horten, I would have closed the books on the whole silly business. But she isn’t in love with him, and she never will be. Even if I were convinced that Horten is going to marry her, I wouldn’t have another word to say. But I’m far from convinced. On the contrary. And that leaves me free to say what I’ve been wanting to say for weeks—and I’d say it to Degraff Horten if he were here instead of in Pittsburgh—on important business, according to Esther. I wasn’t being merely facetious when I wanted to name those damn’ birds Flotsam and Jetsam. When I said the stinking fog from the river was pinch-hitting for Degraff Horten, I wasn’t being funny. And when I hinted there was something in common between him and a plum pudding, I meant every word of it, and more. God knows I don’t give a damn for the so-called sanctity of marriage. I’ve had one experience with it and that was enough. It doesn’t matter to me whether Horten gets rid of his wife or not. He can throw her into the Hudson if he wants to. But the whole situation involving him and Beatrice and Esther—yes, and all the rest of us—smells to high heaven. It’s a stench in the nostrils of anybody with a grain of self-respect left in him. Maybe if I hadn’t been brought up on an Iowa farm I would feel different about it. Or if Esther was an out and out gold-digger instead of a small-town kid chasing a will-o’-the-wisp, I’d tell her to go ahead and get all she can out of it. If Horten were an out and out profligate with a kept woman on his hands, I’d leave him alone to pay the bills and the hell with it! Or if Beatrice were a bitch instead of just a dumb, decent wife, I’d tell her she was getting only what’s coming to her. But they’re not. Look at this nest with its love-birds—its samovar—its grand piano—its Persian rug, and all the rest of it. This is no place for Esther Clarke. I’m disgusted with her for letting herself be led into it. I’m disgusted with Beatrice for being so blind to what’s going on under her very nose. And as for Degraff Horten, I loathe

him for an unspeakable liar and a cad without even the sensibilities of an amateur roué!”

Esther dabbed at her eyes with a tiny ball of handkerchief. Tomasina was rocking her great frame back and forth, staring fixedly at the wall opposite her.

“I think you’ve said enough, Oliver,” she observed in a colorless tone.

“I think so too,” Oliver agreed. “I’d better go. I’ll snuff out that damned incense first.”

He attended to the green Buddha, and the fog-horns moaned from the river.

The buzzer sounded from above the doorway to the hall.

“Perhaps Degraff got back after all,” Tomasina said, resignedly, preparing to get up from her chair. “He said he’d try.”

“I’ll go,” Esther said, rising from her cushion and brushing her eyes quickly with her handkerchief.

In the moment’s wait before the elevator stopped at the second floor, Tomasina saw Esther draw herself up, set her shoulders back, and touch her hair lightly with her fingertips. She saw Oliver open the closet door and take his coat and scarf from their hook. Then she heard the elevator stop and saw Esther’s lips part in a fixed smile as she placed her hand to the door-knob.

But it was not Degraff Horten. The thin, dark young man who stood presently smiling in the open doorway wore a mustard-colored, plaid overcoat and a peaked tweed cap, and carried a suitcase and a long, white florist’s box.

“Duke!” Esther gasped after an instant’s startled incredulity, and threw her arms about him. “Oh, let me look at you! How did you ever—” She stood away from him, her eyes great with tears while her laughing voice quavered.

“Thought I’d surprise you on your birthday, Sis.” Duke said, still eagerly smiling as he stepped through the doorway, but with some diffidence as his eyes went past her to the two strangers sitting in the room. He set his burdens on the floor and removed his cap and overcoat.

“I—I just can’t believe it!” Esther cried confusedly as she drew him into the room. “It’s my brother Duke—Tomasina—Oliver! Here, give me your coat and meet my two best friends. Tomasina Trome—my teacher, you know—and Oliver Whittle, the artist I wrote you about—the one who painted my picture. Oliver was just saying he didn’t believe you existed—

and here you are! Have I a brother, Oliver? Is he real enough to suit you? Oh, I never had such a surprise in all my life!”

While Tomasina and Oliver shook hands with Duke, Esther hung his coat and cap in the closet, peering out from behind the narrow door to catch the first revealing sign in the eyes of her friends as they surveyed her brother in his broad-striped suit and polka-dotted bow tie. Why did he have to wear such outlandish garb? Poor Duke! But she could detect nothing but warm approval in the looks Tomasina and Oliver gave him, and was immediately ashamed of her unworthy doubts.

“Well!” Oliver said, a broad smile lighting his face. “I was on the point of leaving when the buzzer sounded. But—”

“Please don’t go yet, Oliver,” Esther urged, and added, with a pout, “Even if you haven’t been very nice.”

“Don’t get out on my account,” Duke said as he sat down and helped himself to a cigarette as he glanced about the room. “Sis’s friends are my friends, I guess.”

“May I mix you a drink, old man?” Oliver asked in his heartiest manner.

“Say, now—you must be a mind-reader. That fog isn’t like what we get out on the coast. This stuff gets right into your bones. But look—I brought some of my own along with me. I’m not taking any chances on this prohibition stuff. Drag that suitcase of mine over here, Sis. It isn’t too heavy, and you look like a little exercise would be good for you.” He winked at Oliver, without a smile except for the glint in his eyes. “That white box I left on the floor is for you, Sis. Might as well open it—get it over with while we’re still sober.”

“Flowers for me?” Esther asked, setting the suitcase in front of him and taking the long box to a table.

“Who else? I haven’t any girl-friend that I know of hiding out in this town. This is only my first trip to New York. Maybe by the next time I make it, I’ll have a couple of telephone calls to make.” He drew a bottle of bourbon from his suitcase and handed it to Oliver. “A guy can always find himself a woman, but I wasn’t taking a gamble on this. It’s easier to carry around than a woman, for one thing, and I can throw it away when I’m through with it.”

“Oh, Duke, they’re beautiful!” Esther lifted an armful of white, long-stemmed roses from the box and held them for Tomasina and Oliver to see, then buried her face in their waxy petals. “M-m-m! You shouldn’t have been so extravagant, Duke.” She stooped and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Come on out to the kitchen with me, Tomasina, and help me arrange them.”

“I’ll get some ice,” Oliver said. “You sit where you are, Mr. Clarke, while I—”

“Duke’s the name I answer to,” Duke said. “Hey, Sis, you dropped the envelope that came with the flowers—there at your feet. Go ahead, I’ll get it.”

He picked the envelope from the floor and set it on the table beside the samovar, then stood back and looked quizzically at the gleaming copper urn before he went back to his chair.

In the kitchen, Oliver put an arm about Esther’s slender waist and pressed her gently to him. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, then turned abruptly away to open the door of the refrigerator.

When he had gone back to the living room, Esther said, “Poor Oliver! He can be so darned sweet when he wants to be—and so cruel sometimes! You saw him put his arm around me just now?”

“My back was turned,” Tomasina said, “but I had a pretty good idea of what was going on behind me. I know Oliver, I think, better than he knows himself. He’s one of the grandest persons I know, but he has to let off steam once in a while—like the rest of us, I suppose. Get out your vases.”

Esther placed two tall vases in the sink and turned on a faucet. “But he looked so sorry for what he said.”

“I wouldn’t count too much on that, if I were you,” Tomasina remarked. “He was undoubtedly sorry that he had hurt your feelings, but he doesn’t regret saying what he did. I suppose that’s another fine distinction, and we’ve surely had enough of that for one night.”

“Oliver thinks I’m just fond of Degraff,” Esther said. “You probably think so too. But it’s more than that. He has done so much for me, and he’s planning to do so much more when his new show is ready. I don’t know what I would have done without him. I don’t know what I’d do now without him. Besides, he needs me. Beatrice has never appreciated him, and she has failed him in so many ways. It isn’t as if I were taking him away from her. They haven’t meant anything to each other for—”

“Let’s not talk drivel,” Tomasina broke in. “I don’t know anything about what they mean to each other, and I’m not curious enough to find out. I know they’ve been married for ten years. And I know they’re still married and living together under the same roof when they both happen to be in town. And yet you and Degraff are apparently talking marriage as if you were actually engaged. It doesn’t make sense to Oliver—but why go on arguing about it? Oliver said all there is to say about it. Here—take the rest of these—your vase is bigger than mine.”

“But we *are* engaged,” Esther said as she took the roses from Tomasina.

“Piffle! That’s just the kind of thing you say sometimes that makes me feel like taking you over my knee in proper old-fashioned—”

“Well, just as good as engaged.”

“Nor as good as. You’re not engaged, and you know you’re not, if you’ve got a grain of sense in your head.”

“You agree, then, with everything Oliver said tonight?”

“I could have said more. I could have said that Degraff Horten has no intention of divorcing his wife, or he’d have done something about it before this. I could have said you’ve let yourself into this—whatever it is, and I’m not asking—because you think you see a way of getting what you want without working for it. Now, don’t start crying again, for God’s sake!”

“Why haven’t you said all this to me before?” Esther asked, her lips trembling.

“I wonder. Maybe I’m getting too old to meddle. I feel like letting people work out their own problems. And I have an idea you’re working yours out in the only way it can be done.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think you’ve had just about all you can stand of Degraff Horten, that’s what I mean. I’ve been through a few things with you, don’t forget, and I know the signs.”

“I don’t know how you have ever put up with me.”

In her large way, Tomasina gave her body a resigned shake. “I can put up with a great deal in anyone I love as much as I love you,” she said, and her eyes traveled over the roses. “Your brother must have paid something for these. Two dozen! One for every year, of course. He’s a fine looking chap—good eyes and a good voice—and good, honest-knuckled hands. Come along, let’s get back in. They’ll be wondering what has happened to us.”

When the two vases of roses were set in place in the living room, Esther picked up the envelope from beside the samovar. Duke waited, drawing on his cigarette in a too casual silence, his eyes betrayingly bright as he watched her.

“Why, Durwood Clarke!” Esther cried. “I’m going to faint! Look, people!” She lifted a green rectangle of paper toward Tomasina and Oliver, then held it before her own eyes to stare at it again. “A thousand dollars! Duke, have you been holding up a bank, or what?”

Duke took a long drink from his glass. “No—and I haven’t started running liquor yet, except enough to keep up my own stock. That’s honest

money, Sis, if there is such a thing. Chet and I have been doing a little better than break even the last few months. We both figured you ought to get cut in on it.”

“But, Duke—darling!” Esther looked at the check again. “You’ve been so generous with me all my life. I don’t deserve it.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, Sis,” Duke said. “Of course, if your conscience is bothering you—”

She kissed him again and used her handkerchief to rub the smear of lip rouge from his cheek. “What I mean is—I don’t really need it,” she told him. “I’m engaged, Duke.”

“What—again?” He looked up quickly and blinked at Oliver. “Is there something here I should know about?”

“Don’t look at me,” Oliver laughed. “I’m not the lucky one.”

“No, no,” Esther said quickly. “He’d have been here tonight, but he had to go to Pittsburgh on business.”

“Oh! Well, I’ll hear about him later.”

“Let me pour you another drink,” Oliver suggested and got up at once.

“How do you like my particular brand?” Duke asked, handing Oliver his empty glass.

“It seems genuine to me,” Oliver said.

Duke chuckled to himself. “It’s genuine, all right. It’s the real McCoy. My partner and I laid in a supply before the drought hit us, though it won’t be long now before we’ll all be drinking shoe polish if the dry spell lasts. Look, Sis,” he said suddenly, and whipped out his watch. “I’ve got to have a place to sleep tonight. I didn’t do anything about a hotel in case you had room for me here. It doesn’t look like much of a set-up for two people, from what I can see. I think I’d better get busy on the telephone before it’s too late.”

“Say, I can put you up in my studio, Duke,” Oliver offered promptly. “I have an extra couch, and Esther has nothing here but one little bedroom. I could make you comfortable, and you’d find my place more central than here.”

“That’s nice of you, Oliver,” Esther said, and gave Oliver one of her sweetest smiles, “but I’m sure Duke would prefer a hotel. You have friends who drop in at all hours, and Duke may want to sleep when people usually sleep. What sort of hotel would you like, Duke?”

“Eh? Oh, well—hell, any sort of hotel! A good hotel. Chet said something about the Waldorf-Astoria.”

"I'll phone the Waldorf," Esther said.

The reservation made, she seated herself again on the black velvet cushion while Oliver and Duke discussed prohibition and the sudden slump in the cost of living from the year before.

It was almost eleven o'clock and Tomasina had suggested it was time they were going home, when the buzzer above the doorway sounded for the second time that evening.

A quick glance passed between Oliver and Tomasina.

"I wonder who that can be," Esther said nervously as she got up and started for the door.

She knew who it must be, and she knew all the thoughts that were crowding the minds of her two friends.

But—again—it was not Degraff Horten.

A nondescript woman, neither blond nor brunette, of average height and weight, and perhaps in her late thirties, but very smartly clad in a mink coat and brown tailored suit stood in the doorway.

"Why—!" Esther uttered a choking sound as she stepped back from the doorway. "Why, Beatrice, when did you get back? We're celebrating my birthday, and if I had known you were back—"

Her hands appealed, palms upward, in their characteristic gesture.

"I got in this morning," the woman said. "I thought I'd drop in and see if Degraff were here by any chance."

"Why, no, Beatrice. He—he went to Pittsburgh a couple of days ago."

"Yes, I phoned the office as soon as I got to the apartment. But I thought perhaps he—his secretary said he was expected back—"

"Well, come on in," Esther urged. "Tomasina Trome and Oliver Whittle are here—and my brother came all the way from California just to be with me on my birthday."

"Well—maybe I will, just for a minute."

Tomasina and Oliver waved a greeting to her and then Esther presented Duke.

"This is my brother Durwood. You've heard me speak of him, I know. And this is Mrs. Beatrice Horten, Duke. Let me take your coat, Bea—"

"Thanks, I think I'll just keep it around me," Beatrice said. "I won't be staying. And I'm frozen to the bottom of my heart—or whatever I have left of it. I'll sit over here beside the fire." She sat down and opened her coat to the warmth from the fireplace. "Well, it's nice to see you again, Tomasina—and Oliver."

“Would you like a hot rum, Bea?” Oliver said. “I know you don’t often drink anything, but a hot rum would be just right, I’m sure.”

“Well—yes, I think I’d like one, especially since it’s Esther’s birthday.”

Oliver went away to prepare the drink, and Beatrice turned toward Duke and smiled. “You have a good-looking brother, Esther.”

“People out on the west coast are more honest than they are here, evidently,” Duke said with a grin. “Out there they tell me I’m the homeliest cuss in the state.”

Beatrice laughed. “Oh, I didn’t say you were handsome. I said *good* looking. Are you going to visit us for a while, Mr. Clarke?”

“A few days. I’ll stay over for Christmas with Sis. We haven’t had a Christmas together since we were kids. About eight years, isn’t it, Sis?”

“Eight very long years,” Esther said.

“You mean you haven’t seen each other in eight years?” Beatrice exclaimed.

“I almost saw him once, when I was west on a tour,” Esther said, “but I didn’t get any farther than Arizona.”

“I thought we’d get together during the war,” Duke said, “but I must have had an ingrown toe-nail or something. I wasn’t good enough for the army anyhow.”

Oliver came in with a steaming glass and handed it to Beatrice. As she reached for it, the fur draped over her arm glistened in the firelight.

“It looks as if the fog wept over me, doesn’t it?” she said, and took a sip of the drink. “This is very nice, Oliver, thanks. I feel better already.” She relaxed back in her chair and sighed. “Oh, I suppose I should have let Degraff know I was coming, but I’m always doing things the wrong way. I telephoned him last week and tried to get him to come down for Christmas, but he said he was too busy working on the new show. So I just made up my mind all at once and got on the train.”

A low chuckle came from Duke. “Out where I come from, we’d call that kind of risky,” he remarked, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. “Sometimes the wrong person gets the surprise.”

Beatrice glanced sharply at him. “I should have had you to advise me, Mr. Clarke.”

“Oh, now, I didn’t mean anything by that, Mrs. Horten,” he apologized. “I was just—”

“Of course you didn’t,” Beatrice said, recovering herself immediately and putting a hand out toward him. “After all, your coming was a surprise to

your sister, wasn't it?"

"I'm not married to her," Duke replied.

"Well, I've been married to my husband for ten years. I don't think he could do anything that would surprise me very much. This time I had a little surprise planned for *him*."

She looked into the fire and a hard little smile froze upon her lips.

"You don't have to be so mysterious about it," Tomasina said. "We know you're dying to tell us anyhow."

Beatrice took another sip from her glass, then lowered it slowly to the arm of her chair. "I'm going to have a baby," she said, "—my husband's, oddly enough."

Esther's eyes darted to Durwood, who was leaning forward in his chair in an uncertain, perplexed attitude of listening.

"Congratulations!" Oliver said.

"Aren't you going to say something, Tomasina?" Beatrice said.

"It isn't incredible," Tomasina observed. "And I suppose it's wonderful, in a way—if it's true. I just can't get excited when a woman announces—"

"What do you mean—if it's true?" Beatrice demanded.

"Well, after ten fruitless years," Tomasina replied guardedly, though it was not at all what she had in mind to say—and *would* have had it not been for the presence of Esther's brother, whose fingers were beating a light tattoo on the arms of his chair, a look of vague bewilderment in his eyes.

"Even so, it *does* happen, after all." Beatrice said. "And I assure you it *has*. I'm going to have a baby. No, I *was* going to have a baby—in six or seven months. But I've decided to cancel the order."

"What on earth do you mean?" Esther asked.

Beatrice lifted her glass again, with a trembling hand, and Oliver rose suddenly and put an arm about her shoulders.

"Look, Bea," he said gently, "how'd you like to come out with me and have a snug little supper somewhere? I have to leave in a minute anyhow. So must Tomasina. And I know Esther and her brother want to visit a little, after all these years."

"Why, certainly, Oliver. And thank you. Let me finish my drink first." Her round and slightly protruding blue eyes smiled across at Esther on her velvet cushion. "You asked me what I meant about canceling the order. You're not so naive as all that, my dear. I meant precisely what I said. I was downtown this afternoon and I dropped in at Degraff's office. Miss Lambert, that nice old maid secretary of his, told me she expected him back this

evening. I don't think she quite knew what she was doing when she showed me a bill that had just come in from a Fifth Avenue pet shop. Or perhaps she thought Degraff had been buying a little gift for me. It was really too, too quaint. I won't even mention what it was. I must say it was rather indiscreet on Miss Lambert's part, don't you think? And she's such a model secretary! Anyhow, when Degraff didn't come home this evening, I thought I'd drop in and have a chat with you. Ordinarily, I don't think I would have minded so much. It isn't the first time, by any means. But this time—I don't know—the circumstances were different. Even you can see that, can't you, dear? I couldn't think of going ahead with—oh, this must be awfully boring to everybody! I'm ready to go, Oliver, if you are." She got up, gathering her mink coat about her, and smiled with glassy radiance at Esther. "Many happy returns, my dear. And good-night, Mr. Clarke. Nice to have met you. You mustn't hurry back to California before we have had a chance to get acquainted. Come along, Oliver. I'm suddenly ravenous. They say that's to be expected."

Esther was standing now, quite straight in her long white satin sheath of a dress.

Tomasina kissed her cheek and murmured, "I'll talk to her. This is all sheer nonsense, of course. Good-night, dear." She gave Duke her hand. "Good-night, Duke. Let's see more of you before you go back to the coast."

"Good-night, both," said Oliver, and glanced at the love-birds as he opened the door.

Esther heard the elevator descend before she turned to look at Duke, who was standing erect beside his chair.

"I guess I should have gone out to the elevator with them," he said vacantly, "but I'm a little out of my territory here. I won't know how to act till I've been around for a while."

"You acted all right," Esther assured him. "And you didn't have to go to the elevator with them. Sit down."

"I think I'll have another short one first." He helped himself to a drink. "I notice you haven't done any drinking tonight—and no smoking."

"I don't smoke, on account of my voice," Esther said, "and I've never cared much for drinking."

"Well, that's fine. It's no damn' good for anybody. If I thought they could make a prohibition law that would stick in this country, I'd vote for it myself." He sat down and stretched his legs. "Nice friends you've got too, the two who were here when I came in. But that Beatrice woman—I don't

know. Looks like she got her nose twisted before she came in. I don't know anything about her, of course. Maybe she's always like that."

"Oh, she and her husband haven't been getting along together for years," Esther said, perching herself again on her cushion.

"Well, if I got her straight on that baby business, she'd better watch her step," Duke said. "That stuff is nothing to monkey with. Chet knew a girl in L.A. who decided she wasn't going to have it, and she died the day after the operation."

"I don't believe she's going to have any baby at all," Esther said. "And Tomasina doesn't, either."

"Oh! Well—I wouldn't know anything about that." Duke fumbled with his hands, an old man's fumbling, Esther thought as she watched him nervously. "So you're engaged again. When is the wedding to be?"

"Probably not till spring. I'll let you know in plenty of time." Esther hesitated for only a moment. "You'll meet him if you can stay in New York for a few days."

"You said he was in Pittsburgh on business, didn't you? That's where this Beatrice's husband is, I understand. There wouldn't be any connection between the two, would there?" His voice droned on while his hands worked over each other.

"Let's not talk about it till tomorrow," Esther begged. "I'm too tired to talk any more tonight."

"I see. You're *engaged* to a married man, is that it?"

"Oh, it isn't as bad as it sounds, Duke! They haven't been really living together for years. He's getting his divorce just as soon as—"

"Nuts!" Duke said suddenly. "I may be dumb, but I'm not that dumb. I had a hunch as soon as that Beatrice woman came in here asking for her husband. She could have telephoned, couldn't she? Sure she could. But she didn't want to. She wanted to catch him with the goods on him. You're probably right about that baby stuff. But that's neither here nor there. It's an old stunt, but they still use it. Engaged, my neck! I suppose all your other engagements were like this one—decorating yourself with them, like some damn' Indian hanging scalps on his belt!"

"Oh, no, Duke! If you'll give me a chance to explain—"

"Explain, hell! I don't have to have anything explained. All I got to do is look around me—right here where I'm sitting. Look at this goddam place! You're not running this joint on the money you've been making. Christ, my

own sister!" His hands were fumbling jerkily now. "I'm going out after that son-of-a-bitch if I have to wait around all winter. To think that any—"

"Don't say any more, Duke, please," Esther pleaded. "He's no more to blame than I am."

She was weeping now, and Duke sat looking at the floor, his labored breathing filling the room.

"No," he said at last. "I guess he isn't, at that." He got to his feet and tossed the remains of his cigarette into the fire. "Well, I might as well get down to the hotel and sleep on it. I'm too mad right now to talk. What do I have to do to get me a cab?"

"Just tell the boy on the elevator—" Esther's voice broke on a sob.

Duke went to the closet for his cap and overcoat, then lifted his suitcase to the chair he had been sitting on and busied himself with the leather straps that bound it. When he was ready to leave, he looked down at his sister where she sat with her face buried in her hands.

"You'd better let me have your telephone number here," he said, his voice steadier now. "I'll want to call you tomorrow."

She gave him the number, then got up from the cushion and started to follow him to the door. But he was gone before she was halfway across the floor, and the sound of his heavy footsteps came to her from the hall without.

Esther looked at the closed door, then at her right hand where she used to wear Duke's gold-nugget ring until Tomasina told her she must never wear rings at all. Was Aunt Annie still wearing hers? How long ago, that other Christmas! Perhaps, she thought, she would never wear any ring that meant anything.

In the heavy warmth of the room, she felt a creeping chill across her shoulders. She went to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror above the wash-bowl. The effect was ghastly.

"You took a beating from everybody tonight," she said to her distorted image, and leaned to bathe her eyes in cold water from the faucet. "They all took a hand in it, even your own brother. Happy birthday to you!"

The telephone rang from the living room. Degraff? No.

"We're having chop suey on Columbus Circle," Oliver Whittle said. "Can you talk to me?"

"Why not?"

"I mean—is your brother still there?"

"He left a couple of minutes ago."

“Well, listen to me, Esther. You know where Degraff is staying in Pittsburgh, don’t you?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Why don’t you call him and let him know Beatrice is back? We don’t want any more complications right now. I don’t like the mood Beatrice is in.”

“Why should I call him? He hasn’t even phoned me on my birthday. Let Beatrice call him, if she wants to. She’s the one who’s got the nice little surprise for him.”

“Well—what’s the hotel? I’ll phone him myself,” Oliver said.

She named the hotel, her voice studiously indifferent.

“I’ll call you back after I’ve talked to him,” Oliver said. “We’re leaving here right away. I’ll put in a call as soon as I get back to the studio, and let you know. You’ll be home, won’t you?”

“Where else?”

“So long, then.” Oliver hung up.

Esther went back to the bathroom, ran hot water into the tub, disrobed, and stood for a contemplative minute before the full-length door mirror. She stroked the satiny curves of her hips, her tilted breasts.

“No,” she said calmly to her reflection. “Not Degraff’s. I don’t know what I could have been drinking about. Perhaps I was just tired and wanted a rest.”

She shook lilac-scented salts into the tub, then slid down with a sigh into the sweetly clouded water. *Pa woke from a dream once—a dream about ma and the perfume of lilacs.*

When she had bathed and dressed in a silk nightgown and warm robe, she went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Eggs, cheese—no, not on her birthday.

She telephoned a rotisserie on Broadway and ordered a broiled squab to be sent up right away. “And have the boy pick up a half pint of vanilla ice cream and some strawberry sauce.”

She was devouring the last spoonful of the ice cream when the telephone rang. She let it ring a third time before she decided to answer it. It probably wasn’t Degraff anyhow. Oliver had said he would call.

She took up the receiver. “Hello.”

“I got Degraff’s hotel in Pittsburgh,” Oliver said. “He checked out today. He hasn’t called you yet?”

“No.”

“Well, listen, Esther—you’d better tell me—is he with you now?”

“Certainly not.”

“He’ll probably be in on a late train,” Oliver said. “I think there’s one that gets in around midnight.”

“I won’t be here,” Esther said. “I’ve decided to take a long walk—maybe a bus-ride in the fog. I’m not sure what all, but I won’t be in, not for a long time.”

Chapter Four

“Why don’t you and Ellen come out to California this summer and see my rose garden?” Phoebe Larson suggested. “I have a man looking after it while I’m away, but pretty soon I expect to be there all the time, looking after it myself. The place isn’t quite a *hacienda*. It’s just a modest acre or two, but out there—”

A plane’s distant drone grew into a roar overhead, as if it were almost skimming the roof top.

“He’s flying low,” Esther said, and glanced toward the windows. “Thank heaven, the storm has passed. That north road has such steep banks on both sides—really a cliff in one place, as I remember. Oh—I’m so sorry, Phoebe! You were saying—California, oh, yes! It *would* be nice, after Ellen graduates. And we could visit Durwood. We’ve never seen his—his *new* home—in Beverly Hills. It would be so nice too if you could visit him when you’re out there. He never seemed to get over his wife dying so soon after they were married.”

Phoebe was suddenly curious. “What was she like?”

“I never met her,” Esther said. “She died suddenly before they’d been married a year, and he scarcely ever says anything about her. But he has become so cynical—especially about women. He’s kind and he’s thoughtful—he never forgets to send me white roses on my birthday—and he really dotes on Ellen. Still, he has changed in so many ways. He loses his patience over things of no importance whatever, and he drinks steadily, even when he is with us. In all the years he has been coming and going, he has never once asked me to sing for him. Since I lost my voice, of course, there wouldn’t be much point in his asking me, but I mean even before that. When he used to come east, when I was working, he never came to hear me—and nobody could have been more ambitious for me than he was when I first began.”

“What happened to your voice?” Phoebe asked. “Or is that something you’d rather not talk about?”

“Oh, I haven’t told you about that, have I?” Esther exclaimed as if in surprise. “I don’t mind telling you, not in the least. Why should I? You see, I didn’t really lose my voice. I can still talk.”

Her laugh was forced, but Phoebe said, “Your speaking voice is lovely.”

As if on an irresistible impulse, Esther got up and drifted in her shimmering gray satin housecoat toward the spinet-like piano. Or *wove*,

perhaps, Phoebe thought, remembering that west of her walk from long ago.

A few tentative notes, and then Esther began to sing. Phoebe leaned forward, her hands clasped with a sudden drily hot nervousness. It was, she thought, as if Esther Clarke of Sun Rock, Minnesota, were performing on a ghostly stage for an audience of one.

*O Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling,
From glen to glen and down the mountain side. . .*

The voice was not strained, as Phoebe had feared it might be, but so muted as to be almost inaudible. As the song faltered to its last notes, she felt a raw approach of her own tears. *I'm an old fool*, she said to herself. *Why should I cry over Esther Clarke, who has everything and who evidently has had everything most of her life?* But she knew it was Esther she wanted to cry over, not Ronda. She wanted to weep over all youth and beauty that looks bravely upon its unknown world with dreaming eyes.

"Thank you," she said earnestly when Esther returned to her chair as gracefully composed as before she had sung. "That was sweet. It made me almost want to cry."

"I don't doubt it," Esther said with a flippant laugh. "I could cry myself sometimes, when I get to feeling sorry for myself. It was all such a silly, unnecessary affair. Oliver Whittle, the artist I told you about, gave a house party at his place on Montauk Point, on Long Island. There were five of us, counting Oliver himself—Tomasina Trome and I, and an actress by the name of Joan Carter, and an old friend of Oliver's from South America. He was a civil engineer, a very attractive young man, and Joan proceeded to fall head over heels in love with him. For some reason, Oliver did everything he could to keep the two of them from being alone together. Oliver was really a Puritan at heart, and there was something sadistic about him."

Esther looked across at the fireplace where the birch logs were still gray-pink. She was silent so long that Phoebe made a purposeful little commotion in putting out her cigarette on the tray beside her.

"The last night we were all together," Esther went on, "Oliver made himself so objectionable with sly references to Joan's past that Joan got up suddenly and rushed out of the house. It was an awful night, and when she didn't come back we went out to look for her along the shore and up across the cliff. We found her, but only after we had spent almost two hours looking everywhere. I caught a terrible cold that developed into pneumonia, and then a strep throat on top of everything else. They didn't have penicillin in those days. My throat had to be operated on, and I almost died. After that, for nearly two years I could scarcely speak, let alone sing. When I finally

got so I could use my voice at all, it was only as a *disease*. It was a horrible time for me, with Duke paying for everything, and Tomasina doing everything she could to encourage me. It was she who made me change my name to Ronda Cameron. With my earlier career at an end, she insisted on my starting all over again, as a *disease*, with a new name and everything. Poor Tomasina!”

“And I suppose the Carter woman came out of it all without as much as a sneeze,” Phoebe said. “And married the young engineer, naturally?”

“No, he left for South America right away. And a year or so later he wrote Oliver that he had married the daughter of a man in the American embassy. Oliver lost touch with him after that. I don’t really know what happened to Joan Carter. But when I think how she changed my whole life ...”

It was early in 1923 when Oliver Whittle acquired a salt-box house on a bluff overlooking the ocean at Montauk, and had transported to it from an old farm farther inland an authentic eighteenth-century Dutch windmill of which he was immensely proud. Here he intended to remain throughout the spring and summer, capturing on his canvases the humble romance of the fishermen’s shacks and boats that possessed that shore jointly with the screaming gulls and the ever-changing color and sound of the sea.

Back of the place were the bold, sky-reaching hills, hills that seemed to spurn the sea though they bore upon their slopes only a few trees grotesquely crippled by winds, scrubby oak and grass that had scarcely time to turn green, and the modest shad-bush. Oliver had admired the moorlands of England, and this was the nearest resemblance to them he had found in America. His isolation, his cove, his bluff, his westward flowing promontory, could not have pleased him more.

There had been a great to-do between Oliver and Tomasina over naming the place when he had first taken her out to look at it. After groans at the triteness of every suggestion she made, he had finally in desperation painted a sign in green and white and hung it on his picket gate. The sign bore the one word—HERE.

“Pretty far fetched,” Tomasina sniffed, “if it isn’t utterly meaningless.”

“Meaningless? Look, you literal-minded denizen of a region of steel and chiseled stone!” He swung her about and pointed westward. “Yonder are the Hither Hills. Was that meaningless to the man who named them? And—if

Hither, why not Here? Besides, where I am is always *here*—just that. The ineffable, the inescapable here!”

And so it was—and so it had remained.

In late April, then, when Esther Clarke was waiting for try-outs in a new Broadway show and Tomasina was recuperating from an attack of bronchitis, the two were house guests at Oliver’s place on Montauk Point. For three days, whenever he relaxed from his painting or sketching, Oliver amused himself with badgering and heckling his two friends, while Tomasina goaded him from her couch or from her chair, and felt new strength returning with every lashing out of her own sharp wit. And for three days and nights, Esther was wonderfully someone else, or more rightly no one at all, made substanceless, released for the first time since she was sixteen from the darkly corridorred house that was herself.

The sea dawns, cut silver-white by the wing blades of gulls, and the windy starlight of the naked reaches of the headland where she walked hour upon hour alone, made her a bodiless part of them, so that she scarcely remembered all that sparkling shadowy drift that had formed of her something she had never wanted to be, or perhaps had never really been. During those days, even Tomasina and Oliver, thrusting and parrying to their own delight in the pine-paneled living room with its windows looking on the sea—even they ceased to exist. Esther had the wildly sweet experience of being born into nothing.

But it was not into nothing. She had been tossed into the sea-wind, the stars and the loneliness, to become rarified, it seemed, against the arrival of Oliver’s friend, Sam Bridewell.

It was Monday morning when old Crawford, Oliver’s caretaker, brought the telegram up from the village.

“Well, girls,” Oliver said at breakfast, his face a glowing length, “we are about to become a foursome. There is to be an addition to our happy family. His name is Sam Bridewell, he’s a civil engineer with an excellent record at M.I.T. and some seven years field work in South America. He’s about thirty, not handsome, just above middle height, and when I last saw him he looked like a thin slice of gingerbread. But he had electric blue eyes and had a remarkably well-chiseled face for one of his tender years. In fact I made a quick oil sketch of him just before he left for Argentina. Sam Bridewell is

unique, he's in a class by himself—and you probably won't like him at all." He laughed and finished his orange juice.

"And when do you expect this paragon to arrive?" Tomasina asked.

"He's in New York, probably at this moment reading my telegram giving him directions how to get here. He should be here for dinner, if nothing holds him up. And may I have a cup of coffee, Esther, please?"

"Safely married, I hope," Esther said, pouring the coffee.

"Not unless he's on his honeymoon," Oliver said. "I heard from him last September, and he didn't hint at anything like that then. Furthermore, my lovely, I won't have you tampering with him. He's not your type, and you're not his."

"Just to make you comfortable," Esther said, "I had better go back to town. You have only the two extra bedrooms, anyhow."

"And leave me alone with Sina? It wouldn't be decent. No, I'll give Sam my room and make up the couch down here for myself. Besides, Sina isn't quite strong enough yet to handle the housework and do the cooking, and I'll be too busy with Sam to be of much help. I'm afraid you'll have to stay on for a few days, my dear."

Oliver's gray eyes were bland, but Esther detected something crafty in his smile as he looked at her. She had, suddenly and inexplicably, a trapped feeling, as if she were being held for some ordeal of Oliver's devising. Tomasina, she thought, was too intently studying the blue-white lace of the incoming tide where it could be seen from the window.

"It's a beautiful day," said Tomasina.

"Just right for a climb to the top of the lighthouse—or maybe a hike to the Hither Hills," Esther remarked.

(Do you remember how you spent that day, Esther Clarke? You haven't forgotten, because there was something ominous in the too-brilliant April sky, with the sun winning on you as you raced westward across that England-like heath toward the far-away hills. Of course, the Hither Hills were too far away for you to reach them, and you had not really meant to try, but in their name there was an echo of the hills of Sun Rock, long ago. Even seeing them at a distance that day brought to you a certain release from the oppressive weight Oliver Whittle had hung upon you at the breakfast table. Perhaps he had not meant to do it—perhaps you had read into his

announcement of his friend's coming a thrust that was not there. Anyhow, you had planned your day well. You would stay away from the house until Oliver's precious friend was comfortably settled, and then slip in by the back door and start preparing dinner.)

But it was not in Oliver's house that Esther was first to meet Sam Bridewell.

She was returning from her walk when the western sky was an overwhelming fan of crimson and feathered gold, and the east a luminous depth of turquoise above the sea. On the crest of the bluff stood an ancient, leafless oak, its limbs almost horizontally angled by the winds of unknown decades so that the tree seemed fixed forever in its fantastic arabesque like the skeleton of a ballet dancer.

The man had paused a short distance from the tree, and with it appeared to be intricately laced by the burnish of the sunset, the purity of that turquoise space behind him an infinite frame into which both he and the tree might dissolve, vanish utterly as the kindred and baffling figures of a dream.

Esther approached him hesitantly, knowing he could be none other than Oliver's friend. And, to make more awesome the dream-luster of the suspended evening, he stretched forth his hands and said, "You are Esther, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said directly, and gave him her gloved hand. "And you are Oliver's friend, aren't you?"

He smiled, and in the light from the west his eyes gleamed to her the immediate thought of sapphire. He wore no hat, he needed none with that twisted, cinnamon-colored covering that looked more like some kind of fur than hair. His nose was large, straight and patrician, the skin stretched fine across it, and his mouth showing rather irregular white teeth was long, mobile and merry with his smile. His voice was warm and slow, as if it were expressing what his eyes saw in their warm and slow contemplation of her.

"Yes," he said. "Oliver sent me out to meet you."

They remarked upon the beauty of the evening, it is likely, and perhaps Esther asked how it felt to be back in his native land after so many years. But their talk was of little importance as they walked together, back down the slope to Oliver's house. Within sight of the windows Esther stepped

deftly aside and thrust her hands into the pockets of her jacket. She was sure she had seen Oliver's face at the south window.

Tomasina met them on the little flag-stoned terrace where, on a table Oliver had suitably fashioned out of driftwood, stood the ingredients for highballs and cocktails. The four chairs were of the sturdy kitchen sort.

"So you found her, Sam," Oliver said heartily, coming from the house as they arrived. He spoke almost as if Esther were somewhere else.

"I'm not sure," Sam Bridewell laughed. "I think *she* found *me*."

"That all depends upon who was looking for whom," said Oliver.

"While you're having drinks," Esther evaded quickly, "I'll go in and start dinner."

"Sit down, dear," Tomasina said. "I'm looking after dinner tonight. You must be tired after your long walk. And Oliver is dying to show off with that stuff he got from the natives last week."

"And that *they* got from a rum-runner that went aground in a cove not more than a mile from here," Oliver added.

"That proves it's genuine, I suppose," Sam grinned. "Alas, my poor country!"

Tomasina disappeared into the kitchen and Oliver set about mixing the drinks. "We've already planned a sailing party for tomorrow morning, Esther," he said, "—with old Crawford's boy. In the afternoon we'll have a clam bake on the beach. And the next day Crawford's going to take us out fishing in *The Ark*."

Esther sat stiffly on a chair, listening to him, watching him as he eyed the contents of his measuring glass against the flame of the setting sun.

"You certainly don't have to go to all that trouble on my account," Sam Bridewell protested mildly. "Just to be here is enough for me."

"No trouble whatever. We enjoy those things ourselves, don't we, Esther?"

"Oliver sees to it that a guest never has a dull moment," she said in a tone of mock affection, an obscure fury toward Oliver rising within her as she began to see the meaning behind all his carefully laid plans.

"Thanks for the compliment, darling," he said, handing her a glass. "Will you please take this in to Sina? Then you may have one of your own, if you're good."

In the kitchen, Tomasina said, "Don't pay any attention to him. He has to have fun, even when it happens to be at someone else's expense. He saw the way Sam Bridewell was looking at you when you came down the hill."

“The way he was looking at *me*? Now, *you’re* not going to start imagining things? I haven’t seen him looking at me in any special way. And anyhow—”

“Shush! You’re getting yourself all worked up over nothing. As a matter of fact, you’ve got Oliver just where you want him. You know he’s going to watch for the first sign of anything between you and his wonderful Sam. And you know he’s going to do his best to break it up as soon as he sees anything—a look or a word or a gesture. Let him have his fun. As long as you know what his tactics are, you shouldn’t have any trouble out-witting him.”

“But I don’t want to out-wit him,” Esther said. “I don’t want to be on the defensive every minute—”

“Then simply ignore him. Go ahead as if he weren’t around. Just be yourself.”

“That’s all I want to be.”

“I mean, the self that you really are, down deep,” Tomasina concluded. “Now go on out and have your cocktail while I look over the situation here. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

(It was the self that you really were who sang for them that night, wasn’t it, Esther? The piano in Oliver Whittle’s cottage at Montauk Point was a nice little upright so badly out of tune that Oliver had to apologize for it, though he insisted, that first evening, on your singing for Sam Bridewell. Was his insistence merely another move in the perverse strategy he had so carefully thought out? Was there, perhaps, something perverse in your own counter-move when you looked him squarely in the eyes as you went to the piano? Or when you chose to sing that old Irish air that always took you back to stand above the stone quarry in the moonlight?

O Danny boy . . .

Perhaps it was some other part of your real self that prompted your choice of song, too real, too far removed from any taint of perversity, for while you sang you were alone—you and another who came unseen out of the shadows to stand beside you.

But Sam Bridewell had got up and leaned against the piano until the song was done. And instead of applauding or exclaiming, he had simply bent close to you and whispered, “Thanks, Esther Clarke.” And wasn’t it

strange when you awoke in your bed later, the first hint of dawn at your window, and realized you had been singing the song again in your dream, the shadowy form standing beside you while you sang, and you looked up to find that Sam Bridewell had somehow moved in to take the place of that other? It *was* strange, because it had never happened before.)

The flawless weather of the next three days aided and abetted Oliver Whittle in his plans for Sam Bridewell's entertainment—the sailing, the clam bake, the fishing, and on the third afternoon the climb to the top of the lighthouse all came off as scheduled. Only the lighthouse expedition fell somewhat short of his expectations. Esther flatly refused to go.

"I was up there the day Sam came," she said. "Besides, the climb is still too much for Tomasina. I'll stay here with her."

"What?" Oliver asked in an injured tone. "Don't you want to show the top of the world to Sam? You can spot more of the landmarks up there than I can."

"You've done pretty well so far," Esther said airily. "You've been such a good guide, and you've kept the group together, and all that. I'm sure Sam won't miss anything with you in the lighthouse tower."

She glanced at Sam and saw a perplexed wrinkling of his brow, and what seemed to be a slight flush on his cheeks. But then, as was to be expected, came Oliver's exasperating chuckle. When the two men had left the house, Tomasina broke her silence.

"Why didn't you simply tell Oliver to stay home, and take Sam up there by yourself? I know that's what Sam wanted. He hasn't had one minute alone with you since he came, except for the little walk you had the day he met you, and the little while in the kitchen yesterday."

It was true. She and Sam had not been alone for a moment except for the brief interval in the kitchen yesterday when he had undertaken to instruct her in the preparation of something he called "Spanish Rice à la Sam Bridewell in the Andes," a fiery concoction of which he was inordinately proud. Even during that short time, Oliver's presence was explicit in his whistling off key in the living room. Tomasina had been having her before-dinner nap at the time.

On the other hand—"What makes you think Sam wants to be alone with me?" she asked.

“Why shouldn’t he?” Tomasina demanded. “Sam Bridewell is a man, isn’t he? Anyhow, Oliver has been acting like a darned old woman, and I wouldn’t let him get away with it if I were you.”

“Frankly, I’m not interested in how he acts,” Esther said. “And after the talk at dinner last night—Tomasina, I’m so confused—I don’t know what to think!”

“Oh, all that stuff about South American standards—the two kinds of women? The kind a man marries and the other kind. I suppose you’re worrying about where that puts us. I wasn’t the Lily Maid of Astolat when I married Q. Victor, and I didn’t expect him to think so.”

“But,” Esther persisted, “apparently I’m not the kind a man in his country would think of marrying.”

“His country? Sam is still an American. He was so young when he went down there that that Latin standard nonsense worked on him till he actually believes in it. Get him back into this country for a year and he’ll slough it off as if he’d never heard of it. He’s smart enough for that, I hope. And you, my dear, are far too sensitive for your own good. You’ve made a few blunders—especially that Horten affair. But we’ve all made mistakes. Do you suppose for one moment that Sam Bridewell doesn’t know what it’s all about? More than you do, I’ll bet. They have their *bordellos* in South America. My God, these Latin-American men! I’ve seen a few of them around the school.”

Esther was standing at the window. “It’s clouding up all of a sudden. They won’t be able to see much from the tower today. It’s quite dark in the south.”

Yes, it was dark in the south, and by the time dinner was over that last evening of Sam Bridewell’s visit, a storm was raging magnificently over the dunes and the headlands, the ocean exploding in its age-long struggle to level the cliffs, and the wind hurling up spectral skyrockets of spray against the lighthouse beacon.

With coffee after dinner there were liqueurs, white mint pleasant to the taste, and Esther had three of them.

Oliver looked at her with amusedly lifted eyebrows. “You’re coming along, aren’t you?” he remarked. “Do you suppose our child is growing up, Sina?”

“I have never discovered any significant connection between maturity and alcohol intake,” Sam Bridewell observed, smiling warmly at Esther. “Down in my country—”

“*Your* country!” Oliver interrupted. “You talk as if you’d forgotten where you were born. You’re still an American.”

“Well, yes,” Sam agreed. “But it’s amazing how a man can change in a new environment. I feel almost like an alien here, after seven years down there. What another seven years will do to me—”

“Then you’d better make up your mind not to go back,” Oliver broke in again. “Or at least resign from your company when you do go, and get a job in this country.”

“No, I’m satisfied where I am.”

“Well,” Oliver said resignedly, and looked at Esther. “You knocked off that last one in a gulp. It’s only a liqueur, but it isn’t just candy, my dear.”

“I’m just getting fortified,” Esther said. “Isn’t that your word for it? I’m going out to look at the storm. I don’t want to miss it. I’m going down to the cave.”

She left the room and got one of Oliver’s reefers from the hall closet. She heard Tomasina rise and call after her, but in a moment Esther was out in the lovely, impartial storm that was sweeping Montauk Point.

The cave was scarcely more than a notch in the cliff wall, as if once upon a time the sea had thrust an elbow into it by accident and had drawn indignantly back to a safe distance from the land’s rebuff. It was this shallow, spooned-out shelter that Esther looked for, and found against the storm within a few minutes. She sat down and drew the reefer closely about her. Now she could sit alone for a while and think, without the maddening touch upon her thoughts of Oliver Whittle.

Ever since the night when she had awakened to her own singing to find Sam Bridewell thrusting himself into the place that had for so long been Danny O’Rourke’s alone, she had been aware of what was happening to her. The awareness had grown within her until now it was one with her heart’s blood. It was as if Danny himself had come back to her out of a void of space and time. She wanted him to hold her in his arms while she told him what a fool she had been ever to doubt that he would come to her at last. She wanted to tell him that she had remained faithful to him through all the years, faithful in spirit and in truth, however the world might judge her for what she had done.

And now he was here—Danny O’Rourke was here, for Sam Bridewell *was* Danny O’Rourke. Sam Bridewell was love and all the promise of love. And he would never know. Oh, yes, she could have gone to the lighthouse with him this afternoon, alone as Tomasina had suggested. But after that, what would Oliver not have done? What would he still not do, if he discovered what was in her heart?

The beam of a flashlight swung upon the little hollow of the cliff side, and a man's shadowy figure appeared behind it.

"Esther!" It was Sam Bridewell's voice.

"Come on in," she invited. "There's just room enough for two."

He picked his way carefully toward her, and paused almost within reach. "What a snug harbor!"

Snug harbor! Oh, why, she asked herself with a caught heart-beat, why must he use the very words Oliver had used to describe her apartment on West End Avenue?

He wrapped his raincoat about him and sat down beside her. The blown rain needled across the glare from his flashlight. He turned it off and laid it on the sand beside him.

"You knew I'd come out to find you, didn't you, Esther?" he asked.

"No—not quite. Perhaps I hoped you would."

"Then—I'm not altogether mistaken—about us?"

"Mistaken? How?"

Her words were suspended on a breath, her body was rigid, all her mind was taut with an expectancy that was more than half fear. Love had escaped her once. Would it elude her again? She waited for Sam to speak.

After a long time he put out a hand, groping for hers. She put her cool, ungloved hand into his and felt his strong fingers close about it in the darkness. Then he laid his other hand gently over it.

"There is something I want to know, Esther," he said at last. "Maybe I should have asked Oliver, but—is he in love with you?"

"Oliver!" Esther took her hand away, then threw back her head and laughed so hoydenishly that Sam, though not understanding, laughed too. "No, Oliver Whittle isn't in love with me. So far as I know he isn't in love with anybody. Where did you get such an idea?"

"He has been chaperoning us almost every minute since I came," Sam said. "He even tried to argue me out of coming down to look for you just now."

"Oliver prides himself upon being the perfect host," Esther explained. "Sometimes he overdoes it, in my opinion, but that's Oliver's way."

"Well, I wanted to know. He befriended me once when I was very ill. I was doing post-graduate work at the time and had pretty well run out of funds. We weren't even close friends at the time. That came later. I wouldn't hurt Oliver for anything on earth. That's why I wanted to know about you and him. You see, Esther—I've lived in a lot of places in the past few years,

and I've been with a lot of people—men and women. I've had a man's experiences, but I've never been in love before.”

“It wouldn't matter to me if you had,” Esther said. “I was in love once, when I was fifteen. Would that matter to you?”

“Fifteen!” Sam laughed and reached again for her hand. “How could it matter? You're a woman now, and you have a woman's love to give. That's all that matters to me. Something happened to me that first day when I saw you coming down the hill—”

“Oh, Sam, it happened to me too, when I saw you standing there beside the old oak, waiting for me.” The tears sprang uncontrollably from her eyes. “You were—it was as if you were that very first love of mine—as if you had been waiting for me there all the time!”

He caught her in his arms, while a gust of wind flung the smarting salt spray into their faces.

“My sweet little Esther!”

Was it Danny's kiss? Was it Philip's or Nevin's? Why should she think of them now? What shabby tricks one's mind could play! This was Sam Bridewell's kiss, with all the hunger of Philip's, all the devotion of Nevin's, all the lonely heart-reaching that had been Danny's. It was the kiss of love returning.

“Will you marry me, Esther?” Sam asked finally. “Life in South America isn't always easy, the way I live it.”

“I'd go with you to Patagonia,” Esther laughed with supreme happiness. “In fact, I've always wanted to go to Patagonia.”

“I'm sailing in a few days, you know, after I've finished up some business in New York. We could be married at the Little Church Around the Corner. That's popular with theatrical people, isn't it? Can you get ready to leave with me?”

“Yes—oh, yes, Sam! I haven't signed any contract yet for the new show. But let's go back to the house right away—and tell them!” She was almost breathless.

Sam lifted her to her feet and she put her hands to his face and kissed him slowly and reverently on the mouth. Then they made their way back through the storm to Oliver's cottage.

There was a cheery driftwood fire burning in Oliver Whittle's living room when they entered it, Sam's arm about the dripping shoulders of Esther's reefer. Tomasina and Oliver were facing each other across a cribbage board in front of the fire. Tomasina glanced toward the door with brightly lifted eyebrows, but Oliver moved a peg on the board and said, "Fifteen for two."

Esther and Sam went on through to the kitchen, where they took off their coats and hung them on hooks to dry. There, in the dark, Sam drew her up into his arms, and their kiss was long and saltily sweet.

"How about a hot toddy?" Oliver asked solicitously when they returned to the living room. "I've beaten Sina three out of five."

"How he loves to gloat!" Tomasina said. "Don't put any nutmeg in my drink."

"And you, Sam?"

"Fix it your way and I'll drink it."

"How about yours, child?" Oliver asked Esther.

"The same as Sam's," she said, stretching her hands to the fire.

Oliver eyed her speculatively and glanced at Sam Bridewell. He seemed on the point of saying something, but turned away and vanished into the kitchen.

Tomasina braced herself back in her chair, and looked at Esther. "What are you looking so starry-eyed about?" she asked.

Esther went to her and leaned over the back of her chair. "We have news for you—as soon as Oliver comes back with the drinks."

But Sam Bridewell stepped close and put his arm about Esther. "I think Tomasina should hear the news first, even before Oliver." His face lighted boyishly as he looked down at Tomasina. "You're almost like a mother to Esther, aren't you? That's why you should be the first to know—if you don't know already. Esther and I are going to be married."

For a moment Tomasina did not speak, but sat faintly smiling with her arms folded across her breast. "I think I did know."

"And you approve?" Sam asked.

"It could be just about the nicest thing that ever happened," Tomasina replied. "So you're going to take her back to South America with you?"

"Do you think I'd go without her?"

Oliver came in with the drinks on a tray and began handing them around. "Without nutmeg, Sina," he said as he gave her a glass and held the tray toward Esther. "They're all the same—even the glasses are identical. That

poses a problem, doesn't it? If they were all different, there would be one that was especially yours. But since they—”

“Oh, take one and let him sit down, for heaven's sake!” Tomasina said.

Her voice sounded unnecessarily vexed, Esther thought, as she took her glass and went to a chair facing the fireplace.

They were all seated at last, and Oliver lifted his drink toward Sam. “A happy voyage, Sam! A fair wind and a following sea!”

“You'd better include Esther in that toast,” Tomasina said.

“What?”

“She's going with Sam.”

Oliver lowered his glass slowly and looked at his friend.

“That's right, Oliver. Esther is going along—as my wife.”

“Well, for God's sake!” Oliver exploded. “When did this happen?”

“Just a few minutes ago—down there on the shore,” Sam told him.

Oliver sat down, his face a dark mask under the outward glow it borrowed from the fire. After a silence that seemed to Esther like a small eternity, he sat up abruptly.

“Forgive me, please,” he said, his eyes clearing as if with an effort, “but, Lord, anything so sudden—”

“It isn't so sudden, old man,” Sam put in. “It has been on the way for the last three days, right under your nose.”

Oliver smiled. “Oh, I could see it, all right. Why do you suppose I kept you from getting off by yourselves?”

“I've been wondering,” Sam said.

“You've been pretty cagey where women are concerned,” Oliver went on. “I didn't want you to get the idea that I was setting a trap for you when I invited you to come here for a few days. I didn't want to be blamed—” He broke off suddenly and lifted his glass. “It has happened in spite of me, and I wish you both all the luck in the world. I mean it!”

“It's about time,” Tomasina said with a sigh of relief.

She and Oliver drank while Sam went to sit on the arm of Esther's chair. “We can at least drink to each other,” he said and leaned over to kiss her.

“What will all those pretty *senoritas* of yours think when you land down there with a wife as pretty as our Esther?” Oliver asked.

“I have made no pledges to any *senorita*,” Sam replied easily. “We manage such things a little differently down there—and a little better, I think, though it took me a while to get used to it.”

Here they go again, Esther thought with impatience—arguing about the difference in conventions as if it were all-important!

“One of the first mistakes I made when I first went down,” Sam was resuming, “was to mention the name of a young lady when I was having a drink at a bar. One of the men with me happened to be engaged to the young lady, and I had met her at a party the night before. I merely wanted to congratulate him, but I had chosen the wrong place for it. I found that out later. It’s only a convention, but it isn’t a bad one, at that. A lady whose name is bandied about at a bar isn’t the kind a man marries. It’s rather rigid, but it’s fundamentally right.”

Tomasina took exception to it, expressing her views sharply, and Esther asked a few eager questions about women’s place in South American life. And if she felt any uneasiness, it was deeply buried even from herself in her new-found joy. Throughout it all, Oliver sat in an unwonted silence, sipping his drink contemplatively, appearing not to hear anything that was being said. When he had emptied his glass finally, he set it aside and placed his elbows on the arms of his chair, his fingers laced in front of him. Tall and dry and homely, badly in need of a shave and a hair-cut, his costly English tweeds bagging about his length and breadth, he sat with his slatey, black-fringed eyes intent upon the tiny flames that were flickering down at last like dying wings.

“You make a good case for your Latin way of living, Sam,” he said. “Of course it’s rigid, as you say—compared with our own ideas. But it must be simple, when you know the rules. With us, especially since the advent of Mr. Volstead and his Noble Experiment, we have thrown our book of rules out the window, I’m not at all sure that we have profited by it. Girls drink—get drunk as a matter of course—make love to men they have known for half an hour—and hail it all as a glorious emancipation.”

“Don’t blame everything on prohibition,” Tomasina said.

“I’m not. It was all in these kids before we ever thought of prohibition. In the grown-ups, too. Prohibition and the speak-easy is just bringing it out into the open. I knew a girl once, a promising young actress by the name of Joan Carter, whose case is a good example of what I mean. Joan had the misfortune of desiring more with her lovely body than with her lovely voice.”

Tomasina had picked up her knitting, missing a purl here and there as she cast furious glances across at Oliver.

“Moralists would call that a flaw in Joan’s character,” Oliver mused, still staring into the fireplace. “They would censure her for many of the things

she did. I don't. It wasn't Joan's fault—she was made that way.” He stretched out his long, bony hands, crooked his fingers graphically, then raked his hands back toward him. “She was *hungry*,” he said softly, the word stretching out and drawing in with the movement of his fingers. “Perpetually *hungry*—when satiated, she reached out for something new, a fresh flavor. She—”

“I don't see what all this has to do with what we were talking about,” Tomasina cried angrily. “We were having another interesting discussion on South American social customs when you suddenly woke up. Why don't you go back to sleep!”

“I was not sleeping, my dear Sina,” Oliver said with a kind of icy gentleness. “I was just wondering to myself where Sam would place Joan Carter if he happened to come across her in this—this rigid society he has been talking about. I think it's an interesting point. There was nothing bad about Joan. It wasn't her fault that every man she met fell in love with her. And she didn't take advantage of them. She wasn't a gold-digger. She didn't have the makings of one. So far as I know, except for a few dozen broken hearts she left along the way—hearts that weren't worth mending anyhow—she never did anything to hurt a human soul except one—or perhaps two, come to think of it. The wife of a music publisher happened to make two startling discoveries at the same time. One was that she was going to have her first baby after ten years of marriage. The other was that her husband was in love with Joan Carter and was keeping her in an up-town apartment until he could get a divorce. Whereupon the wife found herself a highly recommended abortionist, had an operation, and died in less than a week. I'm passing no judgment on Joan. I'm just presenting a case—”

“And I'm going to bed,” said Tomasina with tight lips, and started to get up from her chair.

But Esther, who had sat motionless throughout Oliver's heartless account of the hypothetical Joan Carter, released her arm from Sam Bridewell's and sprang to her feet.

“No, don't go, Tomasina! Let me tell it my way.” Her eyes swept with brilliant but defenseless mockery over Oliver Whittle's face and then turned upon Sam. “Oliver isn't just presenting a case, as he calls it. He's taking this way of telling me that I can't go with you to South America. He's telling me that I can't marry you.”

Sam looked bewildered. “What do you mean by that, Esther?”

“He never knew a Joan Carter, that's what I mean. I'm the Joan Carter he's been telling you about. I'm the *hungry* woman—always reaching for

something new.” As she spoke, she stretched out her hands, and accentuating the natural curve of her fingers crooked them in an imitation of Oliver’s clawing gesture, and drew them toward her again. “I’m the one men fell in love with. I’m the one who broke their poor, innocent hearts. And I’m the one who killed Beatrice Horten, the music publisher’s wife, and her unborn child, when she—”

“I didn’t accuse you of killing Bea—” Oliver tried to interrupt.

But Esther lifted her voice. “Oh, yes, Oliver! Now you’re going to listen to me. I have never been *hungry*—” She repeated the grim gesture. “—except for what I knew just once in my life before tonight. And perhaps for that I’ve been *starved*. I have already told Sam about that. I would have told him all the rest of it—tomorrow—or whenever I could be alone with him long enough to tell him without being watched and spied upon as if I were a criminal. I would not have married Sam before he knew everything—and wanted me in spite of everything!” Her voice almost broke, and she saw Sam Bridewell start up from the arm of the chair where he had been sitting, his face a study in incredible anguish. “No, Sam—let me finish. There is much more to tell—much more that even Oliver doesn’t know. I’ll tell it now, if Sam wants to hear it, or—”

“Esther, dear, please don’t go on,” Tomasina implored. “Let it be for a while—”

Esther turned and looked at her. “I—you—”

Her voice gathered in suddenly and before anyone could speak a word she sped back of Tomasina’s chair and rushed upstairs to her room.

She learned, later, about Sam Bridewell’s swinging suddenly toward his old friend. “What is this, Oliver? Are you pulling some kind of clumsy American joke on me? I’ve heard of tricks being played on people who’ve been away for a long time, but this—”

“Take it easy, Sam,” Oliver said. “Nobody is playing tricks. I had no idea Esther would fly off. It was clumsy—but it was no joke. Damn it, I was only trying to show the girl what she was in for, before it was too late.”

“It was cruel!” Tomasina said, and got up from her chair. “I’ll go up and try to talk to her.”

Her tread was swift and determined on the stairs, as the two men sat without speaking in the dying glow of the fire. But before she gained the upper hall, Esther had already flung a light coat over her shoulders and was running down the rear staircase and through the kitchen into the enveloping black of the storm.

What Esther did then remained for a long time afterwards a merciful blur. There was only one passion now that would not be denied, and that was the desire for escape from that house of betrayal. The hard sand of the narrow beach seemed to rise and press against her blind feet, and then as she veered away from the shore and up the hill to the promontory it seemed that it was not she herself who was meeting the blown rain but the rain fiercely seeking her out. She met it without flinching. These, at least, were not forces of soul betrayal, whatever violation they might visit upon her body.

A headlong sense of direction brought her to the solitary, ancient oak, and before she all but fell against it she heard the skeleton music of its branches in the wind. She touched the dripping trunk of the tree with her lips, then ran across the headland toward its steep decline to the south. Was it with an impulse of self-destruction that she stood at last on the edge of the cliff? She sat down sobbing in the rough, sharp-smelling grass and tugged her thin spring coat about her.

It was perhaps an hour later that they found her there, Oliver Whittle and Sam Bridewell. She would remember thinking that the circling beams of the two flashlights were like comets' tails in the wet gloom. But before the men saw her she had scrambled up and had run, half-stumbling, back the way she had come, and from the top of the hill the brightly lighted windows of Oliver's house guided her until she was at the door.

"Esther!" It was Sam Bridewell's voice, somewhere in the darkness behind her, roughly loud in the wind.

But she flung the door open and burst into the house where Tomasina caught her by both arms.

"No, Tomasina!" Esther cried. "Let me go!"

She wrenched herself free and ran upstairs where she locked herself securely in her room.

Tomasina watched her go, then hearing the men approaching, followed her and knocked on her door. "Please, Esther, let me come in and talk to you." Her voice was a gentle entreaty.

"I can't talk," Esther said, her teeth chattering where she lay huddled beneath the blankets.

"You've got to come down and get warm," Tomasina commanded. "You must be soaked to the skin."

"Go away, please, and leave me alone. I'm all right. I won't see anybody. I mean *anybody*. Give Sam Bridewell *bon voyage* from me."

She had meant that. She had allowed no one into her room, and Sam had had to leave early in the morning for New York. But she was not, as she had

said, all right. By noon the next day, Tomasina found her with a mounting fever.

There followed then a meaningless drift of days and weeks that bore her from Oliver Whittle's place on Montauk Point to the hospital in New York, and finally to the Trome house on Thirty-seventh Street, where Tomasina nursed her through a long convalescence. It was a time erased, except for fevered dreams in which a wind screamed forever over a high cliff above a pounding sea—except for hours of delirium in which the black and white linoleum squares on the floor of the operating room whirled up into an eternity of space only to shrink away as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope—except for the reassuring voice and the cool hands of Tomasina Trome, who alone kept alive within her the will to live.

There came a day in midsummer, however, when she was able to utter a quilted sort of speech.

To her first question, Tomasina replied, "Well, dear, we'll just have to wait and see. You won't be able to do much singing for a while. The doctor hasn't given up hope, but it'll take time, and you mustn't worry about it. Just rest, and don't do any more talking than you have to. I'll do enough of that for both of us."

It was then that Esther learned for the first time that Oliver Whittle had gone to spend the summer in England.

"He was here the day before he sailed," Tomasina told her, "but I wouldn't let him come up to see you. He wanted to know if there wasn't something he could do about—well, defraying hospital expenses and so on, and he seemed to be quite worried, but I told him your brother Durwood was looking after all that. He knew, of course, that I had got in touch with Durwood when you were taken to the hospital. Oliver is a good sort, but his nose is somehow psychologically out of joint. So I wouldn't let him come up to see you, because I thought you might be upset, and you weren't strong enough to take it. But I couldn't help feeling sorry for the big lunk."

Esther made an impatient gesture with her hands.

"Oh, I know how you feel about it, dear," Tomasina said. "But the clumsy oaf thought he was doing it all for the best. And the more I think of it, the more I'm inclined to agree with him. He went about it all wrong, but that Bridewell fellow would never have gone through with it, even if you

had told him the truth yourself, as you said you intended to. He had lived too long south of the equator.”

But it was not until almost another two weeks had passed and Esther was able to move about that Tomasina had a calm talk with her about her future.

“I’ve been making plans for you,” she said when they were having tea quietly in the sunlit back garden, no pupils or Trome children in immediate view. “You know that you’ve come through the well-known valley of the shadow and all that. Some of us didn’t think you would, for a while. You didn’t even see Oliver’s—but let that pass—”

“Never mind Oliver,” Esther said crossly. “Am I ever going to sing again?”

“We won’t know about that for some time yet. We won’t even try. But you’re young and you *are* going to be strong again. And you might as well be of some use in the world, even if you never sing another note as long as you live.”

Esther went suddenly faint, and set down her teacup. Was this Tomasina’s way of breaking the truth to her?

“You don’t think I’ll ever sing again, do you?” she asked.

“I’ve said we’ll have to wait and see. In the meantime, you can begin all over again—with what you have. I’m going to launch you on a new career. You’re going to become a *diseuse*—half chanting, half speaking the words—the way you did that bit in the charity show. I’ve had a talk with Freddy Ruffo, and he’s going to try his hand at something for you—something a little dramatic and sentimental, good character stuff. He’s going to sketch out a half dozen pieces and show them to us. I think we can count on him for a good job. What do you think of the idea?”

Esther smiled. “What I think doesn’t matter much. You’ve already got Freddy Ruffo working on it. But if you think I can, Tomasina, I’ll try to put it over.”

“But not as Esther Clarke,” Tomasina said.

“How, then?”

“I’ve got a new name for you. You’ve got a public of sorts, and I’m not going to offer them any patched-up edition of what you used to be. Forget that you ever were Esther Clarke. From now on you’re going to be Ronda Cameron.”

Chapter Five

“Aren’t you going to tell me how you met your husband, Esther?” Phoebe Larson said finally. “We won’t be able to talk much after Ellen gets here.” To herself Phoebe Larson was wondering: what about the revealing rise of that little curtain, Esther, when you partly broke down to tell me the truth of things? But she delicately felt that it would not do to ask.

“Oh, dear—that name *Esther!*” Esther caught her breath. Then, quickly, as though she had read Phoebe’s mind. “Please, Phoebe, forget what I said a while ago about the life I would have chosen. That was all so silly—I get dizzy spells once in a while. I have loved my life, really. And don’t call me Esther when Ellen is here. She has never heard me called anything but Ronda—even by Oliver Whittle, except when he wants to tease me. And Durwood always calls me Sis. After all, I had to pay fifty dollars to have my name changed, besides all the arguments I had with the judge. If Tomasina hadn’t gone with me and answered all his nosy questions, I never would have gone through with it. Honestly, you’d have thought I had committed some horrible crime or something, the way he cross-questioned me.”

“I didn’t realize you had changed your name legally,” Phoebe said. “I thought you just used it for professional reasons, while you were on the stage.”

“That was only for a while. When even Tomasina began calling me nothing but Ronda, I decided to make it legal. It’s hard to explain just how I felt about it. I never was able to explain it to Durwood. I don’t think he ever quite forgave me. But I felt better with the new name, somehow. My singing voice was gone, my career was gone, everything that my old name stood for was gone, so why keep the name? I had got so I hated it, anyhow. With my new name, I began a new life. I took engagements in small clubs and private entertainments in the homes of wealthy people Tomasina had known. I got to know a lot of the nicest people myself that way, because I was always treated like one of the guests. In fact, it was at one of the very grandest homes on Park Avenue that I met Milton Southflagg for the first time. It was on my thirtieth birthday, and I was a guest that night.” She smiled reminiscently. “He took me home after the party, and after that—well, Milton turned out to be *the* one. It was as simple as that. There had been times before when I thought I was in love—every girl goes through those things before she finds the one she was meant for. When I met Milton I knew it was the real, substantial thing I had been waiting for. It didn’t matter

to me that he came from a wealthy New England family. I didn't even know at first that one of his ancestors was an old feudal baron in northern England—oh, centuries ago, of course. But it was sort of romantic, and I think Ellen looks sort of well-bred, don't you, in spite of her mother's side of the family?"

She laughed, and twisted the diamond circlet on her ring finger.

"If you're really asking me," Phoebe said, "I don't think Ellen could have had a better man than John Clarke for a grandfather."

"Well, of course. As my husband said once, a person never knows anything about his ancestors if he hasn't kept a family tree. Even the name of Clarke, if you went back far enough—"

"Piffle!" Phoebe snorted. "I wouldn't be bothered with my own family tree. I'd be afraid of what I might find out about myself."

Ronda Southflagg laughed deprecatingly. "Still, it might be quite interesting. I found it so when we went to England and France on our honeymoon. We were married early in nineteen-twenty-eight, and we went over on the *Majestic*. We motored north to the site of the old family castle. There wasn't anything left of it but a pile of ruins in the middle of a dairy farm. All grown over with ivy. There's a legend that the castle was mostly destroyed during the Wars of the Roses. Wait a minute—we took snapshots of the place. It's called Darlness Farm now."

She went to a dainty escritoire at the back of the room and returned with a polished brass box.

"This box is what I intend to have my ashes kept in when I die," she laughed, taking out a manila envelope and riffling through a stack of snapshots until she found what she wanted.

"Here's Milton," she said. "I took this of him standing beside what he believed used to be the moat around the castle. It was just a shallow ditch—no water in it."

Phoebe peered at the glossy print. Milton was wearing plus fours, and was quite recognizable from the photograph she had seen of him earlier in the evening.

"And this is one he took of me," Ronda said. "I'm sitting on an ivy-covered stone ledge—it was probably the foundation of one of the walls."

Phoebe, with unconcealed curiosity, studied the face of Ronda Southflagg, smiling happily beneath the cloche hat of 1928. Yes, Ronda had been thirty at the time, she reckoned quickly. Surely this could not have been a marriage of desperation, unless the woman in the snapshot had been able to dissimulate very well indeed.

“You haven’t changed much since then,” Phoebe said, handing back the prints.

“I had a good husband,” was the reply. “Milton was always so considerate of me—in every way. He had been married before, and his wife had died in childbirth—the baby, too. He longed for children, but he was terribly worried when we found I was going to have a baby in our first year of marriage. Of course I was delighted, because neither of us was growing any younger, and there was nothing I wanted more. It was too bad he couldn’t have lived to enjoy her growing up. He became interested in public life, too, and even spoke of becoming governor in a few years. Imagine—I might have been the governor’s wife if he had lived! But it wasn’t to be.” She paused and looked away regretfully. “I told you he died when Ellen was five. Milton’s sister Judith—she was a lumberman’s widow—was living here when Milton died. That’s why we moved to Madison. She was quite a bit older than Milton, a real *grande dame*,—that’s what Ellen called her. She was very kind to us, but—oh, so aristocratic! Ellen was fond of her, though, and when she died a couple of years ago we stayed on here. With Ellen already well on in her work at the university—”

Her chin darted up alertly to a sound in the street below, the sound of a car coming to a stop in front of the apartment house.

“That must be Ellen now!” she said, and smoothed her hair back to its heavy chignon as she went to look down from a window above the street. “Yes—here they are!”

(Why did you think it necessary to tell Phoebe Larson that it was at a Park Avenue mansion that you first met Milton Southflagg, Ronda? You had, as a matter of fact, never been inside such a residence, although if Tomasina Trome had not died from cancer in 1925 you might have been—and profitably, too—since that great, good woman had polite access in the name of art to vastly differentiated places. Without Tomasina, however, some sturdy maternal support seemed to have been swept away from beneath you, from beneath the light as well as the dark of your flowing spirit.

You would prefer, perhaps, not to think in the presence of Phoebe Larson of the years that led to your thirtieth birthday and your first meeting with Milton Southflagg, those years that saw you descend from one second-rate night club to another, until at last the name of Ronda Cameron appeared on

the poster in the garish lobby of The One-Eyed Owl, a bistro flourishing in one of the more lurking little streets of Greenwich Village, at the height of the bootleg era in 1927.)

The iron-grilled outer door of Louie's Place, as it was more commonly known to its patrons, was equipped with the conventional small inset panel, a device which in itself must have been a mockery to the enforcers of the law, its very presence proclaiming its function.

Once beyond the lobby, if they happened to enter during the floor show, the privileged were obliged to narrow their eyes in order to see anything except the spotlight on the diminutive dance floor in front of the orchestra. At its most illuminated, The One-Eyed Owl effused no more than a dusty, purplish twilight, through which layer upon layer of cigarette smoke idled grayly upward toward an invisible ceiling.

Ronda Cameron had established for herself the custom of remaining aloof in a secluded corner until her number was announced by the master of ceremonies, a detestable little man with a twig of mustache who had, upon her signing her contract with the manager of the night club two weeks ago, approached her as though through a tube of oil. She had given him a brief, icy gaze, flicking his moist hand from her bare arm as though it were some sort of insect, since when he had, in announcing her as a *disease*, been so humble that from his words the customers at the tables might well have gained the impression that Ronda Cameron was having her last fling before entering a convent as a novice.

On this December evening of her thirtieth birthday, Ronda wore a Chinese costume of glossy black satin, an "atmospheric" accessory to her own peculiar rendition of *Limehouse Blues*. The loose sleeves of the garment came well down over her hands. Her voice, oddly exotic now, and her body sinuously weaving within its throat-to-ankle envelopment of satin, had for almost two weeks drawn a gratifying response from the guests, and had at least contributed its share toward the new and high appraisal which even the gossip-columns in the newspapers of that valorously guilty day accorded The One-Eyed Owl. For her drawing powers, however, Ronda was paid only seventy-five dollars a week, out of which she had to pay her agent's fee and supply her own costumes.

Without Tomasina Trome, fear had made inroads upon the insouciant aura that had protected Esther Clarke's being—and that had not been

restored by the name of Ronda Cameron. The fear of being alone, the fear that comes from being no longer very young, fears even of a subtler kind descend in the loud, stiff and waiting silence that hangs between the fading trouper and the well-fed personage who sits behind his polished desk and jots down the applicant's qualifications. Herman Brownstone, her glib agent, was clever enough and knew his business. But—"Patience it takes! You are not a doll, just. A *personality* you are. A personality must build up. It takes time—patience it takes!"

Yes, patience it took!

Ronda sat in her corner, watching the almost nude dance act which had just begun and which preceded her own. Don and Duna, the graceful boy and the muscular girl were going through some rather tedious and suggestive acrobatics in a number they called *Moonlight in Mist*, to a garbled version of Debussy by the orchestra.

All at once she became aware of someone seating himself at the table beside her.

"I'm sorry," Ronda said to the man. "Haven't you been able to find another table? This one—"

"Why—why, no. I mean—yes, of course!" The stranger laughed in such a surprised way, as if at himself, that Ronda deigned to give him a look. His height was sufficient to carry a certain paunchiness, and his tweeds were perfectly tailored. He had a clipped mustache, eyes set deep beneath sparse eyebrows, and a wiry, gray strength of hair that didn't match the eyebrows. "But," he went on before Ronda could say anything, "I saw you here in a corner by yourself, and I thought—well, you see, I'm doing the Village all by myself, too, and I thought—we might—please don't think me impertinent. I don't mean to be. Here—let me introduce myself. Milton Southflagg is my name, and I'm a textile manufacturer." He gave her a modest smile. "Nothing very exciting about that, is there? But—here's my card."

His naively direct approach astonished Ronda so that she accepted the card and glanced at it in the dim light. It would scarcely do to tell him summarily to find another table—his demeanor certainly did not justify that. But Louie had given her this small table for her own, and she was not expected to share it with patrons of the place. She felt annoyed.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Mr. Southflagg," she said as pleasantly as she could, and handed his card back to him. "I'm not—slumming. I work here."

"Work? Oh, I beg your pardon!" The man's jaw fell. "You mean—"

“You may have seen my name posted in the lobby as you came in. I am Ronda Cameron.”

“Oh! You—you sing?”

Ronda’s lips twisted in a smile. “Well, not exactly. If you care to wait a few minutes you will hear what I do. I go on after the dancers. But I’m afraid that you’ll have to wait at another table. The manager makes it a rule that performers—”

“I shall certainly wait, Miss Cameron!” he said gallantly.

A sharper glance convinced her that the gentleman, so painstakingly polite, was a trifle inebriated. What a way, she thought wearily, to spend a birthday!

“I do hope you won’t mind my waiting at your table,” he went on. “I have just come from a stupid dinner at the Pennsylvania—rug manufacturers. Out of sheer boredom, I’m afraid I drank more than I should. I left early and walked all the way down here to the Village to get the warp and woof out of my head. I was here once before, with a friend, and I used his name to get by the door. But—I assure you I’m not in the habit of forcing my attention upon strange young ladies—” He began actually to stutter with embarrassment. “If you really insist, I shall find another table.”

The limbs of Don and Duna were intercoiled pillars of flesh in the center of the spot-lighted floor when Louie tip-toed behind Ronda’s chair, her jacket and cap of leopard skin thrown over one arm.

“Better slip out the back way, Miss Cameron,” he whispered stiffly. “The cops will be here in five minutes. We just got the tip-off. The gentleman, here—”

Mr. Southflagg’s eyes darted from Louie to Ronda. He understood, and dug his hat check out of a pocket. Louie sped away with it and was back in a moment. Brief as the interval had been, Ronda could hear the rising commotion as she slipped into the narrow alley back of the night club, with Mr. Southflagg immediately behind her.

It was snowing, and the snow was the large, cat-paw flakes that Ronda suddenly remembered from the night when she was barely seventeen, near the shore of Lake Michigan, and a boy—Philip Beauchamp—had kissed her. But that snow had come down magically with a back-drop of moonlight. Now two lean cats prowled about the garbage cans outside the kitchen exit of The One-Eyed Owl.

A squad car with two uniformed figures in the front seat stopped at the entrance to the alley as Ronda grasped Mr. Southflagg’s arm and ran

eastward to a jog that debouched into a lighted street. There she drew up, catching her breath back from helpless laughter.

“My dear girl!” Mr. Southflagg exclaimed in concern. “You mustn’t—wait, here’s a cab!” He hailed it and all but lifted Ronda into its warmth and out of the falling snow. Still she shivered, and laughed.

“Where to, mister?” the driver asked.

Ronda with sudden dignity leaned forward and gave him her address on Eleventh Street. Afterward, she could hardly imagine how that inspiration had come to her rescue. To take a total stranger to her apartment!

The distance was only a matter of ten minutes or so. Ronda thought to herself that if the raid had had the decency to wait until she had eaten the midnight supper that was included in her salary, she would not now be so ravenously hungry. During the day, she subsisted on fruit juice, toast and coffee for breakfast, and whatever her purse allowed for dinner. Rent and clothing came before food, and one had to be smartly dressed these days. There was a can of sardines in her refrigerator, she knew, besides two eggs and a bottle of milk, some marmalade and a half loaf of Italian bread. Coffee, yes. No cream.

“This has been quite exciting, I must say,” Mr. Southflagg observed as she reached the end of the rapid reckoning of her kitchen resources. “Imagine Milton Southflagg sneaking down a dark alley to evade the minions of the law!”

“And in the company of a night club entertainer you’d met only a few minutes before!” Ronda laughed. “It wouldn’t do for your family to hear about that, Mr. Southflagg.”

“My family at present, Miss Cameron, is composed of only one member—a highly respectable widowed sister who would be totally at a loss to understand it, I’m afraid. But what Judith doesn’t know—you’re familiar with the old saying, no doubt?”

“Won’t hurt her,” Ronda said, a small devil of mischief prompting her to add, “I hope you don’t feel too horribly compromised?”

He laughed. “On the contrary. As a matter of fact, it’s delightful. My one regret is that the—er—rude descent of the law cheated me out of the pleasure of hearing you sing, Miss Cameron.”

“You didn’t really miss much, Mr. Southflagg,” Ronda said.

“Be that as it may, my dear, I hope I may have another opportunity. But, I say—perhaps we might go somewhere for a little supper. They serve an excellent lobster thermidor at the Lafayette.”

Lobster thermidor, dear heaven! Ronda felt actually faint. But no, some inner voice monitored. There was still the small item of pride. Tomorrow, it was true, she would be looking for another job—she would be facing Herman Brownstone again, across his polished desk, and Herman would be sympathetic about the padlocking of The One-Eyed Owl. And yet—

“It would be wonderful, Mr. Southflagg,” she breathed feelingly, “but I couldn’t go anywhere, even in the Village, in this costume and make-up. But, goodness—you probably want to eat something. You can drop me off at my apartment—”

“And bring our little adventure to an end so quickly?” he interrupted, as though he were scolding a child. “Certainly not, my dear. On second thought, I really shouldn’t eat lobster at this time of night. I must consider my waistline, to say nothing of my age.”

“If you’re not awfully hungry,” Ronda said, “—and if you’d care to—I can raid my icebox for a snack for both of us. That is—oh, here we are!”

And quite suddenly they were not only there, but up by way of the creaking elevator to Ronda’s fifth floor rear apartment.

Shad, the ancient elevator operator and doorman, had touched his grizzled head respectfully as he greeted Ronda in the foyer, and remarked upon the heavy snowfall.

“You’re home early, Miss Ronda,” he said as he opened the elevator door. “Maybe on ’count o’ this bein’ your birthday an’ all.”

“No, Shad,” Ronda smiled. “I’m home early because the club had visitors tonight. The door will be wearing a padlock tomorrow.”

The old fellow’s eyes rolled and he clucked sympathetically, knowing only too well what it would mean to Ronda.

“That’s too bad, too bad,” he said as the elevator rattled its way upward. “But don’t let that upset you, Miss Ronda. Wait till you see all them white roses I carried up to your apartment a couple hours ago.”

“Oh—from my brother!” Ronda exclaimed.

“That’s what I figured,” Shad chuckled. “You ought to tell him he shouldn’t count them roses the way he does, Miss Ronda. Every year they come, all I got to do is count ’em and I know your age. But I swear you don’t look a day older’n when you came here.”

“Shad, I believe you’re Irish, with all that blarney of yours,” Ronda said as the old negro opened the elevator door.

“If I is, Miss Ronda, somebody’s been playin’ a low-down trick on somebody else,” Shad replied.

The dimly lighted living room was almost oppressive with the scent of the white roses when Ronda and Milton Southflagg entered it, although one window was open several inches and snow feathered the sill.

“Smells like a wedding, doesn’t it?” she laughed as she laid her coat aside. “I’ll just leave the door ajar, or we’ll smother. And if you’ll excuse me for a minute, I’ll make myself look a little more human. All this make-up—”

She vanished into the bathroom, but was back a few moments later and began to rearrange three vases Shad had set on the mantel. In the mirror, she saw Milton Southflagg’s eyes surveying the room behind her. Did he notice how shabby the furnishings were rendered by the presence of the immaculate roses that seemed to be everywhere? She had had to turn on a couple of floor lamps rather than have him suspect that she was designedly leaving the room in suggestive half-light, even though he didn’t look like a man who would harbor any such suspicions. Had it occurred to him that perhaps she had used the roses as an excuse for leaving the door open into the hall? But no, Mr. Southflagg, by the unstudied casualness with which he had disburdened himself of his overcoat and hung it over the back of a chair, gave ample evidence to his simple trust in her motives.

“This is really your birthday?” he asked, bringing his eyes quickly back to hers.

“Yes,” she replied brightly. “They’re beginning to happen a little too often for comfort. My brother in California doesn’t let me forget that, sending me white roses every year.”

“And very appropriately, I’m sure. A very affectionate brother, too, I should say.”

“We have only each other,” Ronda said as she went to the kitchenette. After a pretense of exploring refrigerator and cupboard, she called out a lament. “Oh, dear, I’m afraid Cynthia forgot all about ordering from the delicatessen. I went out early, before she left. But I’ve only had her for a little over a week, and she hasn’t had time to get used to my routine. We *could* have sardines on toast, and coffee, if that’s—”

“I say—why shouldn’t we send out for something? Or perhaps I could find a shop somewhere around the corner—”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Ronda replied, “unless you’re very hungry. I scarcely ever take anything but a glass of milk or a cup of coffee before going to bed.”

“A cup of coffee would suit me perfectly,” he assured her. “It’s scarcely a fitting repast with which to celebrate a birthday, though. I wish I had known, but—”

“I counted my birthday past at dinner tonight,” she told him. “I shouldn’t eat now anyhow, after that to-do at the club.”

Just why she should be modulating her voice to that floating shadowy quality she used in her recitative, she could not have told at the moment. It was certainly not from any conscious effort to impress the circumspect Mr. Southflagg. She doubted that she could do anything that would really impress him, and instantly she was aware of his standing in the doorway of the kitchenette, looking at her as she carefully measured the coffee into the percolator.

“It will only take a few minutes,” she continued in the idle, chanting melancholy of that voice.

“Say that again, won’t you, please?” he almost whispered, his deep-set hazel eyes glistening.

Ronda laughed mischievously. “I was forgetting I was not alone,” she said. “When I’m here by myself, I use my voice—sort of like a singer vocalizing—”

“Fascinating—absolutely fascinating! You perform to a musical accompaniment, I suppose?”

“Just piano—and very *pianissimo*.”

“It must be a great pleasure to listen to you,” he said with a courtly warmth that struck Ronda as being a little too old for him—he did not look over fifty.

“I had a concert voice, once,” Ronda said, “but I lost it through a throat infection and an operation. It has taken a lot of work to get back even what voice I have. That’s probably why I unconsciously work on it when I’m busy with something else—like making coffee, for instance.”

Her eyes sparkled up at him.

“Do you enjoy your work?” Milton Southflagg asked.

“One has to live,” she told him. “When I was very young I thought I wanted to be famous—as a singer. But I’m afraid I’m old-fashioned, Mr. Southflagg. There’s only one career for most women. I think the coffee is ready, if you’ll just go in and sit down now. You take cream and sugar?”

“Plain black, please. But let me carry it in, won’t you?”

She filled his cup and handed it to him, and as their fingers briefly touched she was startled to see a shy flush of excitement cross his face.

“I’ll help myself to cream and sugar and be with you in a minute.”

She was glad to see him turn away—taking cream off the top of the milk bottle reminded her too much of her days in Sun Rock. While she got the

milk from the refrigerator, the two eggs in their glass bowl twinkled their promise at her, and Ronda twinkled back at them. "I'll have you later, my beauties!"

She did not know then how much later it would be. Before leaving for the club tonight, she had dined alone on macaroni and cheese, here in the apartment, and two slices of Italian bread. But Mr. Southflagg, relaxed over his coffee, was reconstructing his past. With his second cup, he was reading himself aloud, chapter after chapter, as though it were a book he had long possessed and had suddenly come upon with surprise.

As Ronda listened, her own surprise at such personal revelations from a stranger decreased. The man was intolerably lonely!

". . . and so, after Yale, my father insisted on my taking over the management of his woolen mills, because he wasn't in good health. It wasn't my idea of a career—I would have chosen medicine—but, well, I was devoted to my father, and he was so alone after my mother died. Cecily—the girl I married a couple of years later—seemed to go along with the job. Her father was an important shareholder in the mills. Cecily was a sweet girl, but delicate. She died in childbirth—and the baby, too, a boy. You'll think it strange, perhaps, but I never wanted to marry again, although I was only thirty at the time. I've had a phobia—I still have it, in fact, and I'm fifty."

"You shouldn't have let it affect you so much, Mr. Southflagg," Ronda said, sipping her second cup of coffee which was half milk. "You must be a very sensitive man. But look—" She managed to glow in spite of her hunger. "—your name. It's such an odd—"

"I'm often asked about it," he said, his laugh deprecatingly self-conscious. "And its history makes me feel a little silly—as if King Arthur and the Round Table were somewhere in my background. Well—the name was assumed by Sir Archibald Southflagg in the Fourteenth Century, according to family legend. Whether he tacked the extra 'g' on the name I don't know. Sir Archibald occupied the south turret of the ancient castle of Darlness in northern England. The feudal baron Darlness was Sir Archibald's father. Sir Archy had his own heraldic flag flying from a southern rampart—and from that he concocted his name. There are some ruins of the old castle still left—or *were* when I visited it. My father gave me a trip to Europe as a graduation present. But that's more than twenty-five years ago—the ruins must have crumbled a good deal more since then. I've been to Europe many times, of course, but I've never had any inclination to visit again what's left of the Castle Darlness."

“How very romantic!” Ronda cried with delight. “I’m afraid there aren’t any barons or knights hidden away in my family tree.”

“Cameron is a good old family name,” Southflagg said. “It must go back a long way in—”

“But Cameron is not my family name. I took the name of Ronda Cameron for professional reasons, and later adopted it legally. I was born plain Esther Clarke—Clarke spelled with an e.”

“Well, now,” he said, “there was a Sir Andrew Clarke—and a Sir Caspar Clarke, I believe—both distinguished men and well-known in their fields. Not that a name matters,” he hastily added. “But I must have tired you out with all this talk about myself. I’m not so conceited as I sound, really. And maybe—another time—you will tell me all about yourself. I’ll promise to listen, and not say a word.”

His laugh companionably joined hers, and then he said, “I really must be on my way now—I’ve kept you up much too late, I’m sure. But we *have* got acquainted, haven’t we?”

“Yes,” she said, and smiled as she got to her feet. “And it was very nice of you to see me safely home, Mr. Southflagg.”

As he picked up his hat and coat, she offered her hand and he took it in a firm, rather dry clasp.

“I shan’t be returning to Connecticut for a couple of days,” he said. “I expect to be footloose for an evening or two. Perhaps we might—if we could have dinner together, and see a play, perhaps—” He waited so anxiously, the hope suspended there between them, that Ronda, with the accumulation of everything that had happened to her in the past several hours, felt suddenly close to tears.

“I had expected to be working, of course,” she said slowly, “but because of tonight’s—”

“Well, damn it!” he exclaimed. “How could I have forgotten! Then—if you have nothing else to do—may I call for you at—at seven, say, tomorrow evening? It would make me very happy.”

She gave him her warmest smile. “Thank you, that would be very nice. I’ll be ready at seven.”

“Good! Perhaps a little before seven, if we decide on a play.” He hesitated an instant and then added, “Please don’t worry about the loss of your—your job, Miss Cameron. I’m quite sure—”

“Oh, I won’t,” she assured him. “I have a very good agent.”

“Good-night, my dear. This has been as pleasant as it was unexpected.”

When he had gone, Ronda went to the kitchenette, took the eggs from the refrigerator, and reflected for a moment upon whether to have them both now or save one for breakfast. Thirty years old—and wondering whether she could afford two eggs after a day in which she had eaten practically nothing! Had it not been for tonight's untimely interruption of the club's activities, she would at least have eaten a substantial dinner. And tomorrow, undoubtedly, Louie would send someone around with what money was due her. Besides, she was going to have dinner with Milton Southflagg. Two eggs, then—and she put them on to boil, and went back into the living room.

There, a hitherto only skulking fear clutched her. Tonight Milton Southflagg had sat in his chair, looking about him with a calmly appraising eye. Had he seen what she now saw with a clarity that made her shrink inwardly as she stood in the middle of a room that had already taken on that sly, shabby-genteel aspect of a place that could belong only to a has-been in the theatre? The past might overtake you and bring destruction when it was least expected, but the future could be even more terrifying when it came halfway to meet you. It was already here in this room.

She marked the signs—the seedy domestic-oriental carpet, the faded drapes and lampshades, the threadbare velours sofa only partially concealed beneath a rose-patterned black Spanish shawl, the up-and-down climb of dated and autographed photographs of fellow-entertainers on the walls, the ridiculous, frog-green incense-burner book-ends on a table holding together a small but motley company of authors new and old, the factory-antique, Second Avenue prayer rug on the console table that held the telephone, the cheap knick-knacks that did their best to crowd loneliness out of empty space—the signs were all there, in one form or another. Without the pervasive fragrance of the roses, the room would also have the beginning of that musty smell, as if dust had been swept under the rug because its owner was too tired or too hungry really to care. The apartment of old Fanny Pilton, up on West Fiftieth Street, who had in her day been the toast of dukes and princes according to her own accounts—old Fanny, with her pathetic hennaed hair, her photographs and clippings, her faded diary—her apartment

...

Ronda opened the door to her small bedroom, where the window had been open all afternoon and evening, and where there was no overpowering smell of roses above the choking lumber of the past, only the smell of freshly fallen snow and, faintly, her own cologne. She closed the window and returned to the kitchenette, where she ate the two eggs with two slices of buttered toast, and drank a glass of milk.

When she went back into the living room, it was with a mind fortified by strong resolve. She tore the photographs from the walls—all except a brown-dim snapshot of her father and mother standing together under a lilac bush in their garden in Sun Rock—and piled them on the sofa. A sketch that Oliver Whittle had made of Tomasina Trome, she left in its place on the mantel. From her wardrobe trunk standing upright in a closet, she dug out a scrap-book half-full of press clippings she had begun collecting in her first week on the road with Herbert and Tulip Smith. A tin box full of gaudy costume jewelry and odds and ends of theatrical fripperies, she set to one side without looking into it. Last of all, she removed a small diary. Something tugged at her heart as her eyes fell upon the gilt lettering on its green cover: *My Diary*. It was years since she had made any entry in the little book. She did not open it now. She dared not open it. She placed it on top of the scrap-book and laid them together on the pile of photographs on the sofa. Then she glanced about her, her hard resolve still like something clutching at the pit of her stomach. Her eyes fell upon the black Spanish shawl that only half concealed the shabbiness of the sofa. Armando had given her that shawl, only last year, in a regretful but definite farewell.

Armando!

Was it because of Milton Southflagg's disinterested chivalry tonight that a tingling flush of recollection came into her cheeks as she looked now at the rose-patterned shawl and thought of Armando? Whatever misdeeds she had been guilty of in her life, the practice of "gold digging" had not been one of them until she met that glittering *caballero* from the Argentine. To her deeper shame, however, she knew that her deliberate seduction of Armando had been inspired by a childish and far-fetched desire to have her revenge upon any South American, because of what South America had done to Sam Bridewell. Well, Armando had been clever enough to see through her without damage to his own dignity—and without the assistance of Oliver Whittle. There would be no more Armandos, she told herself now with heated decision, and jerked the shawl from the sofa.

Tying half the pile of photographs in the shawl, the other half in brown wrapping paper from the kitchenette, she carried the two bundles into the hall. When she finally closed the door of the incinerator chute on those fragile little entities of the past, Ronda brushed her hands and returned to her apartment. There, she put on her heavy coat and picked up the tin box of gimcracks she had left on a chair. The janitor's child might like the costume jewelry, she reflected, but she had no desire to see it on the street tomorrow. She carried it downstairs and out to a trash can standing at the curb. The

elevator was not running at this hour, or old Shad might have wondered what she was doing.

There, it was done! Huddled in her coat beside the wrought-iron paling in front of the apartment house, she looked up into the dark, snowy stillness. It was after two o'clock. The street was deserted—no, not quite. The snow, finely grained and colder now against the light from the corner, sparked up a small, yellowish object cowering in the gutter. Ronda stooped and saw a bedraggled, half-grown kitten. The creature did not move except to turn startling, phosphorescent lamps of eyes up to her face.

Before she was really aware of what she was doing, she had scooped the kitten up into her arms, and with its unprotesting, wet misery of bones and fur clinging to her she was immediately back inside the hall and up the stairs to her apartment.

The radiators were almost cold, but the kitchenette was still warm. With several large towels ready, Ronda bathed the little waif in the sink. It was either too frightened or too surprised to struggle much. She rinsed it carefully, rubbed it almost dry with one towel, wrapped it in another, and deposited it in a grocery carton while she warmed a saucer of milk. On a newspaper in a corner she shredded up toilet tissue invitingly. The kitten squirmed in the towel, but settled down to a contented lapping as soon as the saucer was set before it.

“You’re no beauty,” Ronda said softly as she knelt to stroke the round little head. Then she laughed. “But a *personality* you are! *Patience* it will take!”

She got up, closed the kitchenette door quietly, and went to the bathroom where she ran a steamy tub while she undressed. Before stepping into the tub she looked closely into her mirror. Her hair, her eyes, her skin, were perfect. Would anyone take her for more than twenty-five? Surely not! Her youth seemed to have bloomed to an unspoiling close, like a flower fixed in wax under glass. She had won release from passion, that etching acid so ruinous to the smooth plaque of beauty.

But life still held her, she mused gratefully as she slid down into the soothing warmth of the bath. She still had tomorrow. She would get up at noon. She would telephone Louie then and have him send over whatever was due her. She would go out for breakfast, take a brisk walk in the wintry air, return with hamburger for the little yellow cat, and rest for an hour or so in the afternoon. Then she would dress for dinner with Milton Southflagg, who was good, and sound, and decent—and lonely. She would wear the gold velvet gown she had bought at Wanamaker’s last spring, where she had

discovered it on a “greatly reduced” rack. There was a small tear in the hem, but she could mend that easily. She would wear her black velvet wrap over the gown, and carry her seed-pearl evening bag. So many people had told her that she looked radiant in the gold velvet, but she didn’t have to be told. She knew it. She was going to be her most radiant when she went to dinner with the textile manufacturer from Connecticut. She, Ronda Cameron, was going to marry Milton Southflagg . . .

The wedding was no grand affair. Milton had been averse to anything but a simple, private ceremony in the church rectory, with no outsiders present except the necessary witnesses. Ronda herself was happy with the arrangement. Tomasina had died, Durwood was in California, and Oliver Whittle, who had been in Europe most of the time in the past few years so that she had seen little of him, was now in Florida doing a portrait of a wealthy dowager. It was just as well. The engraved wedding announcements would reveal the marriage as an accomplished fact, permitting no let or hindrance, offering no opportunity for cynical obstruction to the course she had chosen. Oliver, for instance, she thought as she visualized him for an oddly wistful moment, would have some innocently nasty remark to make upon the first addition to the new Southflagg marriage—a little yellow cat by the name of Goldy.

Yes, Ronda *had* chosen a course. Hitherto, love had led her a devious way that had ended in emptiness. Now she would fashion her own way. And there was a gentle kind of love in what she brought to Milton Southflagg during their brief years together in that big, over-servanted Colonial house of his that he had bought after they had been married but a few weeks. There had been tenderness and a quiet devotion. But it was with a sense of obligation to life itself that Ellen was conceived so soon. Fear went with it, too—fear because of Milton’s fear. He was really more distraught than Ronda was when, so shortly after marriage, she found herself with child. That was Milton’s very proper expression. “So you are with child, my dear!” She hated to think of how Victorian he seemed when he said it.

But no woman could have been more cherished than she during the time of waiting. As if the place were not already over-run with help, Milton engaged a willing and efficient woman whose only duty was to anticipate and satisfy every merest wish of Ronda’s that could in any way add to her comfort. Her name was Lucy Miller. And while her over-zealous efforts

frequently nettled her, Ronda accepted it all with a patient resignation that was tempered always by gratefulness toward her husband. Her gift of Ellen, who was named after Milton's mother, at last made Milton Southflagg almost embarrassingly humble, so that there were times when his doting on both his wife and his daughter irked her to the point where she was forced to use excessively sweet self-control lest she betray her irritation at his fatuousness.

There were other things. As Ellen grew into lovely childhood, Milton insisted upon her beginning her musical education. He bought her a little spinet piano which he played after his own fashion, and sang familiar old songs by way of encouraging his daughter. The results were enough to make Ronda want to grind her teeth, especially in the presence of Oliver Whittle, who had begun to visit them on an occasional week-end.

There was the matter of Milton's conservatory, too. It was in no sense a remarkable conservatory, housing as it did a half dozen rubber plants, ferns of various sorts, a huge Star of Bethlehem plant, a shelf or two of potted fuchsias, numerous fantastically shaped and colored cacti, boxed geraniums, African violets, and other flowers not especially exotic. But he pored for hours over catalogs, consulting endlessly with Ronda over each new addition he contemplated adding to his collection, until she felt as if she herself were ready to be transplanted—preferably to some wind-swept hillside where she would at least be able to breathe freely. And then Milton got his aquarium inspiration. Guppies! The viviparous birth of guppies!

Still, when Milton went so suddenly, there was a space left by him, as though some large, cumbersome piece of furniture had been removed from a room, leaving only a clutter of delicate, spindly articles to fill the vacancy. Oliver Whittle had attended the funeral and had seemed profoundly moved as he stood with head bowed and uncovered while the last words were being read beside the open grave. He had grown fond of Ellen, who was five at the time of her father's death, and in his own unflattering fashion he was fond of Ronda, even if he often greeted her with a mocking lift of his eyebrow that was not exactly comforting. And Durwood had arrived in time to gaze at the dead face of Milton Southflagg, as if to cement in his own mind the idea that Ronda had really been married. He all but said as much before he took the train back to the west coast. Aunt Judith had come from Wisconsin, where she had continued to live after the death of her lumberman husband, and had spent the better part of a fortnight going over Milton's affairs with Mr. Lewis, the family lawyer.

Well, Ronda missed her husband, of course, if only in a negative way, and after the first shock of his sudden demise had passed, there were

moments when she felt almost relieved. During the past two years Milton had been taking a disquieting interest in politics. Ronda had no desire to expose herself to the light of public opinion. Still, she honored the memory of Milton Southflagg in all the ways she knew. She did what she could to keep his image fresh in Ellen's mind. She gave no thought to marrying again. She supervised the care of the grounds and gardens and saw to it that even the conservatory was kept as Milton himself might have kept it. For five years she was faithful to the memory of the man who had found her one wintry night—as she herself had found the starveling, golden-furred waif of the alleys—and had given her shelter and comfort and all the love of his gentle heart.

Had she tended her own spirit with the same vigilance she had given Milton's blooms and flowering shrubs, she might have discovered what had been lurking there throughout the years, waiting to spring into life from the hidden depths where it had lain so long.

It was chilling to remember, afterwards—that night in the conservatory adjoining the rear of the big house. Clement Foyle, the young man's name was. He was the new gardener she had engaged in late summer, on the recommendation of Mr. Lewis, to replace the one Milton had retained when he acquired the property. Clement Foyle was not long from Ireland, and there was something about his lean, high-colored Irishness . . .

Ronda's first discussion with him had been about some herbs that flourished, according to him, in the sweet, dank peatiness of Irish soil, and were guaranteed to cure any ailment on God's green earth. Ronda listened to him, half-bemused, out there in the garden, and Clement Foyle looked at her with his slow, blue eyes.

It was some weeks later, in the fall, that Clement Foyle began giving the glass-covered conservatory a going over for the winter. Something after ten o'clock one evening Ronda had gone to have a look at the night-blooming cereus she had received from Oliver Whittle only a few days before. The light was greenly dim in the conservatory, and Ronda and Clement stood looking down at the plant, aware, not of its strangeness alone, but of each other and their mutual strangeness. Clement Foyle wore a leather jacket redolent of darkly turned earth and burnt leaves. When she saw his arms reach out toward her, she was not surprised. She moved into them with a small moan.

Was it just then, or a moment later, that she saw Ellen standing in the conservatory doorway? She was quite sure that her mind had warned her to spring away from Clement, before she had committed herself to something unspeakably foolish.

“Thank you, Clement,” she said quickly and loudly, for even as she spoke the spare form of Lucy Miller appeared behind Ellen. “I would have fallen if you hadn’t caught me. I get these faint spells now and then. But I’m quite all right now, thanks. We’ll talk about the—the new lighting tomorrow. Your suggestion is good, and I’ll think about it. Good-night.”

Clement could not have seen Ellen there in the doorway, but his mobile face instantly changed with understanding.

“Good-night, Mrs. Southflagg,” he said gravely. “You’re sure you’re feeling all right, now?”

“Yes, I’m quite all right, thanks.” She glanced about at the conservatory door. “Why—Ellen! What are you doing out of bed?”

The child stood so queerly erect in her flowered pajamas, her thin arms folded across her chest. Lucy Miller stood rigid, her hands on Ellen’s shoulders.

“She woke up a while ago,” the woman said, “and I came down to the kitchen to warm a glass of milk for her. She hasn’t been sleeping well.”

“I’ll go up with her,” Ronda said. “Bring the milk up as soon as it’s ready.”

When she had tucked Ellen into bed, Ronda stood and looked at her—that child of hers with the unfathomable mermaid eyes that had so often made her wonder if she, Ronda Southflagg, had actually given birth to her. She experienced a sudden havoc of thought. How much had Ellen seen down there in the conservatory? Ronda had to know.

“You shouldn’t leave your bed, darling,” she said and stooped to brush the child’s hair away from her forehead. “You’re almost ten years old now, and that means you’re a big girl. What *were* you doing downstairs at this time of night?”

“Were you really going to faint, mother?” Ellen asked in a strangely distant way.

“It was just one of my dizzy spells, dear, but Clement caught me before I fell.”

“I don’t like Clement,” the child said bluntly. “I wish we didn’t live here.”

“Sh-h-h, darling, you mustn’t say such things.”

Ellen began to whimper. “I was dreaming about daddy—I thought he was down in the conservatory. And then the first thing I knew, I must have been walking in my sleep—”

“Here’s Lucy with your milk,” Ronda said. “Drink it, now, and go to sleep, dear. Kiss mother good-night again—only you have to mean it this time, because I’m going right to bed.”

Ronda simply nodded a good-night to Lucy without directly looking at the older woman. And by not looking at her, she was forced to admit to herself a sullen depth of humiliation, an obscure anger and resentment that would follow her through years to come. She knew, too, with clear foresight at that moment, that from the elderly virgin Lucy Miller there would be no escape so long as Lucy’s precious Ellen was not anchored safely in marriage. For there had been what seemed at the time an innocent clause in Milton’s will—“. . . and with this bequest to Lucy Miller, it is also my wish that she be retained until such time as my daughter Ellen has a home of her own.” Ronda had thought then only of Milton’s kindness and generosity, and gratitude, too, toward the woman who had, indeed, been devoted to his daughter Ellen. Well, Lucy had enough put by, certainly, to keep her in comfort if she lived to be a hundred, without doing another day’s work during that time. But—Lucy Miller, of course, would stay with the Southflaggs!

In her own room, Ronda closed the door and leaned against it for a moment to steady herself. *I wish we didn’t live here*—Ellen had said that, but all at once it was as if Ronda had said it herself. There had been many tempting offers for the house and its spacious grounds. Only yesterday, Mr. Lewis had told her of a large family that was ready to pay a handsome sum for the property. And Aunt Judith had been urging her to move out to Wisconsin, where the climate would be so healthful for Ellen.

Before she went to sleep that night, Ronda decided to have a talk with Mr. Lewis first thing in the morning . . .

Phoebe Larson stifled a yawn as Ronda came back from the window. She was visualizing her comfortable bed in the hotel, wishing she had left an hour ago. *I must be getting old*, she said to herself, and immediately there was the sound of young voices at the door. Ronda was still standing when Ellen entered the room followed by a tall young man.

“Mother,” the girl said, breathlessly eager, “I’m so glad you waited up.” She stepped a little to one side and the young man paused, smiling a bit self-consciously. From where she sat, all that Phoebe Larson got in her first glimpse of him was a thin face, large teeth, and uncombed-looking hair.

Then Ellen put out her hand to draw him toward Ronda. "Mother, this is Jim Bridewell. And this—" she turned to Phoebe, "—this is Miss Larson, Jim. It was nice of you to wait, Miss Larson."

There was a certain confusion of handshaking as the young man strode forward to acknowledge the introductions, but Phoebe saw that his eyes were a clear blue, his mouth firm and generous. Then she saw beyond him the sudden chalky pallor of Ronda Southflagg's face.

"You're a student at the university, I suppose?" Phoebe said as the young man seated himself in a chair close to hers.

"Yes—in civil engineering," he told her.

"Imagine," Ellen said in a floating laugh of high delight, "he came all the way from the Argentine to study at Wisconsin!"

"Well, my father took his degree here," Jim Bridewell explained, "and he thinks it's the only school in the country—except M.I.T., of course. That's where he did his graduate work."

"I've never been to South America," Phoebe said in an effort to pursue a conversation she knew to be politely pointless. "Mrs. Southflagg and I were just talking about—"

Her voice dropped abruptly as she glanced at Ronda, who had sunk down into her chair, her hands pressed to her temples.

"Mother!" Ellen exclaimed, alarm in her voice. "Aren't you feeling well?"

Ronda's hands came together gripped in her lap. "Just one of my old faint spells, dear," she said and smiled thinly. "I'll be all right in a minute."

There came upon Phoebe Larson then a flash of intense clarity and an abrupt pang of knowledge—South America—the young engineer—the graduate student in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—Montauk Point and Oliver Whittle's friend . . .

"I'm afraid you've done too much talking for one night, Ronda," Phoebe said. "I think you ought to go to bed and have a good sleep. In fact, I could do with a little sleep myself right now. Perhaps Mr. Bridewell would drive me down to the hotel—"

It was the only way she could think of to get the young man out of the apartment, away from Ronda.

"Certainly, Miss Larson," he said, getting up at once. "I hope you'll feel better in the morning, Mrs. Southflagg."

"Oh, I'm quite all right, thank you," Ronda said. "But—perhaps I'd better not sit up any longer."

“Now, then, mother,” Ellen said as soon as the two were alone, “what happened to you all of a sudden?”

“I told you it was just one of my dizzy spells,” Ronda said.

“Yes, I know. But mother dear, I’ve always noticed your dizzy spells happen when something displeases you. Have I done something—”

“How long have you known this young man?” Ronda interrupted.

“You *know* I met him tonight for the first time!” Ellen cried. “You don’t like him, is that it?”

“I haven’t said I don’t like him. He’s probably a very nice young man.”

“He’s the nicest boy I’ve ever met,” Ellen declared. “And he thinks I’m the nicest girl he has met.”

“You mean—the two of you have said so—the first time you’ve been out together?”

“Why not, mother?” Ellen asked innocently. “We hadn’t been together an hour before we knew it. We’re in love, mother—Jim and I are in love, and it’s too wonderful!”

Ronda fought back her feeling of panic. “Oh, Ellen, don’t be silly! How could you possibly know—”

“Mother, dear, I have always told you I’d know when the right man came along. And he has. Jim is the man I’ve been waiting for. I knew it the minute I met him. We’re going to be married right after graduation, and I’m going to South America with him.”

“Ellen!” Ronda’s cry was one of despair, a hopeless, grief-stricken plea.

“I can’t help it, mother,” the girl said. “I wish it didn’t mean I was going so far away. But there isn’t anything I can do about it. Jim’s father sent him up here to get ready for a position he has waiting for him as soon as he graduates.”

“Ellen, Ellen, don’t do this to me,” Ronda implored. “Let’s wait—let’s talk about it before you decide. Let’s—oh, just give us a little time, dear.”

“Of course, mother. I want to talk about it. I don’t want to talk about anything else! If you’d only think back to the first time you were in love.”

The first time! The child could not possibly mean anything especial in that, of course—it was just a phrase with the young. A sigh that threatened to break upon a sob came from Ronda as she looked helplessly at her daughter. “I can’t talk any more tonight, Ellen. Please go to bed.”

“Yes, mother. I’m sorry you—”

“Don’t say any more, Ellen, please! Just go.”

“Yes, mother. Good-night, then.”

Ronda lifted her cheek for the girl's kiss, then crouched back in her chair as Ellen left the room. After a moment she got up and went to the escritoire in the corner. Never before had she so felt the need of someone's help. She could not fight this alone.

She sat down and wrote a hurried note to Oliver Whittle. She had no idea where he might be, but she addressed the envelope to his studio in New York.

THE FRUITFUL WOOD

AN EPILOGUE

RALPH BLAKE, the botanist, came back down the forest path in the flow of evening just as Oliver Whittle brought his car to a stop in the driveway beside the cabin.

“Hello!” Blake hailed his friend in warm surprise. “I didn’t expect you for another two or three days. You said in your wire—”

“I know.” Oliver grinned as he hauled his suitcase out of the back of his car. “Things happened faster than I thought—a lot of things.” He looked toward the lake. “Man, what sunsets you get out here!”

“Not bad,” Blake said in a tone of possessive pride. “Sunsets like that go well with a man’s declining years. You ought to pull up your stakes in New York and come out here to live.”

“With your damn *myxo*—whatever you call your mysterious pets!”

Blake laughed. “I’ve just come down from a last look at her. I wish you could have seen her in the sunset. She’s fruiting. Rather early, but atmospheric conditions have been just right for it.”

Oliver Whittle slung an arm about in a wide arc. “I suppose she’s tossing her progeny to the air—isn’t that the way you put it?”

“Exactly. It’s—it’s dramatic! But all nature is dramatic. The elements of chance and misadventure and blind courage in the presence of unpredictable hazards—”

“I want a drink,” Oliver interrupted.

In the cabin, Blake set out a bottle of scotch with ice and soda and two tall glasses.

“Mix your own poison,” he said as he took up a glass for himself and clunked it half-full of ice. “It’s too warm for a fire or I’d make one. You look just right for a tall drink and a comfortable chair in front of a roaring fire.”

Oliver poured his drink. “That’s twice in five minutes you’ve reminded me of my advanced years,” he observed drily.

Ralph Blake grinned. “When a man of your age goes chasing away to answer a call of a woman in distress—”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Oliver sighed and sat down in a deep chair before the empty hearth. “I’m beginning to enjoy the creature comforts—I’m beginning to think about them more than I used to. And I feel considerably older than I did when I saw you last.”

“Well—what happened?” Blake asked and watched the thin upward race of bubbles in his glass.

Oliver lifted his drink toward the sunset-inflamed window. He squinted through the sparkle of ice for a moment and said, “I’m drinking this sun-downer to Ronda Southflagg,” he said abruptly. “Will you join me?”

“To Ronda Southflagg!” Blake said and raised his glass. “Though you don’t have to be so mysterious about her.”

“I’ll clear up all the mystery—and to your complete satisfaction, I hope,” Oliver promised.

When they had done justice to the toast, Ralph Blake leaned back in his chair. “Well—I’m waiting.”

Oliver took his pipe from his pocket and began filling it as he stretched out his long legs. “I reached Madison that afternoon—four days ago—in what must have been record time for me. I’ve never believed in doing anything with needless haste. I had wired Ronda, and when I got there she was waiting for me . . .”

“It was good of you to come, Oliver,” Ronda said as she led the way into the living room, “—especially when I didn’t even explain why I needed you. Or did you come just out of curiosity?”

“I wasn’t far away, as you must have noticed from my wire. I’ve been spending a few days up north with Ralph Blake, that old rain-maker friend of mine I told you about. I was planning to visit you on my way back to New York—surprise you, so to speak. But of course, as you say, curiosity was the compelling force that brought me here as soon as I got your letter. Where’s Ellen?”

“She has late classes at the university,” Ronda explained. “She won’t be home much before six. Look, I’ve got your favorite brand of scotch for you. Wasn’t I thoughtful?”

“You’ve always been thoughtful,” Oliver agreed with his old provoking smile, “—far more thoughtful than people give you credit for. More thoughtful of yourself, perhaps, than of anybody else, but still—thoughtful.”

Ronda put her hand to her forehead and glanced up at the ceiling as if a cobweb had fallen on her face. “If you’re going to start out that way before you’ve been in the house five minutes—”

He put an arm about her and laughed. “I’ve got to get in the first lick, darling,” he said and kissed her lightly on the brow. “Otherwise you’d have me at a disadvantage. I lose my integrity when I’m forced on the defensive.”

“I’m in no mood for just words,” Ronda said irritably. “Make yourself a drink and sit down. We have to talk seriously—and quickly, before Ellen comes in.” She stepped to the door and called toward the kitchen. “Bring in my tea, Lucy, please.”

“Well, what’s it all about?” Oliver asked as soon as they were finally settled.

“Ellen says she is going to be married,” Ronda said when she had taken a sip from her cup.

“Yes? Well, she’s young, but—she’s of marriageable age. I’d consider her quite prepared. Are you objecting to the young man of her choice?”

“The young man is Sam Bridewell’s son,” Ronda revealed flatly.

Oliver’s lips tightened involuntarily. “You’re sure?”

“Why do you think I sent for you? He’s a student here at the university—in engineering, of course—and his father and mother live in the Argentine. Besides, I’ve asked questions. I’m *sure*. He’s Sam Bridewell’s son.”

“Well!” Oliver remarked. “The long arm of coincidence seems to have over-reached itself a bit. Still—it’s natural enough that Sam should want to send his son to his old school. He used to talk a lot about Wisconsin when I first knew him. But that Ellen should be here—well, there isn’t much we can do about that now. What you want me to do, I suppose, is to find a way to prevent the marriage of these two young innocents. Have you thought of anything yourself?”

“I’ve thought until I can’t think any more.”

“I see.” Oliver sipped his drink consideringly, then drew his legs in and set his glass aside. “I’d like to know a little more about it before I begin looking for a way out. I’ve got to have a few facts. How long have the kids been going around together?”

“They met for the first time the night I wrote you. It was on one of these silly blind-date affairs and Ellen—”

“You mean they’ve known each other less than a week and have already decided to get married?”

“Oh, Oliver, don’t you understand? They decided that night—the first time they were out together. That’s why I sent for you.”

Oliver restrained himself from rising and going over to her to take those agitated hands into his own.

“Let’s see—Ellen will be twenty in the fall. And young Bridewell—he must be in his early twenties—”

“He’s twenty-three.”

“Well, there’s no sense in arguing that they’re too young to know their own minds.”

“I tried that when Jim was here with Ellen last night.”

“Knowing your own mind has nothing to do with age when two people are in love, my dear. Or have you forgotten that?”

Ronda had picked up a spoon from the little table, and was turning it from end to end in her hands. “I sent for you because I needed your help, Oliver,” she reminded him. “If you’re going to spend the time raking up the past—”

“Quite right, my girl.” He took another sip from his glass. “Well, we have two young people desperately in love. And we have a mother just as desperately opposed to their being married. What is your main objection?”

She looked at him for a moment as if she wondered whether he could really be serious in asking such a question. “I would rather die than come face to face with Sam Bridewell again. If you can’t understand that, there’s no use in our talking any more.”

“I think you’re putting too much emphasis on that aspect of it,” said Oliver. “Sam has been married long enough to have a grown-up son. Besides, he lives a good five thousand miles away. Do you think there’s much chance of your ever meeting him?”

“Ellen is my daughter,” Ronda said. “I have tried all these years to keep her respect and her love. I’ve made up a pattern of my past—yes, I’ve lied, rather than disillusion her. I wouldn’t admit that to anybody but you, Oliver, and I wouldn’t admit it to you except that you know it already. I have made myself appear to be somebody I never was—only because I wanted the best for Ellen. I’ll never meet Sam Bridewell again—I have made up my mind on that—but sooner or later, one way or another, Sam Bridewell will discover who Ellen is. I would rather die twice than have her hear the story from him. Now you know why I’ve sent for you.”

“Have you been so intent on your own dissembling that you haven’t noticed any dissembling on Ellen’s part?” Oliver asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Has it never occurred to you that she may have come to conclusions she thought best to keep from her mother? The girl isn’t exactly dumb, after all, and your fabric of pretense hasn’t been altogether fool-proof. Nothing of that sort ever is.”

“Has she ever said anything to you that—”

“Never. Ellen is just as anxious to protect you as you are to protect her—if I know Ellen. The whole damned business has been stupid from the beginning. I admit to a share in the responsibility. That night on Montauk Point—I should have known enough to keep my mouth shut and let you and Sam work it out in your own way. But I didn’t. Now, I suppose, I’ll have to do it again.” He ran his long fingers through his hair. “Why don’t you tell Ellen all there is to tell, and the hell with it!”

“I’ll never do that,” Ronda asserted.

“No, probably not. And maybe I’m just trying to get out of it. Well—”

He got up from his chair and walked to the window looking down upon the street. For a long time he stood gazing out upon the city and beyond it to where the open country lay softly radiant under a lowering sun. When he came back at last he stood above Ronda, moved, as he had so often been moved during the years they had known each other, with a feeling of pity for the woman who had so often met defeat because of her too-eager, clutching and undefined desire, and also of admiration for the kind of stout gallantry with which she had repeatedly risen from defeat to pursue again her vain search for the unattainable.

“How far is it from here to Sun Rock?” he asked her.

Her eyes turned up to him, startled. “About three hundred and fifty miles, I think. Why?”

Oliver glanced at his watch. “I’m going to a hotel for the night. I want you to pack a bag and be ready to leave at the crack of dawn. Don’t ask me why. I’ll tell you when we get to Sun Rock. You can give Ellen any cock-and-bull story you like when she comes in. But I won’t see her and I won’t talk to her until we get back.”

“But how can I go without—”

“Arrange that any way you can, my sweet. Your admirable Lucy will be here to look after Ellen, if she needs any looking after. Just be ready when I call for you. We’re going to have a look at your old home town together.”

The little town drowsed in its valley cup of early summer color, the dome-like hills with their outcroppings of brilliant granite encircling it, rising above the sky-line so that the horizon seemed to bend protectingly toward the residents of Sun Rock. Oliver Whittle was struck by the almost made-to-order locale as he braked his car at the steep declivity on an eastern hill. Here was a bit of Americana with a difference!

He was about to describe his spontaneous impression when he glanced at Ronda and saw that her eyes were closed. There was something about the expression of her mouth, too, that forbade his violating the silence. But the conviction came upon him that every detail of that little valley of her birth had vividly returned, after all the years, to the darkness behind her sealed lids.

He drove down the well-paved highway into the main street of the town, and saw what he expected to see: a substantial little First National Bank, of brick, on the left; a Mercantile Emporium on the right, both buildings flanked by lesser structures that served the town's needs; a drug store with a pediment of glass brick; a movie theatre with garish arcade; a modern hotel flaunting its shield of approval by the Automobile Association; two bars cater-corner from each other, projecting well-known brands of beer in neon signs; a hardware store, two automobile salesrooms, a garage and filling station. Flicking his eyes from one side of the street to the other, he established no exact sequence to the places he observed, but he was satisfied that this was just another little midwestern town that had undergone great changes in thirty years or more. Then he looked at Ronda Southflagg and found her eyes wide, staring down at a corner of the street.

"It's gone," she said in a whisper.

"What's gone?" Oliver asked gently.

"There used to be a hitching bar for horses there—an iron pipe between two posts, where we used to hunch down and skin the cat." Her laugh was gay, but Oliver felt the catch in it. "Indian Annie's candy store was right across from it. It was a one-story building with a false-front top—now it's a brick dime store." She bit her lip suddenly. "We used to get what we called 'lickerish whips' and 'jawbreakers' from Indian Annie's. I got a package of dates there once, and I've never eaten dates since. They were full of worms. I wonder—but of course not! Indian Annie would have to be a hundred if she were alive today!"

Oliver drove to the curb in front of the neat little hotel. "There'll probably be some of the old landmarks left somewhere. Meanwhile, we've got to eat, noon being here. How about this place? There's a coffee shop."

But Ronda was peering from the car window, and Oliver saw only her profile, clear-cut and untelling.

“‘The Merton,’” she read. “That’s where the Rosebud Ice Cream Parlor used to be. It looks nice and modern, but—look down there, across the tracks. See—it’s still there! The Eating House. At least it’s the same shape, and it’s in the same spot. Let’s—will you, Oliver?”

“I was hoping for something like that,” Oliver said, and turned out into the street again. He drove across the tracks and drew in to a parking space before a longish, wooden, drab building with a yellow sign painted over the door.

“This is where we begin,” he said for his own cryptic pleasure, in a tone too low for Ronda to hear.

She was out of the car at once and Oliver followed her toward the sloping porch upon which sat several men in grimy overalls—section hands or quarry workers, perhaps, but certainly not the dapper drummers of old. With a look impartial as to sentiment, Ronda pointed to a narrow-shouldered house that stood beyond the vacant, weed-infested lot adjacent to the hotel.

“It must have been painted another color since we lived there. It used to be a rather decent brown. Now it’s a mustard yellow.”

Oliver grinned. “A polite description,” he remarked. “So that’s where the Clarke family lived, eh?”

“Yes.”

Without waiting for any further comment from Oliver she mounted the steps. The men on the porch stared at her.

“I thought this gray suit was too dull to attract any attention,” she murmured as Oliver opened the door for her.

“Your legs and eyes aren’t,” he said.

An aroma smote them—a composite of aromas, rather. Years of frying eggs, frying potatoes, frying salt pork and stale bacon, of cheap coffee forever at the boil, blended with the musty plaster smell of ancient wall-paper. An elderly woman, erect and spare as a spike smoothed back her greenish, black-dyed hair with a knuckled hand as Oliver and Ronda sat down at the counter.

“Well, folks, what’ll it be?”

“Heavens, it’s Long Minnie!” Esther breathed, just loudly enough for Oliver to hear.

“Something in a hurry,” Oliver said quickly. “We’re just driving through.”

“We got kraut and pigs’ feet for lunch,” the woman replied. “Or I can fix you some baked beans and ham.”

“Beans and ham for me,” Oliver said. “How about you, Ronda?”

“The same for me, please.”

The woman went toward the kitchen and called her order through an open wicket. Then she came back and swept a damp cloth briskly over the counter top in front of her two customers, a concentrated frown between her faded eyes. Suddenly the frown cleared with alacrity.

“It’s Esther Clarke, ain’t it?”

Oliver glanced quickly at Ronda. Her face seemed actually to shrink with the shrinking pallor of her lips, while her heavy lids flew back from her eyes. In the fear that she might be on the verge of one of her fainting spells, he put a hand to her shoulder, but she recovered herself immediately and smiled at the woman behind the counter.

“Yes—I used to be. And you’re Minnie Long, aren’t you?”

“Still am.”

“I’m Mrs. Southflagg, now,” Ronda said. “And this is Mr. Whittle, a painter friend of mine from the east.”

“Pleased to meet you, mister, I’m sure!” Minnie beamed, and set out knives, forks and spoons swathed in paper napkins. “There’s plenty o’ paintin’ waitin’ to be done around here, if that’s what you’re lookin’ for, ’specially this side o’ the tracks. Them people livin’ over yonder in your old place, Esther—” She hooked a contemptuous thumb over her shoulder. “They ain’t put a brush to it since they moved in ten years ago. Just bohunks!”

“But how did you ever recognize me?” Ronda asked.

Minnie’s smile was puzzled. “Never had anybody in this town with eyes like yours since the day you left. Coffee, tea, or milk?”

“Two coffees, Minnie,” Ronda said.

There came a flat tinkle of a bell from the kitchen, and in a moment two plates were placed on the counter. Minnie drew two cups of coffee from the urn behind the counter and set them beside the plates.

“With or without?” she enquired.

Ronda stared blankly at her. “Oh. Cream with mine, please. Mr. Whittle takes his black.”

“The town has changed a lot since I was here last,” Ronda said.

“I guess *you’d* see a change all right. But it’s come sort o’ gradual on me that’s never been out of it.”

“The quarries are still working, I suppose?”

“Working! They’ve sunk a new hole up there close to a hundred foot deep. Like a little Grand Canyon, they say, colors and all. They quit workin’ the old hole years ago—ran into water and shale, or something. I just forget now. Been a move started to have it filled in. Coupla old man Jensen’s cows fell in there a while back and broke their necks. They got warnin’ signs up, but cows can’t read signs.”

A half dozen laborers filed in and Minnie excused herself unwillingly to wait on them.

“Sorry you’re not goin’ to stay around a few days,” she said as she turned away. “We could find a lot o’ things to go back over.”

Oliver opened the door of his car and waited for Ronda to get in. But she held back, her eyes upon the vacant, weed-choked lot beside The Eating House.

“Just a minute, Oliver,” she said and walked away until she stood directly in front of the decrepit, mustard-colored house she had once called home.

When she came back at last, Oliver saw her stuff a handkerchief angrily into the pocket of her jacket. She got into the car without speaking. Oliver said nothing as he started the car and drove back across the tracks and toward the center of the town. What he was doing, he thought, was probably the most heartless thing he had ever done to her, more heartless, even, than what he had done that storm-driven night on Montauk Point. But it was something he had to do.

He found a place to park his car in front of the Merton Hotel. He turned off his motor and slipped the ignition key into his pocket.

“How far is it from here to the school you used to attend?” he asked Ronda.

“Why—” She looked from the car window. “Not far—about four or five blocks or so.”

“You know how to get there?”

“Of course.”

“Come on, then. We’re going to walk out and have a look at it.”

There was nothing left of the old building. In its place stood an imposing structure of granite and red brick that would have done credit to a modern

university campus.

“Oh, it has all changed so!” Ronda exclaimed. “In spite of what Long Minnie said—”

“Your Long Minnie hasn’t changed,” Oliver laughed. “That’s the answer. All you have to do, my dear, is close your eyes and stand here for a minute. Go ahead—try it!”

She smiled reluctantly, as a child might smile who ventures upon a new kind of game, then let her eyelids fall.

“Well, what do you see now?” Oliver asked.

Ronda laughed. “A lot of kids just let out of school and racing home—and two girls in middy blouses and skirts let down to their ankles and their hair done up into French rolls—” She paused and opened her eyes.

“No, no,” Oliver said. “Keep those eyes shut and tell me some more.”

She closed her eyes again. “Oh, I see a lot of things. There’s the roundhouse, and old Krause’s movie theatre, and Stanley’s Ravine where the raspberries grew so thick and the ghosts of dead Indians used to come at night, and the stone quarry, and the park beside the river, and the cemetery, and the—”

“That’s enough,” Oliver said, and took out his watch. “We won’t have time to do them all and get back to Madison tonight. But we can do some of them. What would you like to see most?”

“Something that hasn’t changed too much. The ravine—no, the stone quarry. Let’s go there.”

They walked south and west to the outskirts of the little town and began the ascent of a quite unbelievable hill. The slope, with its silvery-red granite knuckles sparkling up through bottle-green grass, was like an old-fashioned calico print, Oliver thought, or a flowered wall-paper with a garish design of lemon-colored and pale-blush cactus flowers. Ronda pointed out buttercups, primroses, Job’s Tears, and many others, and picked a large bouquet of Pearly Everlastings that had come into bloom earlier than usual because of the favorable spring.

At last they stood on the edge of the quarry and looked down to where operations were in full swing under the bright blue of mid-afternoon. On the sheer wall opposite them, the veins of azure and magenta and heart’s blood burned in the sunlight.

“Here—we sit!” Oliver said, and trampled the grass in a small circle near the rim of the huge pit.

He took her hand to help her as she seated herself, and then sprawled beside her. Above them a great catalpa that must have been an escape from some cultivated garden, was heavy with its white bell-like flowers. About them was a prodigal weft of wild grapevines swung across pin oaks, and lacy elderberry shrubs in bloom.

Ronda placed the bouquet of Pearly Everlastings on the grass beside him. "Those are for Ellen," she said. "Don't go away and leave them."

He stretched his full length, yawned prodigiously, and looked up at her as he reached out and took one of her hands in his.

"Esther Clarke!" he said.

She looked away across the quarry and smiled. "It was a nice name, after all. I've been calling myself Esther Clarke ever since we left Long Minnie's place."

"That's what I have been hoping for," Oliver said. "You've been sixteen again. What I want you to understand, my dear, is that all the world may change about us, but somewhere down inside us we remain the same. We don't change—much, if at all. There is a part of us, thank God, that never grows up. Beautiful music, a bit of beautiful art, a line of beautiful poetry—that's all we need. We can close our eyes for a moment—and weep like children."

"I have done that often," Ronda confessed.

"It was somewhere here, wasn't it, that you used to come with young Danny O'Rourke?"

"Not right here," she said, and looked behind her. "It was over there a little way, beyond those oaks. That's where the old quarry is."

"Would you rather we had gone there to sit?"

"It's all right here. I—I'd be almost afraid to go there, though sometimes —"

"None of that, now!" Oliver said brusquely. "Here—or near here—you were once sixteen—and in love."

"Fifteen—and in love."

"Well, fifteen. You would have gone anywhere in the world with your Danny. You'd have gone to hell with him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, gladly."

"That's what makes young love the wonderful thing it is. Hell was made for young lovers. It's only the old codgers who insist on heaven. They have to have it when they're worn out from fighting. You took it when you married Milton Southflagg, didn't you?"

“I know.”

“And now you want to cheat Ellen out of her chance. The young are flung out to do their own fighting. Win or lose, that’s the chance they take, but win or lose they’ve had the glory of the fight. What you want to do is keep Ellen safe.”

“No, no—I’d be willing to let her go if it weren’t for—”

“Now you’re being fifty instead of fifteen. I’ve made up my mind about this, Ronda—Esther. Ellen is going to marry Jim Bridewell, if he’s the kind of young man I hope he is. And I’ll know about that when I’ve had a talk with him.”

“What will you say to him?”

“I’ll tell him as much as I think is necessary. If he can’t take it any better than his father took it, the hell with him! I’ll kick him out and lock Ellen in her room till he leaves for South America.”

For a long time then they were silent, Ronda sitting with her hands folded in her lap, Oliver lying beside her, his fingers laced across his eyes. He sat up at last, regarded her intently for a moment, then got to his feet. He had said enough, he thought to himself. It would be best to leave her alone now, let her do her own thinking.

“I’m going to move along the rim, there,” he said, and indicated the direction by a nod of his head. “I’d like to try another angle on the colors in that far wall.”

He strolled away, half his mind occupied with the obscure problems of the artist seeking a vantage point from which he could best employ a crudely scarred Nature as his model, the other half still lingering beside the woman sitting beneath the flowering catalpa, the bouquet of Pearly Everlastings lying near her. When he had stayed long enough away from her—too long, perhaps—he hurried back. At first he thought he had somehow missed the spot where they had been sitting together. But no—there was the catalpa, and there was the bouquet of flowers on the ground. But Ronda had disappeared.

“Ronda!” he called, his voice as raucous as a crow’s as he felt a sudden panic seizing him for no reason he could think of at the time.

He called again, then started off in the direction of the old quarry beyond the oaks she had pointed out to him. The heat of the sun beat down upon him and the spicy smell of the many granite-knoll flowers rose to meet him while he rushed through a labyrinth of thornapple trees that clawed at him as he ran. He was sure he had caught a glimpse of a phantom-swift gray figure

that seemed to glide ahead of him across a narrow aisle of sunless green, overlaced by trees.

“Esther, Esther!” he shouted hoarsely. “Stop, for God’s sake!”

His foot raked up a weed-tangled tree root, and as he plunged forward he was sure he had glimpsed her again. He had the hallucination that she was floating like a swiftly determined little spiral of fog through the green shadow of these looser woods. He scrambled up and lengthened his stride, his voice frantically, imploringly, calling her name. She must have heard him in that spellbound, hot stillness, but she gave no response except to increase the speed of her flight. Dense trailings of grapevines clung to his feet and flung him headlong at last.

When he clambered up again, he stood for a moment and peered ahead through the jungle of vine and shrub. He gathered his breath to call her name again—and then he saw her. She was huddled against the stump of some ancient tree that was studded in delicate forms by a brilliant fungus growth of hues that approached those of the quarry he had gazed down upon only a short time since. Her slender left ankle and foot and her high-heeled gray suède pump were tightly wreathed about by a grapevine that looked as though it had been lying in purposeful wait for her.

Oliver knelt down and half lifted her so that he could look at her face. Her eyes met his with a wan smile, and in that smile he read what was to remain unspoken between them in all the years to come.

Muttering angrily as if to himself, he disentangled her foot. “My God, you need a keeper!”

“Don’t be angry with me, Oliver—not now,” she begged. “You can say what you like—later. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“We’ll just call it an accident and leave it at that,” Oliver said, and lifted her foot in his hands. “Is that ankle sprained?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m all right, if you’ll just help me up.”

He put his arms about her, but he did not get up at once. “Esther Clarke,” he said, “would you marry me?”

She looked at him, the summer-gilt green of the woods reflected in her eyes. “Isn’t it a little late, Oliver?” she asked.

“I should have asked you years ago,” he said. “But I refused to let myself be counted as just another who loved you. My ungodly pride kept me from you. I’ve always loved you, but never so much as I love you now.”

“You would never have been just another, Oliver,” she told him.

Tears brightened the flush on her cheeks, and he gently kissed the provocative mouth.

“I had to come back here for a few days,” Oliver Whittle told Ralph Blake. “Ronda and Ellen—no, *Esther* and Ellen—have a little readjusting to do and I decided they could do it better if I wasn’t around. It won’t amount to much. In fact, the kids were all for making it a double wedding, but I have no intention of parading my senility before the same altar with radiant youth, my friend. Esther and I will dispose of our part of it quietly and let the youngsters put on their own show.”

“Well, I suppose some sort of congratulations are in order.” Blake said.

“Let’s not go conventional,” Oliver retorted.

“Aren’t you still curious about what your old friend, the engineer, will have to say when he finds out that his son has married the daughter of—”

“Curious, maybe, but not worried. The kids know more about it now than he does, and they’re ready to fight if they have to. Furthermore, if old Sam Bridewell as much as quirks a deprecatory eyebrow in the direction of my wife—”

“That’s right,” Blake laughed. “I hadn’t thought of that. It does give you an advantage over him, doesn’t it?”

“A purely conventional one, I admit,” Oliver Whittle said. “But conventions have their place, after all. That’s part of the tribute we have to pay for being civilized.”

“And yet you wonder that I am more interested in *myxomycetes* than I am in human beings,” Ralph Blake observed.

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.

[The end of *The Sunset Tree* by Martha Ostenso]