

And the

TOWN TALKED



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By . . . MARTHA OSTENSO

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And The Town Talked

By MARTHA OSTENSO



WHEREAS most small towns in this country—towns of fewer than five thousand souls—have their right and wrong side of the railroad track, their right and wrong side of the water tower, of the roundhouse, the bridge, or the grain elevator—Bloomhill’s caste division was determined by a matter of color. Of red and green.

From the steps of the neutral courthouse—a courthouse must be neutral—on the nicely parked square with its perennials and clam shells spelling out the name of the town like a brave sampler, you could look south to the vista of deceptively slumbrous red which stamped the quarries, the gravel pits, the brickyard of the Flats, of so-called “Patchtown”; and you could look north to green, to the amiably treed hills from which peered forth the gracious houses of the best families, houses like the dainty old ladies in lace shawls. But the north vista, in green, was likewise deceptively slumbrous. For although the best families, secure in tradition, property, culture, might from the courthouse steps in the valley appear to sleep, they did not sleep. There was an invisible bridge across the town from the green heights to the red lowlands, and over this bridge, late and early, hied the watchful spirits whose riches drew out of the labor in kiln and quarry.

On North Hill lived, at spacious, oak-spread intervals, the Paysons, the Stowells, the Messengers, and one or two other families admittedly almost as good. North Hill owned Patchtown, at the other end of the invisible bridge, but North Hill, being at least five generations old, preferred it to be understood that its income came mostly from the professions it represented: the law, education, the retired life.

Young Doctor Frederick Stowell, grandson of Judge Stowell, suffered no delusions concerning the aristocracy of Bloomhill. He knew it for what it was in its Victorian smugness—intolerant, dour, priding itself upon its rigorous church attendance, its unflagging efforts to stamp out what it considered the flagrant vices of the valley below. These vices included practically every human pleasure, no matter how innocuous. North Hill was, in short, an incredible anachronism. Fred had often wondered how it had managed to survive its own fanatical bitterness against the encroachment of a modern world. The answer was that its spirit was as hard as the granite by which, at a proper and dignified distance, it subsisted. Now that he was twenty-seven, with a year’s general practice in Bloomhill behind him, he knew that answer. He would have had to be rather stupid not to know it, living as he did in his grandfather’s house, with his grandmother’s gardens

merging clannishly right and left into the gardens of the Paysons and the Messengers.

On this July morning, young Doctor Fred was concerned with his own ineradicable vein in that granite of his family and the other North Hill families, as he drove through his grandfather's pillared gate on his way to the valley and his office. He was a stiff, sanctimonious prig like the rest of them! He knew it now, if he hadn't before, because only last night that girl from Patchtown had come to him in tears, and he, a doctor—God save the mark!—had been frostily censorious of her.

If, he had asked, she declined to tell him anything of the circumstances that had led to her plight, how could she look for sympathy from Doctor Stowell? In such cases the town frequently was obliged to bear the responsibility of rearing the unfortunate offspring, and he felt it his duty to learn the name of the man. But Sadie Miller had left abruptly, her nostrils fine and contemptuous as any on North Hill. He had honestly tried to detain her, but it was too late.

Doctor Fred heard someone call him a pleasant, thin good-morning. His black, heavy lashes, brooding over miserable grey eyes, lifted. It was Miss Felicia Payson, the less formidable of the two elderly Payson spinsters, at work on the rambler roses that covered the Payson wall. Her canvas-gloved hands held a spray gun; on her head was a shapeless leghorn hat. Their affluence did not persuade the Paysons to believe that employing a gardener was anything short of immoral. She gave him a puckered, wind-fall smile.

“Off early, doctor?”

“Yes,” he replied a little curtly. “I have some early calls to make in the Flats.”

“In Patchtown?” Miss Felicia looked distressed. “Oh, dear! The Judge was saying only yesterday that he hoped you would be able to confine yourself to more——” Her long nose reddened in confusion.

“The poor have an odd way of getting sick, too, Miss Felicia,” said Doctor Frederick.

“Oh, yes, of course. I didn't mean——” Her sister, Miss Kate Payson, hove into view within the gates. Fred hastily shifted into low gear. “You'll probably meet Elsbeth on the drive, Frederick,” Felicia added. “She went out riding at seven.”

But he did not meet young Elsbeth astride her spirited black horse, on the gravel drive down into the valley. He thought of this niece of the Payson spinsters, his brow knitting in perturbation. Since her mother's death a year ago, Elsbeth Payson had been an unfathomable enigma. He was alone in

recognising the fact. North Hill would never countenance anything so heathenish, so offensive as an enigma. Especially would her two maiden aunts, the sisters of her dead father, Professor Wordsworth Payson, never do so. An enigma, since it was something unforthright, was something faintly indecent.

He had not tried to break through the wall of curiously scornful reserve the girl had built about herself since the loss of her mother. Not but what he might have granted himself the privilege of doing so. Although there was no blood relationship between himself and Elsbeth, their families had been interlocked by marriage in several instances and he had grown up with a protective, older-brother sentiment toward her. But he chose to believe that Elsbeth's aloofness toward her surroundings now was a manifestation of her grief over her mother's passing, and in that belief he felt it more delicate to leave her alone.

He stopped at his office in the Oddfellows' Hall Building only long enough to exchange a few words with the white-starched, reedy Miranda Guest, his assistant, then drove south along the River Pike past the small truck farms into the untidy, patternless, but somehow vigorously romantic sprawl of Patchtown. The place, with its jauntily unperpendicular tin stove-pipes for chimneys, its oddly assembled shacks and staggering picket fences, its gardens companionably knocking knees, had always humorously reminded Doctor Fred of the Toonerville Trolley cartoons. The unguarded happiness of the poor lay like a bright, tattered veil over Patchtown.

Doctor Frederick Stowell made two visits, for which he would probably be paid a year from now, if at all. Then he turned down a willow-hung, dirt road that was known as Toadflax Lane. He himself had never seen any toadflax growing there. He was thinking of this odd name and trying not to think of Sadie Miller, when he was startled to see Elsbeth Payson's black horse Ajax tethered to a willow tree in front of a tiny frame cottage.

Dumbfounded, Doctor Fred stopped his car, got out and strode up the scrubbed wooden steps.

THE round, yellow-haired woman hurried in alarm from the front room window into the kitchen. The woman's name was not Lou, nor Floss, nor Frankie, but—disconcertingly—Priscilla Van der Water. That moreover, was her real name. She was still remembered in show business as one of the most spectacular acrobatic dancers of twenty years ago when, at the close of the war, tunes were composed to match the daring, hieroglyphic grace of her body. By what devious routes she came to be growing vegetables in

Patchtown as the wife of Henry Van der Water, brickyard foreman, is irrelevant. With the bandy-legged, devoted Henry she was the happiest woman in the world.

“Elsbeth!” she cried now in a panic of haste. “You’d best be off out the back door. And take your clothes with you. Fred Stowell’s coming in!”

Elsbeth Payson brought her beautiful bare leg swiftly down from the home-made stretching bar Priscilla had rigged up at one side of the kitchen. Her wide-lidded, hazel-green eyes grew dark with defiant anger. She tossed back her long, thick, amber bob and laughed recklessly, her round, still childish chin out-thrust below a full red mouth drawn straight across her teeth.

“Let him come!” she said. “I’m sick and tired of all this sneaking around. You’d think I was doing something criminal——”

“But your aunts will blame me! They might even fire Henry from the ——”

“Oh, no, they won’t!” Elsbeth jeered. “That wouldn’t be ethical. Bloomhill might criticise them for it.”

“Well, I’d better get this out of the way anyhow!” Priscilla whisked her gold and white accordion off a chair, hid it in the pantry and went to answer the second peremptory knock on the front door.

A moment later Doctor Frederick Stowell stalked into the kitchen, halted abruptly and glared at Elsbeth from head to soft-slippered toe.

“Exactly what does this mean, Beth?” he demanded.

“Another good line,” she returned sweetly, “is—‘how long has this been going on?’ Did you know, Freddie, that even for classical or professional ballroom dancing you should be able to do what’s known as a ‘split’?”

Before Doctor Fred’s outraged stare she glided smoothly to the floor, her bright head thrown back from the dryad curve of her throat. Fred’s brow mantled darkly.

“Get up! What do you suppose your family would think of this exhibition?”

Priscilla bridled. “She’s got the makings of a fine dancer. If I didn’t know that, I wouldn’t have been wasting my time all the summer teaching her what I know about it. Besides, she’s old enough to know what she’s doing.”

“Old enough!” Fred snorted. “She’s nothing but a child. Elsbeth—get your clothes and come with me!”

Elsbeth, in the small space between Priscilla's kitchen stove and the door, was executing two perfect cartwheels. She stood up suddenly, straight and cool.

"Priscilla, do you mind going outside for a minute? I want to talk to this person who thinks I'm a child."

When the outer door had closed on Priscilla, Elsbeth turned upon Frederick in exquisite, low-voiced fury.

"Go and tell my aunts what I've been doing. And see whether that will stop me doing what I want to do, Frederick Stowell!"

"I have no intention of telling them," Fred said evenly. "But this is no place for you, and I'll see to it that you don't come here again."

"Oh—you'll see to it, will you?" Elsbeth's derisive laughter rang out. "Well, let me tell you something. You may have treated me like a baby sister all my life, but you're not going to do it any longer. Next week I'll be eighteen years old!"

"What of it?" Frederick retorted. "This is still no place for you."

"You almost said 'for a Payson,' didn't you?" Elsbeth mocked. "Just as you might say 'for a Stowell or a Messenger.' Well, I'll tell you something else, in case you've forgotten it. On my next birthday I receive the three thousand dollars my father left me. And then I intend to leave Bloomhill for good!"

The angry, buoyant grace of her body was like that of a young tree in a sudden storm as she whirled away from him and picked up her clothes from a chair behind a door.

"You've spoiled my lesson for to-day," she told him, "so I may as well go home."

He watched her in silence while she drew on her white linen riding breeches, boots and green silk shirt waist. During this procedure she did not stop talking.



“The Paysons killed my mother with their narrow-mindedness. The Paysons and the Stowells and the Messengers did that together! But they aren’t going to kill me, Frederick. She loved fun and dancing and singing ——” Tears dilated her eyes suddenly, and made them more brilliant; her voice shook.

“And they wouldn’t let her have any of that. They thought she should spend the rest of her life mourning for my father, even though he died when I was only eight. And because she had to bring me up, without any money, she had to live in that house in—in misery, for years. My father was so jealous of her that he turned his property over to his bigoted sister even before he died! All except my three thousand dollars. You know all about that, of course. Mother had only one pleasure—and that was teaching me to dance. And she had to do that in secret. She brought me down here to Priscilla herself, if you want to know—two years ago!”

Elsbeth strode over to him and stood, vibrant and accusing, her hands clenched in her breeches pockets.

“Now, look here, Beth!” Frederick struggled to maintain the admonishing and yet reasonable attitude of an elder. “That’s all beside the point——”

“If you had eyes in your head,” the girl broke in vehemently, “you must have seen what those blue-stockings on North Hill did to my mother! You came home for vacations—while you were interning. How could you fail to see that she was dying simply of unhappiness?”

Wincing from what he suspected to be the truth, Frederick opened his mouth to protest, but Elsbeth hurried on:

“The Paysons and all the rest of them on the Hill hated her, because she was an outsider. They couldn’t forgive her for having come from the city. Well, I’m an outsider. And as soon as I’m free, I’m going!”

“Where?” Frederick’s voice, for some obscure reason, tightened on the question. He suddenly saw Bloomhill as something drab and devitalised without this Elsbeth whom he had known most of his life—and yet strangely had not known at all until to-day.

“To New York, of course,” said Elsbeth. “Priscilla says it would only be a waste of time for me to study anywhere else.”

“You’re a headstrong young idiot!” he informed her. “I’ve always known it, but this is even worse than I expected of you. You’ll come a cropper and be a disgrace to your name!”

“Will you stop talking about names!” She flew straight into his face with the riding gauntlets she held in her hand. Frederick grasped her wrist and gave it a sharp backward filip.

“Coward!” Elsbeth whispered savagely. “Coward and stuffed shirt—like the rest of them. Let me go!”

Doctor Frederick Stowell released her in confusion and chagrin at his own unaccountable impulse. He hesitated only for an instant, then turned on his heel and marched off without another word. The flippantly gay voice of Elsbeth calling to Priscilla in the back yard smote painfully on his ears.

ELSBETH lingered beside Priscilla, helping her weed the carrot bed in her garden, and heard the reassuring drone of Doctor Fred’s car starting away. She felt jaunty and refreshed after her tilt with him.

Priscilla was shaking her head dubiously. “You oughtn’t to have riled him, honey,” she said. “Maybe the Judge will fix it now so you can’t get your money and escape.”

“Oh, no. Mother told me I’d be sure to get it. And in a couple of weeks I’ll be in New York, Priscilla. I have it figured out that I can live on a thousand dollars a year—in a hall bedroom, of course. I can cook my own meals. And that dancing school you told me about——”

Priscilla glanced up at her uneasily.

“That reminds me,” she said with a slight hesitation. “Henry’s sister had a letter from her son Cecil yesterday. You remember Cecil Andrews—Henry’s nephew.”

“Of course. He was a couple of grades ahead of me in public school. Where is his band now?”

“That’s what I was going to tell you,” said Priscilla. “He’s coming here next week. He’s going to bring his band to the Rendezvous on the Pike for a

week or so. The Andrews' are all excited about it—specially Cecil's mother. She hasn't seen the boy since he left high school and went down to New York. That must be four years ago. I suppose he's close to twenty-three now. And with his own orchestra! He's the only one of the Andrews' that amounted to a bean. It'll be in the paper to-morrow—about his coming here, I mean. They're calling it a 'short engagement,' like Cecil told them to. Of course, he isn't exactly famous or anything like that—not yet. But he has played on the radio, and I suppose he's got the staff it takes.”

Elsbeth had sat back on her slender haunches, and was pensively looking into space. Her eyes, Priscilla noted with a ripple of disquietude, were green-gold slits of reminiscence of excitement.

“During those two years they let me go to the Bloomhill public school,” said Elsbeth, “he was one of the bigger boys. He never even saw me. I must have been about ten, and I always had on a starched white pinafore, with a handkerchief safety-pinned in the pocket. Pinafores were something my aunts remembered from eighteen-ninety. I had to wear them. It was agony. Cecil Andrews was probably fourteen. He used to wear the filthiest corduroy pants, and a slouch cap that hid one eye. He was fascinating. I adored him.”

“I don't know about 'fascinating,'” Priscilla replied. “He was a pretty tough young egg. But he did have music in him. He was no more'n six when he used to come over here and listen with his mouth open when I pulled on the accordion. It was Henry and me that saved up to get that second-hand piano for him.”

“He'd never play for marches or anything in school,” Elsbeth said radiantly. “But I remember once he was almost expelled for sneaking into the auditorium when classes were on and playing 'Frankie and Johnny'! I heard it and knew right away who it was.”

“The rascal,” Priscilla chuckled, then remembering Elsbeth she straightened her face. “If he hasn't changed he's a good sort to keep away from, anyhow, even if he is my nephew, as you might say. He never had a thought for anybody but himself. I hope he'll behave while he stays with his mother. Edna thinks the sun rises and sets in him, just because once in a while he remembers to send her a telegram on her birthday or a pair of stockings now and then. Hmph! I'm glad he's only my nephew by marriage!”

Elsbeth laughed and stood up. “When he's the greatest orchestra leader in the country, I'll bet you won't say that, Priscilla. I'm going to the Rendezvous to hear him—and I don't care who sees me there!”

Priscilla hastily changed the subject. "If I were you, I'd stop in and make up with Doctor Fred. Before you go home, I mean."

"I think not." Elsbeth said easily, stretching on her toes. "Let him simmer. I'm going to ride over to Sadie Miller's. She's feeling so dreadfully about Jim Clark's death. I saw her yesterday, after I left here, and she looked like a ghost. I told her she had better go to Frederick and get a prescription so that she could sleep."

"You—what?"

Priscilla stared up at her, wondering. No, the girl could have no idea that what she had just said might seem ambiguous. Anyhow, Priscilla's suspicions about Sadie might prove groundless, after all.

"I told her he had office hours last night. I don't know whether she went or not, but she certainly needs a tonic, Priscilla. It seems odd that she should be in such a state now—worse, really, than when Jim died."

"Was killed, you mean," Priscilla interrupted tersely. "In the quarry pit."

"Yes," Elsbeth agreed, her mouth tightening. "Killed in the Stowell-Payson quarry. He'd be alive still if the Stowell-Paysons had been willing to hire an extra man for the dynamiting. I know just how niggardly they were about the funeral expenses, too. It's only one more reason why I want to get about from North Hill. But what's the use of talking about it?" Elsbeth shrugged her silk-clad shoulders. "I'd better get along," she added. "I'll water Ajax at Sadie's. May I come and practise again to-morrow?"

"You're welcome any time, child," said Priscilla.

THE MILLER shanty had rather the appearance of a snail emerging, horned, from its shell, since there were two stove-pipe chimneys rising not quite parallel, above its tar-paper facade, and also since the shanty itself had been built into a kind of cul-de-sac, a partially weather-sound haven provided by a gulley between two quarries.

There were stubborn little lilac bushes before the shanty. Here Elsbeth dismounted, slung the reins of Ajax over the branch of a bush, and walked up the path to the Miller house.

Sadie opened the door to her.

"Why—Elsbeth!"

Sadie tried to look bright and pleasantly surprised, but her effort only made more apparent the traces of tears on her flushed cheeks.

“Let me get a pail of water for Ajax, Sadie,” Elsbeth said quickly. “It’s so hot, and we’ve been out since seven o’clock.”

“Certainly! I’m glad you came, Elsbeth. Mum went to town, so I’m all alone.”

Elsbeth followed Sadie through this other small, neat, barely furnished home with its lace curtains, grass rugs and golden oak furniture, to the kitchen. Sadie got a pail and Elsbeth coaxed water from the asthmatic pump above the cast iron sink. The water works of Bloomhill did not extend its benignity to Patchtown.

Sadie walked with Elsbeth to water the horse.

“You’ve been over to Priscilla’s, I suppose. It must’ve been awful hot for dancing.”

Elsbeth told her that she had practised for a while. Then, when they had come back and sat on the narrow stoop of the house, she said, “Did you go to see Doctor Fred last night, Sadie?”

His name was enough. Sadie Miller broke into such a storm of weeping as Elsbeth herself had known only once before in her life—upon her mother’s death last year.

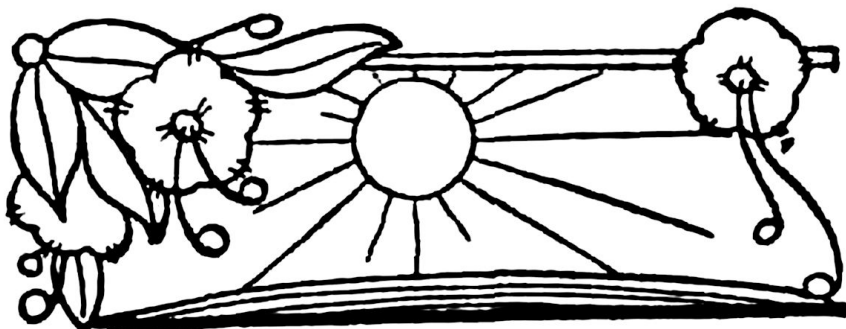
“What on earth! Sadie!”

Elsbeth put her arm about the older girl. “What is the matter, Sadie? Didn’t you go to Doctor Stowell?”

“Yes—I went.” Sadie gasped. “And I told him!”

“You told him what?”

“I couldn’t tell you before, Elsbeth. Can’t you guess?”



The words were like icy, separate, stinging drops of water down Elsbeth’s hot back. She straightened up against them, tried to shake them

off, and in a few seconds of supreme effort the young Elsbeth's sheath of dewy immaturity slipped from her forever.

"Jim is dead—how could I let people know? We were going to be married the very next week—"

"Of course, Sadie! I knew that. But why couldn't you have told that to Doctor Stowell?"

"Because—" Sadie swung about and faced Elsbeth with her eyes full of a dark, bitter passion. "He looked at me as if I was scum. How could I tell him after that—that it was Jim?"

Elsbeth's eyes had been fixed intently upon Sadie Miller while she talked. She was not to know it fully until years later, until the threads of her life, glittering and sombre, had become inextricably woven with those of Frederick Stowell—but she shrank with every sentient fibre of her being from the significance of this Patchtown girl's story. She shrank from it, her own antagonism towards Frederick momentarily forgotten. Yet at last it overtook her, and its impact upon her sensibilities was dull, heavy, sickening. It would be years before she was to recognise that feeling as deep shame for one of her own class. Doctor Frederick Stowell was not even secretly different from the rest of them on North Hill. He was as smug, as puritanical, as prejudiced and mean-spirited as any of them. Really worse, because a doctor, Elsbeth perceived, should be above and outside the narrow pulpit of self-appointed censor of human conduct.

Her humiliation for him found release now in splendid, articulate anger.

"Why didn't you, Sadie?" she cried. "Oh—I wish I'd been with you! I'd have loved to see him act like that. I really would! It's just what you might expect of him. And he has the nerve to call himself a doctor."

This reaction was bewildering to the ingenuous Sadie.

"There's no use getting angry, Elsbeth," she said, drying her eyes on the hem of her skirt. "I don't want to drag you into it—"

"Listen! Fred Stowell and all those people on the Hill aren't worth your little finger. They aren't real—they're not human—they haven't got one ounce of red blood in the whole bunch of them! Forget about Fred, Sadie. Go to old Doctor Goldthwaite—you know, across from the creamery. He'll be nice to you. I'll go with you, if you'll let me."

Her sentences were tumbling wildly one over the other, with uppermost in her emotions the need to set right Frederick Stowell's stupid wrong. It was as if she, Elsbeth Payson, being part of that Olympian arrogance on North Hill, were to an extent responsible for this misery of Sadie Miller.

“I don’t mind,” Sadie agreed apathetically. “Nothing matters. Mum and Dad will have to be told about it sooner or later anyhow. It’s not them I’m worried about so much. But Max will be awfully upset. He’ll think Berenice won’t marry him now. She’s kind of stuck up anyhow, because she works in the telephone office.”

Elsbeth did not smile. “If Berenice is that sort, your brother had better not marry her,” she replied sturdily. “My mother always said the worst sin in the world is intolerance.”

“Your mother was so lovely, Elsbeth!” Sadie began to cry again, but with a kind of lush relaxation now.

Elsbeth sat vividly dry eyed. She would never cry again over her small, frail mother who had been through twenty years of marriage and widowhood like a gay bird fluttering silently with one wing caught in the smooth steel trap of the Paysons. She stood up, flurried and uncomfortable.

Sadie looked down at her square hands. “It’d be nice, Elsbeth. But I don’t know now as I want to go to any doctor here. I’ve been thinking. I’d rather go away somewhere. I’ve got a hundred dollars about, saved from waiting on table in the brickyard boarding-house. And Jim left two hundred out of his insurance. I could go somewhere far enough away and work for three or four months, before—”

Elsbeth nodded gravely. “But it wouldn’t be so nice alone in a strange place, Sadie. I don’t think—”

It was then that Sadie did an amazing, an almost explosive, thing. With an awkward, forward wrenching of her strong, well-shaped body, one hand grappling the other, she burst out:

“Elsbeth, let me go with you! Priscilla says you’re really going to New York. Let me live with you and—and do all the work, the cooking and washing and everything! Then you won’t have to do anything but study dancing.

“I’m so strong. I have my three hundred dollars, too. I’ll put in something for our keep. Maybe I can get a part-time job during the day. I’d like that for a few months, just to keep busy. Elsbeth—if you really do go, let me go with you!”

The imploring, soot-black eyes above the boldly-carved cheekbones, held Elsbeth’s in desperate appeal.

“Why—why, Sadie—”

“I’m twenty-two years old,” Sadie said, changed and determined. “I think I can sort of look after you in New York. You’re too young to go there alone, inexperienced and all. Nobody knows except Doctor Stowell. Let me

go along as your—your maid, Elsbeth. I don't want to stay here—with Max acting up and—and Jim gone.”

Elsbeth sat down again on the step and stared at Sadie with wide, contemplative eyes.

DOCTOR FREDERICK STOWELL would have given much to be able to absent himself, inconspicuously, from the birthday party given by the Misses Kate and Felicia Payson in honor of their niece, Miss Elsbeth Payson. For since that morning in Priscilla Van der Water's house, Elsbeth had tendered him nothing but a cool and challenging disdain which he had tried to deflect, not very successfully, with adult and tolerant amusement.

But the engraved invitations which descended upon North Hill from the Payson mansion were in the nature of a royal command. There was no available avenue of escape.

And now, after what had been two hours of matchless decorum amid the ponderous mahogany, marble, ormolu, and chandelier crystal of the Payson dining and drawing-rooms; after food that would sink a battleship; after Judge Stowell's sonorous presentation speech and his delivery of a three thousand-dollar cheque to the unstirred young Elsbeth; after chamber music by the middle-aged North Hill Music Club, and three atrociously girlish songs by Sarah Messenger; after this hilarity, eleven o'clock having announced itself from three reliable sources on the ground floor, the party was over.

Miss Kate Payson, not to be outdone by the clocks, rose and gave the signal. Of her, Frederick had always had the impression that she was a spiral of dust such as one sees twirling aloft from a dry autumn field on a windy day, tenuously intact for a moment, and then invisible. She produced that same effect of frustrated activity. Yet Frederick knew that the effect was false. Miss Kate Payson, beneath her grey, semi-transparent dust, was obdurate granite. Felicia, her more corporeal sister, was only limestone beside her.

“Eleven o'clock!” proclaimed Miss Kate with a firm, regretful smile. “Even if she is eighteen, our birdie must say good-night to everybody.”

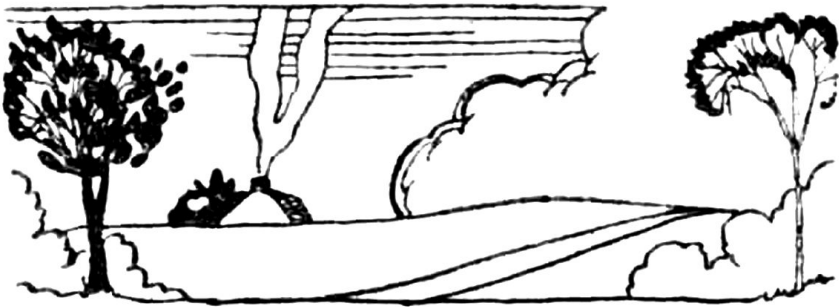
Elsbeth, in a white chiffon dress demurely high about the neck, stood beside the mahogany balustrade of the staircase and sweetly, correctly, bade good-night to her guests. But her eyes, beneath their camellia-white lids, were inscrutable.

Irma Trent, a remote Stowell relation who had lived in the Stowell house for six years as the judge's private secretary, plaintively asked Frederick to fetch her wrap from the west verandah where she had carelessly left it. Her voice, usually metallic and unpliant, was now studiously soft, and the tone more than the words brought Fred to himself with the startled realisation that he had been gazing fixedly at Elsbeth for a long moment. He looked down at the not unhandsome Irma with barely concealed distaste.

"Certainly, Irma," he said hastily, and went to fetch the wrap. As he passed Elsbeth he saw her eyes laughing at him.

Fifteen minutes later he was pacing fretfully in the moonlight on the terrace of his grandfather's place that sloped down towards the all but indistinguishable Stowell-Payson gardens. His mother, his grandfather and Irma had gone directly to bed on their return from the Payson house. Frederick was striving not to think of Elsbeth Payson.

He thought of his father who had gone to France in 1918 with the medical corps, when Frederick was eight, and had not returned. Had that young doctor been relieved to get away from the I-am-better-than-thou atmosphere of North Hill, even into the threat, and final accomplishment, of extinction? He thought of his straight-laced mother, Adeline, who had been a Messenger. Her sister Sarah was a kind of comic valentine replica of her.



So far as Frederick knew, there was only one blot on the escutcheon of North Hill, and that blot had removed himself to the Far East when he was expelled from Harvard in his junior year, a decade ago. Fred himself had been about to enter Harvard then, and his cousin Colin Messenger's disgrace—it concerned a waitress and a brawl in a speakeasy of the period—had bitten harshly into his young pride. But now, strangely enough, there was something comforting in the thought of Colin. He had delivered North Hill from the charge of an abnormal rectitude through five generations.

It seemed, however, that Elsbeth Payson might presently give Colin Messenger some assistance in that mission. Would she really have the courage to defy her family and go to New York to study stage dancing?

While he stood irresolutely on the terrace, arguing with himself that he should be in bed and asleep to prepare for the nasty operation on old Mr. Burmeister early in the morning, he looked down across the laurel and arborvitae below and saw a silvery, insubstantial gleam in the moonlight on the Payson lawn.

“Where the deuce is she going now?” he muttered.

He overtook Elsbeth by the simple expedient of crashing through the laurel bushes and tearing the corner of his dinner-coat pocket. She had a dark velvet cape over one arm.

“What’s the hurry?” Fred asked with an effort to control his breathing.

Elsbeth surveyed him with mock interest.

“I didn’t know we had a night watchman,” she said.

“Do you mind telling me—as one friend to another—where you’re going?”

Her mood suddenly changed. She laughed and took his lapels in both hands.

“I should have thought of it before, Frederick! You can take me in your car. I was going to walk down to Murphy’s garage and get a taxi, but there’s no reason why we shouldn’t go together in real style.”

“Go where, for heaven’s sake?”

“To the Rendezvous, Freddy. Cecil Andrews is opening there to-night. Remember him? He’s the home-town boy who made good. I’m going to meet Brenda Townes and her brother there at midnight. It’s to be my real birthday party, darling!”

FRED looked down at her with feelings hopelessly jumbled, his tongue stiff in his mouth. She was so lovely, so dusky gold here in the moonlight!

“The Rendezvous!” he stammered. “It’s a road house, Elsbeth!”

“Oh—then I have to go alone.”

He set his jaw grimly, seized her arm. “All right, come on. You’re not going alone, that’s definite!”

They went back to the Stowell garage, and while he got out the car, she thought, “I’ll tell him later what I think of him for the way he treated Sadie

Miller. But for the time being I've got to know nothing about it. I simply must hear Cecil Andrews play. And I simply must see him!"

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The slender young man in the purple mess jacket and white flannel trousers sat negligently at the piano, at a ninety degree angle from the keyboard. His trumpets, standing above and behind him, let forth a muted flare of purest shivering gold. Cecil Andrews appeared inattentive, his lazy, deep-set eyes, under the full, musical frontal bone of his forehead, roving over the tightly-wedged dancers below the shallow dais.

Cecil was about to face the piano in that stealthy, lowering way that years later other and lesser band leaders were to strive to imitate, when his eyelids went through a process of motion that could only be called a delicate spasm. A girl in white had just entered and was seating herself at a table near the dais. The table had been reserved. Cecil paid no attention to the tall, dinner-jacketed man who was with her, although his memory indolently recognised him as a North Hill scion who used to come superciliously home from Harvard.

It happened that Doctor Frederick Stowell, pulling his chair back for Elsbeth, witnessed the meeting of her eyes and the eyes of Cecil Andrews.

EVEN after the years had brought their difference of pain and disillusionment, these two weeks were to be for Elsbeth always a memory of sunlight on the river.

The sunlight of the declining afternoons seemed to be a gold tide as the river was a dark one, and between these, in the canoe they rented by the hour from the Rendezvous boathouse, Elsbeth and Cecil Andrews drifted in a timeless enchantment.

Elsbeth, paddling slowly under the overhanging trees, looked down at Cecil, who lay almost flat against the cushions in the prow of the canoe, strumming a tenor guitar. His indolent eyes smiled at her and there was a look of sleep about his smiling mouth while he sang.

**"I've got a red canoe
And a little bit more;
I've got a big full moon—**

"Wish we could come out by moonlight, Betsy!

**“I’ve got a nice fair maid,
And I’ll not ask for more . . .”**

And when he sat and held her in his arms and kissed her again as he had done, abruptly and without any preamble, that evening in the moonlight outside the Rendezvous the second time she had gone to hear him play, Elsbeth felt as if her very identity were ebbing from her.

Cecil scowled, gnawing at his underlip and staring down into her half-closed eyes. “You’re sweet, Betsy!”

“Do you love me?” The whisper came out, against her will. She had known, intuitively, that the evasive look would come like a shutter, quick and gone, down over his eyes.

He laughed, and hurriedly she told herself that the expression had never been there, that she had been mistaken.

“What do you call this?” he demanded. “Isn’t this love?”

He gathered her close.

“Cecil—oh, Cecil—” She stirred so that she could look directly into his eyes, but her own were too full of tears, and his features seemed to waver. “I love you, too! I think I’ve always loved you—ever since you were a naughty little boy in the Flats.”

His face darkened curiously, and when he spoke his voice had a faintly rough edge.

“I’d just as soon forget that,” he said. “It wasn’t my fault that I was born in the Flats.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t!” He laughed charmingly, showing his beautiful small teeth. “You’re too nice, Betsy. Your hair smells like sweet peas.”

That was the way he talked. His conversation was always dappled, highlighted, with irrelevancies. It was only one of the intriguing discoveries Elsbeth had made about him since that first night in the Rendezvous, when he had stepped down from the orchestra and had coolly asked her for a dance, to the amazement of Brenda and Al Townes, and to the tight-lipped disapproval of Frederick Stowell. He had left his band long enough for one turn about the packed floor, but he had held her with close, breath-taking gentleness and had told her that of course she would be here to-morrow night too. And she had said yes, for there was no other answer.

She had come the next night without the vigilant, paternal Frederick, and since then many times for an hour or so, after the aunts were in bed. And there had been these gorgeous afternoons on the river . . . It was a miracle

that the aunts had not yet got wind of what she was doing. She wouldn't have cared if they had. The amenities of her own circumscribed world had shrunk to nothing, leaving only Cecil Andrews and herself.

"But we've got to talk seriously about the future, Cecil," Elsbeth observed, and drew properly upright.

"We haven't really made any plans at all. And to-night you're going—" In spite of her effort to be matter-of-fact, her lips quivered.

"But you're leaving right away, too, aren't you?" he reminded her. "You'll have to work like the dickens for the next six months in New York, and by that time I'll be on my way back. Maybe before, sweet. And I'll look you up at Mrs. Almquist's the minute I get there. I'm quite jealous, though, to think I can't be the first one to show New York what you are."

He gave her an odd, gleaming look then from beneath his suddenly lifted eyelids and pulled her towards him.

"Sweet—I'm going away to-night."

A choking laugh rose in Elsbeth's throat. Cecil, not understanding, flushed and then gave an ironic twist to his mouth.

"My mistake," he said shortly. "I thought you were in earnest about me." He picked up the paddle. "We'd better be shoving back."

"Why—Cecil—I—" Oh, he couldn't possibly think she was laughing at him! "I—it was just—" She looked at him in bewilderment, anxiety and a desperate desire to explain, but his eyes and mouth were haughty. And all at once Elsbeth was perversely glad that she had laughed.

While he paddled back up the river, the strained silence remained between them. But when the boathouse came into view, Elsbeth was overcome by a desire to weep. It was terrible that there should be any discord between them on the very eve of their separation. She could not bear it!

Cecil beached the canoe, helped her out onto the shore, and she clung beseechingly to his arm.

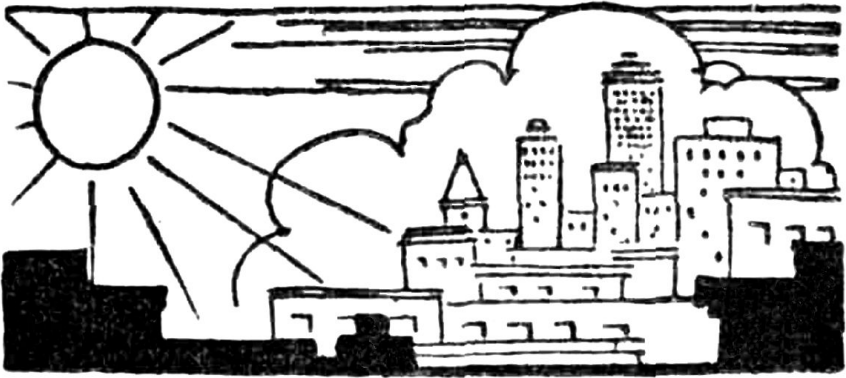
"Darling!" she said softly, winking back the tears. "Let's not quarrel this last day! It's going to be so long before——"

His brilliant, elusive smile checked her, made her feel clumsy and inept.

"Were we quarrelling?" he asked in surprise, then inclined his head in a negligent way and kissed her. Her glance fled to the Rendezvous Pavilion, where a few couples were seated at cocktails or afternoon tea. She was immediately ashamed of that apprehensive glance, and wondered miserably

if Cecil had caught it. “Until New Year’s, then—in New York?” he added lightly, and Elsbeth stared at him in sudden panic.

“But I’ll see you to-night, won’t I? After the dance?”



They were walking up towards the clubhouse now and Cecil shook his head regretfully. “There won’t be time, I’m afraid, sweet. We’re taking the two o’clock train to connect up for Buffalo, and the crowd are coming down to see me off. Elsbeth Payson couldn’t very well be at the depot at that hour of the morning to say good-bye to Cecil Andrews.”

Pity, love, and a rebellious resentment towards his scornful consciousness of their class difference, made her burst out, “I’ll go with you, if you’ll let me!”

“That’d be great, but—well, you’re not quite ready yet, sweet,” he told her complacently. “You’ll need a year’s good professional training, anyhow, before you can step into anything.”

She hadn’t meant that, at all. Had he deliberately misunderstood her?

Elsbeth’s cheeks burned. And it was at that moment that she caught sight of Doctor Frederick Stowell and Irma Trent on the canopied pavilion of the clubhouse.

AMONG the begonias, fuchsias, and star-of-Bethlehems in Aunt Kate Payson’s conservatory, Doctor Frederick Stowell stalked irately to and fro, pausing now and then to punctuate his remarks with an ominous silence while he bent upon Elsbeth an eye of chill displeasure.

Elsbeth sat composed, though pale, in a wicker chair beside Aunt Felicia's aquarium. Her eyes were fixed upon the tiny equipose of two quarter-inch guppies in the tank.

"Do you realise," Doctor Fred demanded, "that your Aunt Felicia might have died of this heart attack? And that you brought the attack on by your—your callous way of announcing your plans—and just after she had eaten her dinner!"

"Brussels sprouts never did agree with Aunt Felicia," said Elsbeth. "Of course, there's nothing immoral about eating, no matter what it does to you."

"This doesn't call for pertness! It was bad enough that your aunts should have found out this afternoon that you were out with that—that low-down—and that you've been in his company more or less continually ever since he came here two weeks ago. But on top of that——"

"And who told them about it?" Elsbeth put in gently. "Our good friend Irma Trent. I saw the two of you down at the Rendezvous together. Did she ask you to take her slumming?"

"You can leave Irma out of this," Frederick interrupted sternly. "As a matter of fact, she was very tactful about it all. What surprises me is that it hadn't come to them before, in a much cruder form."

"Cecil Andrews! If it hadn't been for my grandfather, he'd have been sent to reform school years ago for stealing."

"Dear, dear!" Elsbeth murmured. "How dreadful! I've heard all about that affair. He was about twelve at the time, wasn't he? And his family couldn't afford to buy oranges, so he——"

"That wasn't all," Frederick told her darkly. "There was a girl in the Flats——" He cleared his throat, looked away.

Elsbeth caught her breath and that pang of shameful doubt flashed again through her breast. But out of memory came a line that made, she thought, a perfect retort to the smug censoriousness of Doctor Frederick.

"Do you remember what Guinevere said of Lancelot?" she asked. "'It's the low sun that makes the color.'" She felt, just then, extremely mature, like a person in a play.

Frederick regarded her stonily for an instant and gave her an odd, quite surprising thrill of pleasure when he went white about the lips and when the grey of his eyes became black pits of dilated pupils. Why, he actually seemed to be deeply shaken! She had an obscurely alarming sensation that she was about to see him in a new and strange light, when Aunt Kate entered from the hall.

She pointedly ignored Elsbeth and rustled up to Frederick, her face a colorless, bitten mask of severely controlled emotion.

“I’m so glad you’re still here, Frederick,” she said in her thinly cordial voice. “My sister is sleeping quite easily now, thanks to you. I’m sure we need not detain you any longer.”

“Now Beth’s in for it,” Frederick thought grimly as he picked up his hat and case from the hall settle.

A cross-grained notion came to him all at once, and astonishingly, that since there was obviously no hope of gaining Elsbeth’s friendship—apart from anything deeper!—for himself, he would now be glad to see her defy every convention of the Payson tribe, of all North Hill, and escape to a fuller life of her own making. A dancing career need not necessarily mean one of depravity. And so far as Cecil Andrews was concerned, Fred had taken the trouble to ascertain that he and his band were on contract to play in St. Louis and points west for the next half year. In all likelihood, the glamor and exhilaration of New York would knock every thought of him out of her vivid, wilful head.

He was of half a mind to linger, despite Miss Kate’s rather pointed dismissal, and act as a buffer for Elsbeth against what he knew would be for the girl a trying hour of vituperative and bitter reproach from a prejudiced old woman. But it was, after all, none of his business, he admitted dejectedly. It’s the low sun that makes the color! Elsbeth, identifying him with North Hill, would merely resent his presence, and Kate Payson would not thank him for it.

Miss Kate did not immediately assume what she considered her bounden duty to her dead brother’s child. She got her reticule—one that she had cherished dearly since it had belonged to her stainless mother—and took out her crocheting.

“Elsbeth,” Miss Kate said, her voice like pebbles tossed against a pane, “you’ve had time to regret your scandalous talk at the dinner table to-night. I hope you are prepared to say that you are sorry, although that can scarcely undo the harm you have done to poor dear Felicia.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about Aunt Kate,” Elsbeth said coolly. “I’m sorry Aunt Felicia took it so hard, but I meant what I said at the table. I’m leaving for New York to-morrow. I’ve already enrolled in the dancing school, as I said, and I’ve arranged for a room in an inexpensive place that’s perfectly respectable and homelike. Priscilla Van der Water knows the woman—a Mrs. Almquist.”

“Who? Priscilla Van der—” Kate Payson leaned forward. “What are you saying?”

With that the real tirade began.

It became, soon, almost unbearable. And when it became unbearable, Elsbeth sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing through her tears.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Kate, that you feel like this!” she cried passionately. “But I’m not heading straight for disaster, as you seem to think. I’m going to be an artist—maybe a great artist! And I’m going to live, no matter what I become. I’m not going to have my life smothered by you—and North Hill—as my mother’s was. Yes, you can gasp with outrage at that. But you know it’s true. Your family killed my mother!”

Kate Payson stood still and paper white.

“If you leave here in the morning, Elsbeth,” she said slowly, bitterly, “you leave to stay. You will never enter this house again while you live—or while I live. Now—I wish to be alone.”

NEW YEAR’S EVE, and snow falling from the murkily radiant dome of night down into the canyons of the city Elsbeth leaned from the window of the room on the third floor back, and breathed deeply of the nostalgic, clean, sad smell of the snow, and laughed from a sheer exuberance of joy.

“What’s so funny?” Sadie Miller called to her from the two-burner gas stove where she had just put four potatoes on to boil. Sadie asked the question in a glad voice, everything had turned out so wonderfully since their coming here to Mrs. Almquist’s that neither she nor Elsbeth had ever needed to make a pretence of laughter.

“It’s snowing!”

“Honest?”

And then they both went off into a gale of absurd mirth which nobody could have understood but themselves.

The door opened and the immense Mrs. Almquist entered.

“What on earth are you two roaring about?” she asked, beaming.

“Oh, we’re just being silly,” Elsbeth explained, out of breath. “I guess it’s because it’s New Year’s Eve and you’ve been so good to us, Mrs. Almquist.”

“Hmph! Good? It takes more than I’ve got before you can be good to anybody.” She seated herself hazardously upon a cane-bottomed chair. “A brown-stone front on West Eightieth ain’t what it used to be. I remember the

time when it meant something. But them days are gone. But I come up to tell you—a bunch of the old troupers are coming in for midnight supper to-night. They've been calling me up all the afternoon. I thought maybe they'd forgotten all about me. But they don't forget. I'm still Aunt Min to them. But I don't know—there's going to be more than I can handle all by myself. I was wondering if Elsbeth——”

“Why, of course,” Elsbeth said at once. “I'd be tickled to have something to do. It'll be fun!”

“That's just fine, then. I'm going to write Prissie Van der Water and tell her you're as nice a pair of girls as I've ever had in the house. I ought to thank her for sending you to me. I'd like to keep you both here for good.”

“Who's to be at the party to-night?” Elsbeth asked.

“Well, there ain't no way of telling till they all get here. And it'll be five in the morning before they do, if it's anything like other years. They keep on coming all night. But I got three Virginia hams and with the baked beans and the macaroni and all, there ought to be enough to go round. Bert Mason—he's from the south, you know—he's always kidding me about the hams I have. Just his idea of comedy. But Edie Calahan phoned—you remember her, she used to do impersonations—she'll be here. It ain't so long, either—ten years, maybe, when Edie was going good. Then there's Trixie Bister. She was a toe-dancer—acrobatic—and there wasn't anybody could touch her in nineteen-twenty. And then there'll be a couple who went big at the Abelard Roof, even during the depression. Diana and Joel—you must have heard about them. Ballroom dancers—big time—headliners on the old Orpheum. Now they come here for a New Year's feed! How times have changed! Not that they've ever been any different with me—the gang, I mean. Even in the old days they all used to drop in on me at New Year's.”

She paused, rolling her eyes ruefully, and drew a letter from her bosom. “Land sakes Elsbeth, I clean forgot. Here's a letter for you from that doctor friend of yours, I think, up in Bloomhill.”

It was Frederick Stowell's third letter to Elsbeth. She took it, smiled as Mrs. Almquist hurriedly went out, and then looked at Sadie.



“Read your letter,” Sadie said. “I’ll set the table. You’re all played out from practising the whole afternoon.”

“No, I won’t read it just now,” Elsbeth said. “You go and lie down. You’ve got a big night ahead of you. I can fry the hamburger and read the letter at the same time.”

There was a note in Elsbeth’s voice which Sadie understood only too well. Elsbeth had expected the letter to be from Cecil Andrews, out in Pittsburgh. He had written to her half a dozen times since she had come to New York, but the last letter had been before Christmas.

Elsbeth stabbed the potatoes with a fork, drained them, salted them, and shook them over the fire before she set them aside. She opened a small tin of peas, dumped them into a saucepan and put them to heat, the gas low. The next procedure, on the other burner, had to do with onions sliced into the breakfast bacon fat, and after two minutes the hamburger on top of the onions. This was New Year’s Eve dinner in the third floor room, on West Eightieth Street, in a brown-stone house that had seen better days. And this, to Elsbeth Payson, of Bloomhill, was happiness, except that the letter in her pocket should have been from Cecil Andrews instead of from Doctor Frederick Stowell, of Bloomhill.

While she turned the meat with the ladle, Elsbeth thought swiftly of that July morning when she and Sadie, before the puzzled eyes of seven or eight Bloomhill citizens who knew them both, boarded the train bound for New York. Their amazement could not compare with her own, however. For just as she was paying the cab-driver who had brought her to the station, Doctor Fred’s car had drawn up rather violently alongside the platform.

Fred had jumped out.

“You’re really going?”

She had almost liked him just then. Hatless, his hair ruffled, he looked boyish, defenceless.

“Oh, no,” Elsbeth said. “It’s just a mania I have for meeting trains with my luggage.”

On the platform he said, “Beth, I want you to know that I’m completely in sympathy with you in this. Will you believe that?”

While she was trying to adjust her mind to that idea. Sadie’s brother drew up in his three-year-old car and got out with Sadie and her hump-backed trunk, and the two of them came up on the platform.

“Sadie and I are going to live together at Mrs. Almquist’s,” Elsbeth told Fred lightly. “You see, doctor, I know all about everything. Sadie has told me.”

It was queer, but she had immediately felt sorry for that remark. Fred’s mouth and eyes—his whole face had twisted so strangely. Poor boy, he couldn’t help being North Hill!

“Who is Mrs. Almquist? And what is the address? I might want to write to you, Beth.”

She had given him the Eightieth Street address, the train had come in, there was the hurry of getting aboard, and Frederick Stowell had clasped her hand.

“Good luck!”

And Elsbeth, who had decided that one of these days she would no longer be Elsbeth Payson but a glamorous person billed as “Irena,” was disturbed by a lump in her throat and a horrible mesh of tears across her eyes.

Later, when the train was gathering speed and dusting Bloomhill from its wheels, she stared wrathfully from the window and asked herself why she had stood, tiptoe, to kiss Doctor Frederick.

His letters had been so elder-brotherly and encouraging, especially after that first one in which he had laboriously tried to explain his attitude towards Sadie Miller, and in which he admitted that he had been clumsy and wrong. She had answered his letters at some length, telling him how she was progressing, how hard she was working at the Academie de Terpsichore, omitting such details as the barn-like bleakness of the place, the frantic eagerness of Monsieur Duval (Clyde Burns) to collect the dollar per lesson.

While she turned the hamburgers again, and shut the gas off under the peas, she fingered the letter in the pocket of her tweed dress. She had been resenting it, of course, because it was not from Cecil. That was why she hadn’t opened it at once. And why hadn’t Cecil written since two days before Christmas—and even then not mentioned Christmas? Not that she was looking for a gift, although from his earlier letters she knew that his

band was making money in the corn belt, as he called it. But Christmas was a cosy time. In his last letter he had stated merely that “it wouldn’t be long now before he would have enough put away to tackle New York.”

But, of course, she thought, that was Cecil’s way of telling her that he was still counting the days until their next meeting. And perhaps, even tonight he would surprise her at Mrs. Almquist’s party. He knew Minnie Almquist—his aunt, Priscilla, had once given him a letter to her when he had first come, young and eager, upon New York.

Elsbeth sat down on a stool beside the wash-basin and tore the end from the envelope.

“Elsbeth,” it began as usual “When you receive this I shall be approaching New York. Will you and Sadie have dinner with me? My train gets in at eight o’clock. New Year’s Eve in Bloomhill is unbearably dull without you. I shall have to take the first train back after midnight, however, in order to be at the hospital to-morrow, but an hour or two with you will mean much to me. Fred.”

She read the brief note over three times, the uneasy frown deepening between her brows. What did it mean? What could it mean but one thing? For Frederick—knowing him as she did—the penning of such a letter was a definite emotional commitment!

“Sadie,” she said abstractedly, “we have an invitation to dinner.”

“All right,” Sadie yawned. “I’ll get up and set the table.”

“No, no—we’re going out to dinner.”

ONE thing about Frederick Stowell, Elsbeth decided ungrudgingly, if he did anything at all he didn’t do it half way. He arrived with flowers for both girls—creamy roses for Elsbeth, lily-of-the-valley for Sadie. He sat on Elsbeth’s couch, looking large and doggedly at ease in his double-breasted blue suit while the girls got into their wraps.

“You’re really quite comfortable here, aren’t you?” he remarked. “Those curtains are very gay. And the bookshelf——”

“Sadie made the curtains and I built the bookshelf.”

“What’s the rent?” Fred asked bluntly.

“Eight dollars a week,” said Elsbeth briskly. “And we usually cook our own meals. Our food and incidentals come to another ten or twelve a week. Sadie makes five doing the light work for Mrs. Almquist. My dancing

lessons are the chief item of expense. They run to about ten a week. Well, shall we go?"

"I thought of the Commodore Grill," said Frederick. "Or would you prefer some other place?"

Sadie drew a sibilant breath. Her eyes shone. Any ill-feeling she had entertained toward Frederick had vanished. He had greeted her to-night with a direct friendliness, and had told her that she was looking extremely well. Sadie felt triumphant and yet fluttered.

It was when they were on their way down the stairs that the telephone rang in the lower hall. Mrs. Almquist answered it and Elsbeth heard her say, "Yes, I think she's coming down right now, Cecil."

Her feet took wings. She quite forgot that Frederick and Sadie were following her. Her hand shook as she took the receiver.

Under his nonchalant greeting, Cecil's voice was keen and enthusiastic:

"Just got in, Betsy! When do we meet?"

"Darling! It's so good to hear your voice. Where are you?"

"Up at Murph's place. Just got unpacked."

"Oh, Cecil, why didn't you send me a wire? I have to——" She bit her lip. Fred and Sadie were within earshot. "I'm going out to dinner. Can you be here for the party to-night? You know—it's open house——"

"Oh, I know!" Cecil chuckled. "One of Minnie Almquist's treats for the has-beens. They depress me, sweet. Can't you and I sneak off somewhere?"

"I've promised to help serve, Cecil," Elsbeth told him lamely, while she cast about in desperation for some way of getting out of it. But there just wasn't any way. "You've simply got to come up here. Say at eleven, Cecil!"

His hesitation was like a chill reaching her very heart across the wires.

"Well——" His voice was wounded, sulky. While it pained her, it made her rejoice, too. It meant that he did, really, want her alone to himself! "I'll try to make it up there around one o'clock, then."

One o'clock! Not midnight—not when the bells and the whistles would be ushering in her first New Year in New York!



Elsbeth went back up the dim old hall to join the others, and struggled to hide her confusion and disappointment with an animated laugh.

“Imagine, Sadie! Two beaus on New Year’s Eve! That was Cecil Andrews. He’s coming up later.”

But she glanced away hastily from Frederick’s suddenly darkened, joyless face. Her heart sank.

The evening was anything but a success, despite Sadie’s naive and whole-hearted delight with everything. With the best of intentions to listen to Frederick’s uninspired account of the progress he was making in establishing a clinic for the working people in Patchtown, Elsbeth found her mind wandering impatiently to Cecil.

Towards the end of the excellent dinner Frederick had ordered—and which Sadie had eaten with huge relish, Elsbeth with absent nibbles—she met Fred’s eyes as if by accident. It was only then that she knew she had been avoiding them. They were haggard with resignation.

“You’re really in love with this Andrews, aren’t you, Beth?” he said casually enough. “I thought you might have got over it by this time.”

Sadie gasped. Why, this was like a movie!

“In love?” Elsbeth laughed valiantly. “How do you ever know when you’re in love?”

“Unless you’re feeble-minded, you know, all right,” said Doctor Frederick Stowell. He took out his inelegant gold watch. “You girls have a party on to-night. I think I’d better get that ten o’clock train, after all. It’ll give me a couple of hours more sleep before I have to be on the job to-morrow.”

Elsbeth felt the color creep uncontrollably into her cheeks. Disconcerting and unaccountable anger at Frederick quickened her heartbeat. He was the same as ever—stiff and uncommunicative, instead of free and open about things! He was a Stowell!



At the rear of Mrs. Almquist's house, across from her kitchen and dining-room, there was a long, narrow slot of a room where, for the most part, she lived and had her being. This room to-night was literally overflowing. At ten minutes to twelve, when there was such a babble of voices that nobody could hear himself speak, Mrs. Almquist came prideful, flushed, and worried to Elsbeth.

"They're having fun, ain't they? But do you think the beer and pickles will hold out till we serve supper?"

Diana and Joel, that glittering pair of the Abelard Roof of a few years ago, had just arrived, and Elsbeth was too agitated even to reply to Minnie's question. It was Sadie, reclining in a large armchair, who assured her that there was enough of everything.

Then, punctually, Minnie Almquist threw the windows wide open and turned on the radio. Bells, whistles, sirens, a medley of new hope for a new year rushed in from the outside, and from the radio within came the announcement, "Ladies and gentlemen! Into the silence of a passing year a pin will drop. If you listen you will be able to hear it above all the shouting and the cheering that attends the birth of a new year. When you hear it, it will be nineteen hundred and thirty-four!"

Elsbeth, standing beside Sadie's chair, held tightly to Sadie's hand. She was alone, but more cruelly Sadie was alone. And yet, when the thin metallic sound of the falling pin came, it was Sadie who laughed with confidence.

Everything became merry again. A hubbub of good wishes, congratulations, kisses.

AT a few minutes past twelve, the furniture was cleared away from the middle of the room, and one after another the guests contributed bits of entertainment for which they had once been famous.

A quartet sang, "When You Wore a Tulip." An old actor vanished to the kitchen to return later in black-face and offer his best in tap dancing and lachrymose song. After each performance the applause was deafening.

Elsbeth's eyes felt stretched with tears she dared not shed. Cecil had been so painfully right! Would one o'clock never come? Even if he were late, there would be diversion then, because Minnie Almquist had set one o'clock for the serving of supper.

Minnie explained under her breath to Elsbeth and Sadie, "I wish Diana and Joel would dance to the radio, but I don't dare ask them. You see—they still feel bad about being out of work. They're not like the others, not yet."

And then her eyes gleamed with an inspiration. "Elsbeth, you give us that Basque dance of yours! Listen—that's Spanish music on the radio now. And I'll go and start the coffee. They seem to be getting quiet, kind of. Won't you do it—please, Elsbeth?"

Elsbeth looked down at her flame-colored, full skirted dress, one that she had used as a costume at the school. Well why not, to please kind old Minnie, anyway? Only yesterday the instructor had told her that she was doing the dance to perfection now . . .

She was out upon the floor, a sharp flange of brilliance making the music from the radio suddenly incarnate.

Back in the shadows under a dusty velvet portiere sat a dark man who, until now, had been looking on cynically at the evening's festivities. All at once he leaned forward, intent upon the oddly individualistic flow and pause of a girl's body in a dance that was to him hackneyed and threadbare. The girl, as a creature of flesh and blood, did not interest him one iota. He had a lovely wife of his own and two small children to whom he was devoted, living at present on the largesse of a bitter mother-in-law in New Canaan, Connecticut.

On West Twenty-eighth Street he had a high-class dancing school, the proceeds from which did not pay his rent. He loathed teaching and cursed his stars that he had ever left Cuba, after his German-American father and Spanish mother had taken him there at the age of fourteen. In Cuba he had made a name, had even made a living.

In this country he could not so much as find a female partner who could interpret native dances with any intelligence!

Had he found her here, at Minnie Almquist's Museum, of all places?

During the next few minutes something as new and as passionately vital as the New Year itself came into being in Minnie Almquist's parlor. It would be twenty-two months before that star rose in Broadway's biggest revue as "Jose and Irena," but twenty-two months is a short time.

Cecil Andrews stood in the doorway, looking on at an amazingly blade-clean tango being executed by Elsbeth and a man whose professional finesse was not blurred by his shabby clothes. Cecil's eyes narrowed drowsily. He saw, not Elsbeth, and not the man in the shabby clothes, but the night club for which he had yearned so long, with those two figures, clad in rhine-

stones and silver and perhaps a flash of crimson—a swift dagger on the shining black polish of his floor.

The dance ended in a severe and haughty vis-a-vis. Amid the applause, Elsbeth came to Cecil breathless, her hands outstretched. With expert showmanship, he took them and raised them solemnly, unsmilingly, to his lips.

“Irena!” he said.

A LETTER to Doctor Frederick Stowell, written by Sadie Miller, in October, 1935:

“Dear Doctor Stowell: Beth’s show has opened and it’s a great hit. She gave Minnie and me tickets to the first night and I never seen anything like the way the people acted about Irena and Jose. The papers the next day just raved about them. They said they were like quicksilver. Well, anyhow, Beth is getting three hundred dollars a week now. You might give Bloomhill an ear full of that. Of course it isn’t all velvet by any means. Beth’s clothes cost an awful lot and then her apartment on Central Park West isn’t just thrown in. Besides, her and Jose have to pay for a studio to work in during the day. It’s only a short walk from here and now that Jimmie is walking I take him over there and Mrs. Ewart and her two kids and Jimmie and I sit on the roof and talk and when Jose and Beth are through practising we have tea together and it’s all just grand.

“Jose isn’t a bit like a dancer, or even like a Spaniard, and he’s crazy about his wife and kids and they have a nice place over on Riverside Drive, so everything is handy. Mary told me—she’s Jose’s wife—she doesn’t know what they would have done if Elsbeth hadn’t come along when she did. It’s all kind of like a story, or a movie. And they’re all simply crazy about Jimmie. When I think of all that has happened, I feel like thanking you for being so mean to me that time I went to your office scairt out of my wits. Because now Minnie is going to educate Jimmie, who is very tall for his age and blond, with blue eyes like his father. He won’t be two until next February, but you’d never know it.

“The reason I wrote last summer and got Mum and Dad to come down was that I was so proud of Jimmie and I couldn’t bear it for them not to see him. And when they saw him they almost fell through the floor. He grinned at them and said Glampa and Glemma, like I taught him to, except he sounded like a Chinaman, and Mum and Dad cried and went crazy about him. They wanted me to go back with them and live in Bloomhill, but

Minnie wouldn't hear of it and had a fit, almost, and begged me to stay with her. So Mum cried some more and Dad took it real sensible and said it was best for Jimmie and all to be here with Minnie. Well, I wasn't going to say all that, but when you have a youngster like Jimmie you get kind of soft in the head. When you see him you'll understand.

"Later.

"I had to stop just then because Jimmie woke up from his nap. And I got to stop again pretty soon because this letter is getting so long, six pages already. But what I started out to say was this, and I hope you won't think wrong of me for it. But I know how much you like Beth and you know I think the world and all of her. Well, that Cecil Andrews has been playing here at hotels and so on and it looks as if she can't get him out of her head. Before the opening of her show she went round all day long, walking in a kind of stupor, if you know what I mean. She was afraid he wouldn't be back to town for the first night. He was out somewhere on an engagement. Anyhow, I never seen her act like she did. Jose was mad at her, too. But then he came, just a few days before the opening, without telling her he was coming to town. And Beth was like a new person. Hattie—that's the maid she has—was sick and Elsbeth got me to go over to her apartment one afternoon to help her. That was the day he walked in on her. I was standing in the kitchen door and she just flew into his arms.



"It isn't as if she didn't have any other admirers. Everybody falls in love with her, but she doesn't seem to think of anything but her work and this Cecil Andrews, who, to my mind, is a selfish, conceited prig. Of course he's made a name for himself these last couple of years, but what's his game with Beth, that's what I'd like to know. When he's with her he acts like he was in love with her and she gets so worked up she either laughs or cries like a fool afterwards. Jose doesn't like it and he has sense, believe me, even if he is a Spaniard and a dancer.

“Anyhow, Cecil was at the opening and Beth danced like she never danced before.

“He sat out in front where I could see him. He didn’t clap once, but he just stood up and threw a white carnation out of his lapel on to the stage and somebody near me said out loud, ‘That’s Cecil Andrews!’ And he heard it, too. And liked it.

“He took her out to supper after the show, but I wasn’t there so I don’t know what went on. She told me the next day that Cecil expects to have enough money next season to start his own joint in town here. I guess that’s all right, but she seemed like she wanted to tell me more, about them going to be married or something. I don’t get it. But what I meant to say is you ought to come down here some time this autumn and see her. You ought to see her dance, anyhow. That’s worth coming all the way to see, if nothing else.

“Well, this is getting to be quite a book. I guess I’ll have to put six cents stamps on it. I’m enclosing a picture of Beth and Jose that was in last Sunday’s paper. That costume of hers is made entirely out of fine gold chains.

“How is the clinic coming along? Beth was wondering about it the other day. I’d love to hear from you.

“As ever yours, Sadie Miller.”

And a note to Sadie Miller, written by Doctor Frederick Stowell, in November, 1935:

“My dear Sadie: Your letter was very amusing and interesting and deserved an answer long before this. But there has been a lot of flu in the Flats and the clinic has kept me pretty busy. It is now in good running order, I’m glad to report.

“I should indeed like to knock off for a day or two and run down to New York to see your big son as well as Beth’s show. Permit me to congratulate you on Jimmie. I have already written Elsbeth expressing my delight in her success, but I did not mention the picture you sent me. My grandfather subscribes to the ‘Times’ and I had already seen it, as I supposed everybody else on North Hill had, also. I was glad to observe that she looks very well. I presume she must adhere to a strict regimen of diet and sleep for such a strenuous profession, and I hope that you do your best to see that she keeps to it. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about Cecil Andrews. If they decide to get married, as they no doubt will, I shall merely wish them all the happiness in the world.

“Perhaps next month it may be possible for me to make the New York trip. It seems that Beth’s show is due for a long run, and I shall probably have a chance to see it before it closes.

“Sincerely yours, Frederick Stowell.”

Sadie took her courage in both hands and showed the letter to Elsbeth one afternoon when she was lying listlessly among the satin cushions on a chaise-longue in her apartment on Central Park West. Sadie knew well enough why Elsbeth was lying in that depleted and woe-begone attitude. Cecil Andrews was to have come to see her and had failed again. Sadie could have wrung his neck. But then, she was ready to wring Elsbeth’s neck too for feeling so intensely about Cecil Andrews. That was what made her show Doctor Fred’s letter.

“It’s pleasant to know that North Hill saw me in chains, even if they were gold chains! It must have distressed poor Freddy terribly,” was Elsbeth’s only comment.

IT was spring flushing into summer before Doctor Frederick Stowell came to New York. From Elsbeth’s windows Central Park was stippled with moist crimsons and powdery, sulphurous yellows. The grass between the stony slopes was sharp and green.

The show, in its eighth month now, was also in that delicious state of lassitude that meant late May. It would run into July, when it would take to the road for a spell. But Irena and Jose were not going on the road. Irena and Jose were to grace the floor show in Cecil Andrews’ new “Key Pout” on East Fifty-first Street, the grand opening of which had been set for September the eleventh.

Elsbeth sat in a bronze velvet hostess gown before her triple mirror and brushed her hair.

Hattie put her head in at the door and said, “It’s four o’clock, Miss Irena. Doctor Stowell should be here any minute.”

“Oh, yes, of course, Hattie. I’m ready.” She knotted the turquoise encrusted girdle about her waist more securely and went into the other room.

It was almost two and a half years since that New Year’s Eve when she had seen him last. And because he meant nothing more to her now than a memory of her own absurd rage at him, the fluttering trepidation she felt as Hattie admitted him into the foyer was unaccountable and far from pleasing. It was precisely as if Bloomhill had suddenly descended upon her, and she

was marshalling her forces to defend herself against a charge of turpitude. It was ridiculous! An angry little pulse danced in her throat as she walked slowly, smilingly forward and held out her hand in buoyant greeting.

“How sweet of you, Freddy!” she cried gaily. “I was going to be awfully hurt if you didn’t come down before the show closed! Why——” She stood back from him, thoughtful finger to lip “——it’s over two years, and you haven’t changed a bit!”

Frederick raised one of his soot-black eyebrows and laughed. She could not, somehow, remember his laughing much. It was vaguely unsettling to discover that he had such good large white teeth.

“A man doesn’t usually lose all his hair in two years,” he said, “or go completely to fat. Thirty isn’t such a ripe old age.”

“Well, sit down and let me look at you,” Elsbeth invited with false vivacity.

Frederick sat down and unbuttoned his grey flannel coat. “Phew, it’s hot down here! I don’t see how you can dance in this kind of weather.”

“I really don’t mind it. In my work you can’t afford to think about the weather.”

He smiled. “I suppose dancing is work, but its odd to hear it called that.”

“You’ll think it even more odd when you see me dance. I’m supposed to look like anything but work, Frederick.”

Then, graciously, she turned the conversation to Bloomhill and Frederick’s activities in the new clinic. It became evident at once that he was completely immersed in his profession, and had no time for such social life as Bloomhill—his lofty section of it—had to offer. She told him of her own progress, and finally suggested that he come back stage after the show to-night and take her out to supper.

Abruptly, and with his gauche directness, Frederick said, “What about Cecil Andrews? Is he still the one and only man in the world?”

She hated herself for flushing; she resented Frederick’s off-hand manner.

“Since you are so nice and frank, Freddy, I don’t mind telling you that I’m more in love with Cecil than ever. Perhaps I’d rather not be. I can’t tell. All I know is that when he is out of town I die for a while.”

“I suppose you’ll be married now that he’s made his mark—too?”

With a panicky feeling of being at bay, Elsbeth said coolly, “Cecil doesn’t believe in marriage—at least not for people in the profession.”

“Beth——” Frederick was over beside her, his fingers hard about both her wrists. “Let’s be friends. Let me talk to you. Don’t let this Andrews spoil

your life. He isn't worth it."

Elsbeth released herself with a deft flexing of her wrists. Frederick saw bleakly that he had made an error.

"Perhaps you mean well, Frederick," she said with low vehemence, "but there are some things you're quite incapable of understanding. One of them is a person like Cecil Andrews. You are—and always will be—North Hill!"



Frederick's black lashes winced down over his eyes.

"That seems to be the one thing about me you can't forgive," he said bitterly. "You won't believe that I'm just trying to give you a little advice."

"Oh, yes—I believe it. What's more, I'm grateful—I mean, for your interest. I'm sorry that you think I need guidance. I—you see, you don't really know me."

He laughed roughly. "It's just possible that you don't know me very well, either, Elsbeth. And I can't expect you to take time off to get acquainted with me, can I? You're a very busy young woman."

"Why—I have my work, Frederick," she replied reasonably. "And you have yours. They seem to lie miles apart, don't they? I mean—even if Cecil Andrews didn't exist."

He looked at her for a moment before he spoke again. "You wouldn't consider coming to Bloomhill for your vacation this summer, would you?"

"Well, scarcely! I won't have time for much of a vacation, if I'm to be ready for the opening in autumn. Anyhow, how could you ever think I'd go to Bloomhill? I have no home there——"

"Oh, yes, you have." With his hands negligently in his pockets, he looked down at her. "Not with your aunts, perhaps. But my grandfather has mellowed considerably in the last few years. He'd welcome you to our home, Elsbeth."

“The Judge?” She really had to laugh at that. “Can’t you just picture me taking my stretching exercises in your back yard? Your grandfather—your mother, especially, would pull down the blinds in horror! Thanks, no. If I ever go back to Bloomhill, it will be to visit Priscilla Van der Water. I owe her a lot. I owe North Hill less than nothing.”

“I can understand you there, at least,” Frederick replied slowly. “It’s just possible, however, that we may sometimes be mistaken in what we think we owe—and don’t owe.”

“Freddy!” she laughed impatiently. “You aren’t going to preach me a sermon now, are you?”

His smile was uneven. “No—oh, no. I was just thinking of my debt to Sadie Miller, as a case in point. She made a doctor out of me, though she’ll probably never realise it.”

She was tempted to ask him if anyone would ever make a human being out of him—or anything but a North Hill paragon of virtue—but even Frederick Stowell did not quite deserve that.

Hastily, because of the disquiet moving through her, Elsbeth stood up. “Well, let’s not fight—now that I’m grown up and everything, Freddy. At least not until you’ve seen me dance to-night. Anyhow, you’re due up at Sadie’s for dinner. And we’re having supper together after the show.”

She walked with him into the hall, and heard him say that he would be at her dressing-room after the performance. Then very suddenly he was gone and Elsbeth had the baffling feeling that she had left something trenchant unsaid. But at that moment the telephone rang. The brief, charged stillness of her heart was certainly enough. Cecil Andrews was back in New York.

IT was the first time in his life that Frederick Stowell had been behind the scenes in a theatre. He felt bewildered and a little ill at ease as Hattie opened the door of Elsbeth’s dressing-room to admit him.

Elsbeth sat before her mirror removing the make-up she had worn for her last dance.

“Sit down—quick!—and tell me how you liked it!” she cried.

“I can’t tell you how I liked it,” he said simply. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. It looks like a pretty dangerous dance to me—or is it?”

“It’s all a matter of balance and momentum and leverage,” she explained. “Of course, in the place where I hang on practically by my heels, anything is liable to happen. The timing has to be perfect, to a split second.

We almost broke our necks half a dozen times while we were getting it into shape—at least I did!” She laughed with a spontaneous happiness that cut Frederick to the quick. It had nothing to do with him, that vital young laughter. It sprang from a pure joy in the achievement of beauty.

But later, when he was seated opposite her in the exclusive, arrogantly tranquil supper club, where the orchestra and the fashionable guests were as though on a peak of supercilious reticence above the clamorous sea of night life, Frederick was startled at the radiance of Elsbeth. He was suddenly aware of an angry ache all through his being. He was a fool to have submitted himself to this test of seeing her again. If he had feared before that he was in love with her, now he knew it with disorganizing certainty. Havoc filled him.

It was while they were in the taxicab, driving through the park, that he blurted it out, not touching her, not looking at her, but leaning forward a little and staring stiffly ahead of him.

“Beth—I love you. I thought I had recovered—by working my head off. But it’s something there’s no cure for. And you don’t love me—and I don’t suppose there’s any cure for that, either. But that’s the situation. And so—I’ll not be down here to see you again—unless you send for me.”

“Oh——” Elsbeth caught her breath. “Why—why, Fred! You don’t love me. I—I’m not your sort——”

The harrowed darkness of his face checked the words on her lips.

The taxi swung out of the path. In a moment Frederick was giving Elsbeth his hand outside her apartment house. By the light of a street lamp he could see tears in her eyes.

“Fred—I’m so desperately sorry,” she said huskily.

“Of course,” he interrupted, smiling resolutely. “Perhaps I should have kept it all to myself, too. But I had to tell you why it’s going to be impossible for me to see you again. It wouldn’t——”

He paused. A man in a smart derby and dinner clothes had just rounded the corner. Doctor Frederick Stowell remembered that impression of Cecil Andrews all the way home in the train.

He remembered it all that summer, after he had forgotten his brief leave-taking of Elsbeth. He was to recall it sharply again one August afternoon when the air in the office of his clinic was hot as lead in a vat. A letter had come from Sadie Miller.

“Dear Doctor Frederick,” Sadie had written. “I haven’t let you hear from me since that nice dinner you treated me to last May. Minnie was opening a

tearoom down on our first floor, and it has kept us both awfully busy, what with Jimmie to look after and all. He's such a scamp!

"Well, I'm writing to say this: I'm worried about Elsbeth. I really mean I am. Me and Jimmie spent a week down at Fire Island with the Ewarts—Jose and his wife, you know—and Elsbeth was there most of the time. Cecil Andrews was busy getting his night club ready for opening next month, but whenever he could get down here and take Elsbeth away somewhere, she wouldn't get back until dawn. Jose didn't like it at all, but because Cecil has offered them so much to dance in his club, Jose didn't dare object. I'm pretty sure Elsbeth thinks Cecil's going to propose to her as soon as he's making a little real money. She told me that he intends to marry her as soon as he has a hundred thousand in the bank. Can you imagine that, now?"

"Anyhow, that was two weeks ago. Since then I don't think she has seen him so much. She's beginning to look pale and funny, even with all her tan. Of course she and Jose have to rehearse pretty hard now. But that isn't what I really wanted to tell you. Minnie gets a lot of theatrical news, one way or another, and she heard the other day that Cecil Andrews is squiering—I don't know how to spell it, but that's what Minnie said—around with a real society girl by the name of Joan Fariston. I'm kind of worried about it and that's the reason I'm writing you. I'll kind of keep my eye on things and write you again later.

"Sincerely yours, with best wishes,

"Sadie."

Frederick read the letter through twice, frowned, sighed, and hid it away in a desk drawer. He thought of several grim cases he was battling these days—poor old Mrs. Rooney in the Flats, suffering in silence; wealthy old Josiah Malcolm, on North Hill, bawling out his outrage. He could pit his knowledge and his experience against these ills, but for what ailed Elsbeth Payson he knew no remedy.

September 25, a telegram from Sadie Miller to Doctor Frederick Stowell: "Come right away. Cecil has eloped with that rich girl and I am scared for you know who, Sadie."

But Frederick, having already become acquainted with the news through the morning paper, had his bag packed at the moment the telegram reached him.

He had telephoned Sadie the first thing after his arrival at Grand Central Station. The agitation in her voice, even more than her imploring words, had governed his immediate procedure. Now, at ten minutes past eleven, after having paid an exorbitant cover charge, he was seated at what he acidly

thought of as a “ringside table” beside a polished oval floor in a place called very intelligently “Key Pout,” listening abstractedly to the lower lumbar moan of the orchestra—an orchestra led, evidently, by Cecil Andrews’ assistant.

There was a dispersion of the dancers from the floor, a slender threatening of flutes. And then Irena and Jose, in living silver, split the black sheen of the floor.

Doctor Frederick Stowell ran his hand along his temple, leaned forward and stared. He had studied anatomy; he knew in a vague way what the human body was capable of doing. But he had not guessed that it could be a liquid jewel flying off at a tangent and returning at a sharp angle home. Elsbeth was that, and he forgot for half a minute that it was Elsbeth. He forgot until——

Her body was like a glittering spinner on a line as she flew away from Jose through a horrible instant of space and struck the floor on her back.

Men exclaimed, aghast; women screamed. Frederick hesitated only in his mind. His tall figure stepped out upon the floor and his arms came down strong and calm to gather up the crumpled thing that was Elsbeth.

FLOWERING dogwood clouded against the shell-blue of the early April sky; below the trees the tulips stood in wax-clean bloom, yellow, black-purple, lavender touched with rose. Doctor Frederick Stowell and his grandfather, the Judge, were looking out from the north verandah of the Stowell house, but they were not looking at these reports of spring. They were watching Elsbeth Payson Stowell, walking confidently now along the edge of the tulip bed.



“Beth’s getting stronger every day,” the Judge remarked. “If you can only keep her from over-doing——” He chuckled. “She wanted to drive down to the Flats this morning.”

“She won’t be fit for that for another week yet,” said Frederick. “She’s doing remarkably well, considering. A sacro-iliac takes a while to mend. Especially with her other injuries. She’ll have her little fits of impatience, of course——”

“Wouldn’t you? Almost seven months of it! The girl has been game, Fred! You’ve got to admire it.”

“She’s not suffering from any lack of admiration—on my part, at least,” Frederick replied.

“I shouldn’t worry about anyone else, if I were you. They’ll all come round in their own time.”

“I’m not worrying about them. I married Beth with my eyes open. I was prepared to face the music. But it’s going to be tough going for her. She’s had a taste of it already—from her beloved relatives and a few of their friends. But I hate to think of what’s in store for her when she’s well enough really to get around.”

The Judge lifted his thin shoulders, glanced out into the garden again and waved at Elsbeth.

Frederick, looking at Elsbeth, half rose from his chair, but the Judge motioned him down. “Better leave her alone, young fellow. You’ve done just about all you can do for her. The less she sees of you now, the better—for a while.”

Frederick lighted a fresh cigarette. “What’s behind that remark?”

“Nothing personal. The girl has to heal from the inside out, Fred. You’ve done your job—and done it very well, I’m sure. But there’s another wound there that will heal better and faster if we don’t interfere too much with the process. I’d have been a wiser judge if I had realised that about folks, twenty years before I retired.”

Frederick glanced at him in pity, but made no reply. These regrets, at eighty, seemed a pathetically futile thing. Would he, Frederick Stowell, also live to regret what he had done?

He leaned back in his chair and watched Elsbeth stroll about the garden. It was weeks now since she had discarded the cane. The dragging months since that calamitous night in New York crowded into his thoughts with their weary burden of hope and dread. The stunning image of Elsbeth’s body hurtling through the air would, he knew, never fade from his memory. But scarcely less vivid was that other image—Elsbeth’s white face on the

hospital bed, weeks later, when Dr. Hermann, the specialist, told her gently that she must not hope to engage in professional dancing again. Had her face shown disappointment, Frederick would have rejoiced. It was her apathetic little smile that had cut him to the heart, the listless mockery in her shadowed eyes when she said, “I have no wish to dance again, Dr. Hermann.”

Every week Frederick had gone down from Bloomhill to see her. Her hospital room was always banked with flowers, and when she began to gather strength and the pain was less severe, there were other visitors besides himself. Jose Ewart was inconsolable. It was Elsbeth herself who finally quieted him and persuaded him to look about for another partner—a quest which proved not nearly so difficult as he had expected.

It was shortly after the Christmas season that Frederick asked Elsbeth to marry him.

She looked at him in the slow, contemplative way that had become habitual with her, and then her eyes filled with tears.

“Freddy!” she said huskily. “You feel so sorry for me, don’t you?”

“I feel sorry for you, of course, Beth,” he answered, his mouth and eyes stubborn. “But that isn’t the reason I’m asking you to marry me. I wasn’t exactly sorry for you the first time I asked you. Or do you remember? I was in love with you. I’m in love with you still, Beth. And I don’t think you exactly hate me any more—or am I wrong?”

“I like you better than anyone I know,” she told him then. But she turned her head aside on the pillow and added, “It wouldn’t work, Freddy. Bloomhill will never accept me. And they’d turn against you——”

“Confound Bloomhill!” he said violently. “Look here, Beth.” He reached over and earnestly took her hands. “You’ve talked about getting some kind of a job here in New York. Listen, Beth— I’ve got work for you. I have an idea. I need somebody to help me with field work around Bloomhill—investigating, and so on. Miranda Guest has all she can do in the office. You and I could work together. I’ll not make any demands. Call it a marriage of convenience, if you like. Call it anything. After we’ve worked together for a while——” He flushed, looked resolutely away from her. “Things may change, Beth. You might actually get to think something of me.”

She covered her eyes with her hands then and Frederick leaned and put his arms about her.

“If you’ll really let me work—and be of some use,” she whispered, “I’ll—I’ll go with you.”

That was all. Not a word about Cecil Andrews. It was not until later that he had thought of that. A certain doubt burned in his mind—to his shame, was still burning there. Had Elsbeth any graver cause for her heartbreak than she had confided to him? What had Cecil Andrews been to her? Not that it made any difference now. But her reticence remained a barrier between them.

Their return to Bloomhill after their marriage at City Hall was a major sensation. Elsbeth, on crutches, shrank away from people who greeted them when she got off the train.

He had wired his mother and his grandfather, but there had not been enough time for Adeline Stowell to adjust herself to the incredible circumstance of his marriage. When he and Elsbeth arrived at the house, he saw his mother's eyes still inflamed from weeping. But she was carrying herself with the fortitude of a Messenger and a Stowell, having been comforted, no doubt, by Irma Trent, who was exceedingly present. Irma's smile of welcome was painfully sweet. Adeline's was rigid. A Victorian swoon staved off. It was left for the old Judge to usher Elsbeth and Frederick to the rooms on the second floor—rooms which Elsbeth did not leave until the middle of January.

The Payson aunts, of course, ignored the monstrous fact of Doctor Frederick's hasty marriage. Their brother's daughter was deplorably dead to them. Most of North Hill, prompted by Kate's and Felicia's sentiments, acted in kind. A few, too temperamental to sustain a purely negative attitude, whispered unsavory tales of the life Elsbeth and Cecil Andrews had shared in New York.

ALTHOUGH he whistled to himself as he stepped down from the porch. Frederick's mind was far from easy. Elsbeth had been going about for the better part of a month now, and North Hill had pointedly ignored her. His mother's and Irma Trent's friends had paid their customary calls at the house. Elsbeth had felt their fluttery restraint toward her and had thereafter kept to her room when there were visitors. Invitations to Adeline Stowell and to the Judge's secretary had not included Elsbeth.

Elsbeth had carried herself with a queer, absent, half-smiling aloofness, in which there was no hint of self-pity, but rather an acceptance of droll irony. This, and her impatience to begin work on Frederick's survey of the rural districts, was all he knew of the Elsbeth Payson who was now his wife.

Elsbeth glanced up at him and smiled. She took his arm and they began to walk toward the arbor.

“Did you have a good day, Frederick?” she asked.

“Not bad,” he replied. “We’ve got that gangrene in Bert Madden’s leg checked.”

“I’m so glad,” Elsbeth told him in her slow, meditative way. “His mother has no one but him.”

“I think he’d appreciate a visit from you, Beth. I told him you might be around to see him in a couple of days if you’re feeling fit.”

“I’m fit now!” she said brightly. “And I’d love to see him.”

Their conversation, as usual, drifted along on the safe, impersonal plane of Frederick’s work. He had studiously avoided any expression of his feeling for her. The time for that would come only when their life together had worked the change which he longed for.

Elsbeth looked at him suddenly. “Let me start working with you tomorrow, Frederick. I want to. I’m perfectly well—well enough to drive a car anyhow. I’ll be the new Bloomhill Social Bureau, all by myself!”

“Well——” He hesitated, smiling. “You’re forcing it a little, Beth. I don’t know about to-morrow——”

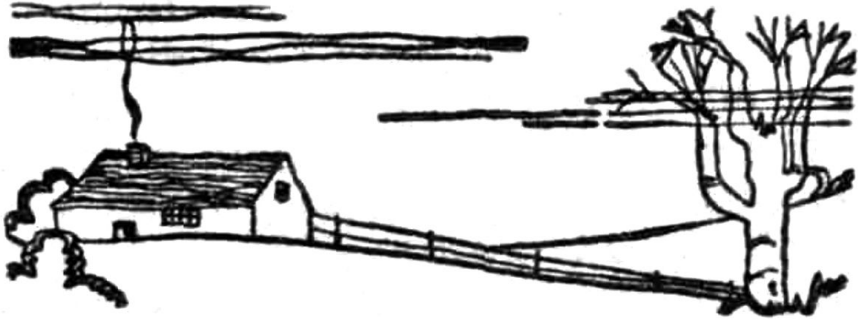
She laid her hand impulsively on his arm. “But I must, Frederick!” she said with a swift vehemence that disturbed him. “I haven’t talked to you about it, but—I’ve got to get out of the house. I’ve got to get away from them. I’m not complaining, but the past few weeks—you know they don’t want me here, Frederick!”

“Who doesn’t want you here?” He felt an angry tightening in his throat.

She flushed unhappily. “You know just as well as I do. I’m grateful to you—and I’m grateful for everything that has been done for me. In some ways they’ve been very kind. But your mother isn’t happy about me—and Irma wants me out. Nothing could be plainer to anyone.”

His confused feeling of dismay, pity and love as he stared at her anguished face was almost more than he could endure. The muscles of his jaw moved in a hard effort at control.

“I won’t pretend I don’t understand what you’re saying—about Irma and mother. Mother actually thinks she has been very kind.”



“I know that. And she has been, Frederick—as kind as she can be.”

“We’ve both got to get out, if we’re to save our own souls,” he said grimly. “I’ve been looking around for a house. I heard yesterday that old man Adams is going to California to live. That house of his, over on the river, is rather nice. It’ll take a little doing over, but it has possibilities. You know the house—that old place on the river bend——”

“Of course I do! It’s a sweet house, Frederick—with the river and lots of trees—I’d love it!”

“We’ll drive down and look at it to-morrow.”

“When—how soon will Mr. Adams leave?”

“In a few days. But the house will need a lot of repairs. It can’t be made ready much before the first of June. We’d have to furnish it.”

“It’ll be fun furnishing a house,” Elsbeth said quickly. “And we don’t have to wait until it’s all ready. We could move in and do most of the work afterward. I could do a lot myself if we——”

He caught her tightly clasped hands suddenly in an uncontrollable impulse. “You don’t have to be so brave about this, darling! You haven’t forgotten Cecil Andrews yet, have you?”

Her suddenly proud, withdrawn look left him feeling empty.

“You probably think that Cecil and I were lovers,” she said simply. “Well—we weren’t. I overheard your mother’s cook telling the laundress that your aunt had told Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce that Cecil and I have a child somewhere in New York.”

Frederick stared attentively at his hands “Did you really hear that?”

“Oh, yes. And Nurse Innsecourt told me a little, last month. I’ve given them every reason in the world to talk about me. And I don’t know, honestly, whether I’m glad or sorry that there’s no truth in it. Cecil thought that I considered myself too good for that sort of thing—with him, at least. You

see, he never quite forgave me for being North Hill—nor himself for being Patchtown.”

Frederick hated himself, at that moment, for the relief he felt.

He said incoherently, “Forgive me, Beth, for speaking of it. I didn’t know how much you had been to each other. You’ve explained Cecil Andrews, at least. He married ten million dollars to—to settle an inferiority complex he never was able to outgrow—toward North Hill.”

Elsbeth laughed quietly.

“But I’m not North Hill, Frederick. If I had ever been able to convince Cecil of that, it might have been different.”

He should have been prepared for this honesty of hers, he thought, and yet he could not help wincing.

“Perhaps I’m merely getting my health back,” she laughed at him. “At any rate, I want you to understand why I must get out of here—and do something—before I lose my mind on North Hill.”

He was silent for a moment. He felt humiliated at his own clumsy inadequacy, baffled by Elsbeth’s volatile mood. But it was his mention of Cecil Andrews that had excited her to this flippant gaiety, he realised. She was simply putting up her defence against the exposure of a hurt that had been almost mortally deep. And now he knew how much Cecil Andrews had meant to her.

“Perhaps we’d better move down town somewhere, until the Adams house is ready,” he suggested finally.

Elsbeth’s quick exclamation interrupted him. “And walk out on Grandfather Stowell! No—I wouldn’t do anything that might hurt his feelings. Except for Brenda Towne, he’s the only friend I have left on North Hill. No—we’ll stay here until we move into the Adams house. I’ll promise not to complain about anything again.”

Frederick gave her a long, penetrating look. And all at once the wisdom of what old Judge Stowell had said came to him very clearly. He would have to leave Elsbeth alone until she found herself again.

• • • • •

Elsbeth drove through a blinding mid-April rain. It was already late afternoon and she had promised Frederick she would be back by three o’clock. But she had prolonged her visit at the Dobeys’ farm where she had gone immediately after luncheon to deliver a layette for the ninth Sill child. She had not intended to delay her return, but the Sill brood had

captivated her with their smudged faces grinning up at her. She had spent more than an hour scrubbing them to some semblance of cleanliness. And then the rain had come.

Frederick would be anxious about her. But there was no sense in trying to hurry over these rain-soaked roads. Besides, she was finding the experience exhilarating. To be doing something again, even if it was nothing more than delivering a layette to Dobey Sill's wife!

She had begun to think lately that her return to Bloomhill as Frederick Stowell's wife had been an unhappy blunder. The bright, artificial cordiality of North Hill was more humiliating than an open snub. So long as she continued to live in Judge Phoebe Stowell's house they would all have to be civil, of course, but beyond that they would not go. They had already made up their minds that this unfortunate marriage would not last. North Hill's favorite son had brought Elsbeth Payson home as his bride only because of his own selfless compassion, his naive charitableness. When that emotion, if it could be called such, had spent itself, when Frederick Stowell discovered finally how cruelly he had been tricked by his own generous impulse, the marriage would come to an end.

Irma Trent, Elsbeth knew very well, had done her part to strengthen that conviction in the collective mind of North Hill.

And through it all, Adeline Stowell had remained proudly aloof from the gossip, suffering in silence her chagrin at her son's folly. To Elsbeth she displayed a schooled kindness, to her friends a wounded loyalty towards Frederick that would not admit in words her disappointment.

Life before Elsbeth appeared suddenly an utter blank. Without the warmth of Frederick's friendship she could not contemplate the future at all. And yet, to him their relationship must be almost meaningless. Some blurred instinct told her that she was no longer capable of love, that some vital part of her had died—as if Cecil Andrews had torn some living fibre out of her being.

Frederick was locking up his filing cabinet in the small dispensary room when she entered.

"Hello!" he greeted her with a smile. "I was beginning to get a little worried about you. It's a brute of a day for you to be out."

He turned quickly away from her and picked up a letter from the desk. "This was addressed to both of us," he said. "I opened it and read it."

"It's from Sadie Miller!" Elsbeth cried.

"She's coming back," Frederick said and stepped across the room to stand beside the window.

There was silence between them while Elsbeth ran hastily through the brief note. Mrs. Miller had suffered so from her arthritis lately that she had asked Sadie to come home and stay with her. She was leaving New York at the end of the week and wanted to see Elsbeth as soon as she got to Bloomhill. Little Jimmie would be with her, of course, and they would be staying all the summer. But wouldn't Elsbeth please come down to the Flats to see them as soon as she could? They would arrive in Bloomhill on Saturday evening.

Elsbeth looked up, her eyes alight with excitement. Frederick's face darkened moodily.

"Well, what's the matter, Frederick? Aren't you going to be glad to see Sadie and little Jimmie?"

He left the window and came back to where she still stood beside the desk, the letter in her hand. "For once, Beth, you're going to understand how I feel about this whole business. I admit I was something of a prig that night when Sadie came to me in my office. But that was four years ago, Beth. I'm not the same man now."

"I know you're not. And I'm not the same girl, Frederick."

"What I'm getting at is this—I think Sadie Miller is being pretty brave about this—coming back home with her kid and taking up her life here. I admire her for it. I'll be one of the first to call on her and welcome her back. So far as I am able, I'm going to see that Jimmie has his chance."

"Oh, Frederick!" Elsbeth was perilously close to tears.

"Now that I've made myself clear on that, Beth," he went on, "I can tell you the rest of it. I wish Sadie would stay in New York."

Elsbeth drew back. "But—why?"

"Are you going to be so eternally blind? Or can't you even guess what they'll say when Sadie arrives with her three-year-old youngster—after having gone to New York with you, presumably as your personal maid? Didn't you tell me that you overheard the cook telling——"

Elsbeth checked the ironical laugh that rose in her throat. "You mean—they'll think Jimmie is mine?"



“Why not? They’re all prepared for it.”

“And does that frighten you?”

“I don’t care about myself,” he declared flatly. “You can believe that or not, just as you like. But you’ve had to put up with enough—from all sides—without adding to it now.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait and see what happens? I’ve come through so far, Frederick. Of course, I’ve had a good doctor looking after me.”

She smiled and Frederick ground out his cigarette. “All right! If that’s your answer, let’s do the thing properly. Let’s start by meeting the train together on Saturday night and driving Sadie and Jimmie down to the Flats.”

“I’d love it! And I hope the very best people on North Hill are there to witness it.”

“The rebel dies hard in you, young woman,” he said. He glanced awkwardly at his watch. “I’m going to disappoint you, I’m afraid. We can’t go out to dinner and the movies, after all.”

“Oh? Not another baby somewhere?”

“No. Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce phoned this afternoon. Doctor Bertrand—I’ve told you about him—is just back from two years in Europe—cancer research, you know. He’s on his way to Boston and is stopping over to visit Tarrant-Boyce. They’re giving him a small dinner party—just a few of the doctors, I believe—and they insist on my being one of the guests.”

“Why—that’s all right, Frederick,” she told him cheerfully.

“There’s only one reason I’m going to the confounded dinner. Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce has promised to write me a cheque for the new dispensary wing.”

Elsbeth looked at him gravely. She wondered if he had really been deceived by this transparent trick of Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce’s.

“Is this to be a—a men’s affair?” she asked bluntly.

He hesitated before he replied. “I didn’t ask her, Beth.”

“I think I know what you mean, Frederick,” she said at last, her voice barely under control. “But let’s try to keep a sense of humor about it, shall we? It’s all in a good cause.” She turned and smiled resolutely up at him.

He took her chin in his hand, tilted her face up and looked at her steadily for a long moment. Elsbeth forced her lips to keep smiling, but a small, uncertain ripple of fear began to creep over her. Once before, with Frederick Stowell, she had felt this same curious alarm.

But with unexpected abruptness he dropped his hand.

“Sometimes I think I see what I’m looking for,” he said shortly, “but most likely I’m only fooling myself. Well—let’s go, shall we?”

• • • • •

The Bloomhill “Clarion” did not announce the return of Sadie Miller after an absence of nearly four years in New York. But it did carry a front page account of the dinner which Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce gave in honor of Doctor Henry Bertrand, visiting Bloomhill after his two years in Europe. And for once, at least, the modest journal’s editor received no criticism for his handling of the news.

Sadie Miller had no desire to find herself the subject of a local news item. Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce, on the other hand, saw to it personally that her distinguished guest received the honor that was his due. It was not important, of course, that any mention should be made of the gift of three thousand dollars which Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce had made to the Bloomhill Clinic, but the incident was mentioned. The list of guests included a number of Bloomhill’s prominent professional and business men and their wives. And for a whole week thereafter Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce was made happy by the very nice things that were said about her.

She might have enjoyed her enviable position for more than a week—and should have, for three thousand dollars is a high price to pay for seven days of popular favor. But an unkind Providence cheated her of her full measure of happiness. The spring downpour through which Elsbeth Stowell drove on her way back from Dobey Sill’s farm had continued for days and nights until the river—an ordinarily docile stream—had become a bloated, green-grey python that threatened to lunge out at any moment in any direction. People were frightened by reports of floods up country, where dams were giving way. There had been a ruinous inundation of homes and a loss of much property.

With Bloomhill’s business section being menaced daily, with parts of Patchtown already under water, with the good people of North Hill

beginning to talk of organising for relief among the less fortunate, Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce's charitable gesture faded to insignificance.

It was cosy here in the tiny front room of the Miller shack where Elsbeth and Sadie sat, the rain beating against the windows and pouring from the shabby roof outside.

Frederick had insisted on Elsbeth's leaving him alone with the Hines infant over whom they had worked together for two hours in an effort to save it from death in convulsions. He had tried to persuade her to go home, but she had argued stubbornly against it and had gone to spend a few minutes with Sadie Miller.

"I'm more fit to be out than Frederick is," Elsbeth declared in answer to Sadie's protests. "He hasn't had a decent night's sleep for a week."

"He looked like a ghost yesterday," Sadie admitted. "I told him he was working too hard."

"I know he is. I've tried to talk to him, but—well, lately—I don't know. And it isn't the work, Sadie," Elsbeth said haltingly.

Sadie's eyes were full of question as she sat looking at her. "He's not—there's nothing wrong, is there?"

Elsbeth fought back her tears. "I should never have come back to Bloomhill," she declared finally. "It might have been better if I had just died after all that in New York."

"Don't talk like that! I thought there was something wrong between you two. What is it? Are you still thinking of that lizard, Cecil Andrews?"

Elsbeth shook her head.

"Doctor Frederick is worth a million of his kind," Sadie went on.

"Oh, I know that," Elsbeth said. "I always knew it, but I fell in love with Cecil just the same."

"And you're still in love with him—after all he——"

Elsbeth's smile was wan. "I'm not in love with him, Sadie. But——"

"Then what's the matter?"

"I wish I knew. I married Frederick when I had no love left in me for anyone. I thought, perhaps—I don't know what I thought. I didn't know what I wanted."

"Do you know now?"

"I—I think I'm beginning to know now," Elsbeth faltered. "I want some meaning in my life. You have it, Sadie. You have little Jimmie. You have him to work for, and hope for. I—I have nothing."

“What’s the matter with you?” Sadie’s exasperation was getting the better of her. “I never heard anything so foolish in my life! Here you are—with everything any girl could ask for, and you say you haven’t got anything! You ought to be ashamed.”

As Elsbeth bit her lip and glanced evasively away, Sadie leaned toward her with a sharp look.

“By golly!” she burst out. “Perhaps I’m not very smart, but I bet I know what’s ailing you. You’re just falling in love with the Doc. and you don’t know it. Look—you’re getting all red in the face!”

“You may be—half right, Sadie.” Elsbeth said in confusion. “I—I still don’t know.”

How could she explain to Sadie that in the past short while she had come to the conviction that if she really loved Frederick Stowell she would leave him immediately, before she brought him down to her own desolate level of despair—these were things that Sadie Miller would never understand. Love had been a simple thing for Sadie.

Well, perhaps Sadie’s way was the only way. Elsbeth knew what the girl’s answer would be if she told her all that North Hill had done to make her marriage to Frederick Stowell a failure. As it happened, she was not permitted to do so. The honking of an automobile came impatiently from the narrow street in front of the Miller shack.

Elsbeth sat, white and drawn, beside Frederick as he started his car.

“You shouldn’t have come out to-night,” he said.

“You’re very flattering, aren’t you? I wasn’t a bit of use, was I? And I should have gone home when you told me to—and let you walk home in the rain.”

His whole upper body seemed to spread dark and wide over the wheel, weariness permeating him.

“You know what I mean, Beth,” he sighed. “You insisted on coming down here to-night—and it isn’t good for you. If the weather keeps up tomorrow you’ll have to stay in the house. I insist.”

She bit her lip to restrain the cry of protest, and pressed rigidly back against the seat. After a moment she said, forcing lightness into her voice, “I wasn’t upset by it as much as you thought, Frederick. I felt sorry for the poor little thing, but—I was in a mean frame of mind before I came down at all.”

His uneasiness, cloaked in his obstinate silence, communicated itself to her, but she continued resolutely in the same half-mocking vein.

“My aunts were having tea with your mother when I went home this afternoon. They hadn’t expected me, of course. I went through the hall, up to our rooms, and back out again—and the conversation in the living-room went on as smoothly as if I had been a thousand miles away. I knew they were embarrassed—Aunt Kate and Aunt Felicia must have been thrown into a heap. But—well, it upset me and I’ve been a little on edge all the evening.”

His face, in the dim light of the instrument board, was set and darkly controlled. “You’re being game about it all, Beth. There doesn’t seem to be anything we can do about it, except grin and bear it till we get settled in our own house.”

All at once she was breathless, hanging eagerly on his every word, and then he ceased speaking as suddenly as he had begun and she was left in confusion.

“Please don’t think about them,” she said brightly. “I don’t really mind much. And I can hold out.”

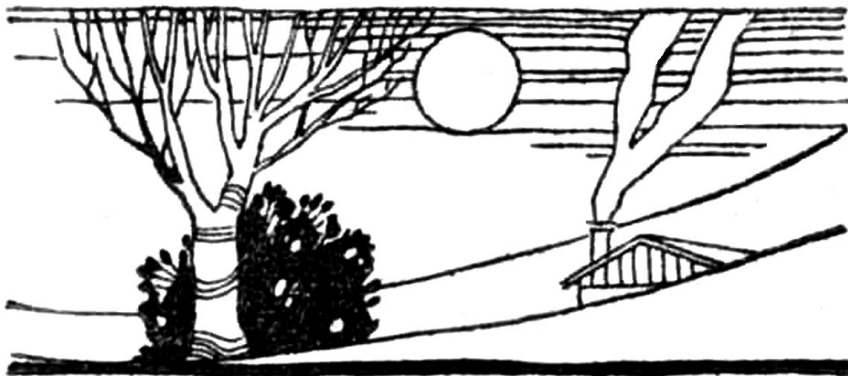
She hurried into the house while Frederick put the car into the garage. There seemed to be no one about downstairs, although by the hall clock it was only nine-thirty. Elsbeth had intended to go directly to her room when she had removed her damp coat and hat, but now the blazing logs in the library fireplace looked inviting. She could sit for a moment before Frederick came in.

She was huddled in a low chair close to the fire when she heard his step in the hall. The firm, long stride set up a tremor of mixed diffidence and courage within her.

When he came and dropped wearily into a chair opposite her and pressed the fingertips of one hand against his eyes. Elsbeth leaned forward with the oddly timorous feeling that she would like to do that for him.

“Frederick,” she ventured, “are you too tired to talk—a little?”

“I’ll never be too tired to talk—to you, Beth,” he said quietly. “What is it? Is Sadie Miller thinking of getting married?”



The question stung her to unreasonable anger. She stood up. "You don't even seem to look at me any more to see if I'm serious about anything—anything that concerns just us! You——"

Frederick lifted his hand. "Don't shout, Beth. You'll wake the household."

"I'm not shouting. But it's time we——"

The rustle of a silk raincoat announced Irma Trent in the doorway. Frederick and Elsbeth both turned. Irma, eyebrows elevated, was smiling with an odious knowingness.

"Not a lovers' quarrel, I hope?" she queried innocently. But the greedy roundness of her eyes betrayed her. Elsbeth sat down again, her face wooden.

Frederick looked at Irma. "Have you been out walking in this rain?" he demanded sharply.

"I was just paying poor old Sylvester Hackett a visit," Irma replied. "He's terrified about himself. I saw your car go by and I thought——" She hesitated for a brief second. "I hate to drag you out again in this weather—but I think you ought to step over and see him."

Elsbeth sprang from her chair and faced Irma Trent. "I should think there'd be some limit to this," she declared. "Frederick has been out every night this week until he's half dead on his feet."

"My dear!" Irma interrupted. "I'm not ordering Frederick out—I'm merely making a suggestion. Perhaps he can judge better than either of us whether his duty——"

"Duty! He has duties besides——" Elsbeth began, but Frederick interrupted her.

“Please, Beth! I’m sorry.” She raised her eyes stonily, briefly, to his, and in that moment saw his gaze darken queerly, “I think you’d better go to bed. You look worn out.”

“All right,” she agreed, and turned to look into the fire.

“I won’t be more than half an hour,” he said as he went towards the door.

“It doesn’t really matter,” Elsbeth told him.

When they had gone She went upstairs and cried herself into troubled sleep.

It was the next afternoon that Colin Messenger came back to Bloomhill, unannounced, from a glamorous life in the Far East.

THE NORTH HILL version of the story was that Colin Messenger had strolled into his parents’ house after more than ten years’ absence as casually as if he had just been out for a walk. But whatever nonchalance he might have assumed upon presenting himself again to his family—Elsbeth realised after her first ten minutes with him—had been achieved only with an effort. Colin Messenger was scarcely nonchalant.

She met him at an impromptu and rather daring cocktail party given in his honor, on the second day after his return, by Brenda Townes. Daring, from Brenda’s point of view, in the same sense that her renewal of her friendship with Elsbeth Payson Stowell had been daring. But Brenda, almost thirty now, with money of her own, often ventured beyond the decorum of North Hill.

More than a score of people made themselves at ease in Brenda’s severely modern drawing-room. As it was the first party of the sort Brenda had given since Elsbeth’s return to Bloomhill, most of the guests were strangers to her. But Colin Messenger, with his mischievous hazel eyes, his faintly satiric grin beneath a blond thread of moustache was curiously not a stranger. No stranger at all, after his first quick handclasp that was gallantly presumptive in a foreign sort of way, and yet not personal.

He did a thing that made Elsbeth catch her breath on a laugh when he led her to a small divan in a corner apart from the others. He bent down, drew a line with his finger all around the divan, then seated himself comfortably beside her.

“Is this a charade?” she asked.

“No, it’s a stockade to keep out the chatter. I want to hear the voice in this lovely cabinet.”

“I’m flattered to be called a radio,” said Elsbeth.

“It was meant for a compliment—and would have been taken as such in Indochina.” Colin explained. “I seem to have lost the knack here.”

A maid brought them cocktails and canapes. While Colin helped himself from the tray, Elsbeth stole a sidelong glance at him. The stripling youth she barely remembered out of her small girlhood had vanished entirely. This man, despite his debonair looks, was hard, ruthless perhaps, but sensitive too, susceptible to beauty and grace in all its forms. The proud, faintly sulky line of his upper lip reminded her of someone . . . she started and flushed as Colin turned suddenly and met her eyes. Yes—Cecil Andrews, so different in breeding, so different in culture, and yet so like!

He smiled at her. “I’m not sure your expression just now is very flattering. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking how much you have changed since I saw you last. How does it feel to be home?”

His face darkened. “Home? I really don’t know—yet. I’m afraid my motive for coming back was not altogether admirable.”

“No? Are you keeping it a secret?”

He laughed. “Not exactly. The fact is, I find it hard to think of this place now as home. That’s part of it—I wanted to find that out for myself. I wanted to prove that I thought enough of it to come back—after I’d been kicked out. Certain ghosts—like homesickness—have to be laid, you know. I rather expected them to shut the door on me. I think I almost hoped they would. That would have been the real test of what I thought of it—of my home, you know. But they didn’t. The whole business fell rather flat, I confess. It took more out of me, too, than I care to admit.”

His harsh deliberateness did not deceive Elsbeth. Impulsively she laid her hand on his arm.

“Aren’t you just—just talking? You know your family are so happy to have you back!”

He made a weary gesture. “You think so, Elsbeth?”

“Of course. Aren’t they, Colin?” she returned with a grave smile.

He patted her fingers lightly. “I think we understand each other. You know the clan as well as I do. Mother and Dad are as sentimental as the deuce about the return of the prodigal son. Of course, the hardware trade in the Orient has been good.”

“I don’t think I like that remark,” Elsbeth said.

“Neither do I,” he shrugged. “And, as a matter of fact, it isn’t quite fair, either. Mother and Dad would have welcomed me if I had been in the gutter all these years. They relented towards me long ago. But the rest of the tribe, what a crowd! At this very moment there’s probably half a dozen of ’em in the house commiserating with my mother upon my return. Obliquely, of course. Do they have to be like that?”

“At least they can’t very well help it, I suppose.”

“Well—I’ll probably stay around for a week or so and satisfy myself that coming back was all a mistake. But—forgive me, Elsbeth. I’d much rather talk about you. Brenda has told me a little. I hear you’re working with Fred, down in Patchtown.”

“Yes. I have been doing a little. But yesterday and to-day he wouldn’t let me go down there because of the flood.” She hesitated. “The work is awfully interesting,” she went on determinedly. “We’re building up a medical and social service bureau, you know. It—it gives me a—a feeling of importance to——”

“You have to do that to make you feel important?” he put in.

“Well——” Even while she evaded his direct look, she knew intuitively that he was aware of how anomalous her position here was. “I think everybody wants to feel important—useful, at least,” she stumbled on. “Don’t you?”

His laugh was charming, if the least bit brittle. “I’ve been here only two days,” he said, “but I’ve heard enough. You’ve had tough sledding, Elsbeth.”

She colored in spite of herself as she said, “It has been hard to—to get adjusted to North Hill again, after New York. But we won’t be on the Hill much longer. We’re remodelling the old Adams house across the river.”

“Oh—I hadn’t heard.”

Colin looked away studiously. The very act of his withdrawing his fixed gaze, the implied chivalry of it, was subtly more personal than anything he had said to her. He wanted to spare her the embarrassment of betraying a truth which he had, somehow, already discovered. Elsbeth felt angry, confused. She found herself wishing that Frederick were here, or that she might expect him to arrive at any moment. Within the past quarter of an hour he seemed to have gone away to a great distance.

“You used to ride, even as a kid, didn’t you?” he asked abruptly.

“I kept it up until I went to New York,” Elsbeth said.

“If it’s a good day to-morrow, how’d you like to take a ride into the hills? I’d like to go up and take a look at our old lodge.”

Paradoxically, because her deepest instincts told her that she must decline, she said, “it would be fun, Colin. I haven’t ridden since—since my accident. But I’m sure I’ll be equal to it.”

“Let’s get away after breakfast, shall we? Say about eight or half past. I’ll come around for you.”

Frederick would certainly have no objection, she thought hurriedly; rather, he should be pleased that at last one of his relatives, outside the immediate family, had deigned to be civil to her.



Another bridge had gone out that afternoon on Idle Creek; Wilkins’ mill dam had broken, and families on the west side of Patchtown were being evacuated from their homes. The clinic, on the east, situated as it was on higher ground, was in no danger.

Frederick had not been able to come home for dinner. Irma Trent had gone down to the clinic with a hot meal for him and Miranda Guest and the assistant doctors all of whom were working tirelessly in the Patchtown emergency.

In her room, Elsbeth heard Frederick come in. It was almost eleven o’clock. She went down and found him in the library, with the Judge. He glanced up at her, and gave her a tired smile.

“I didn’t know you were in, Beth,” he said, and glanced at his watch. “Oh, it’s later than I thought.”

She went to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. “I’ve been home for hours. I was here when you telephoned for something to eat,” she told him evenly. “Why did you ask Irma to bring it to you? I could have gone down _____”

He drew his brows together. “I didn’t ask Irma. She just happened to answer the telephone. I suppose you wanted to do it, eh?”

“There’s no reason why I shouldn’t have gone, is there?” she interrupted. “I’m not so utterly helpless—and useless. Irma gave me to understand you

had asked her to come down with your dinner.”

Frederick looked quizzically up at her and gave a short, strained laugh. “You’re not going temperamental on us, are you, Beth? What difference does it make who brought the food down to us? Irma was probably being decent about it. She said you looked tired after Brenda’s party.”

Elsbeth stood very straight. “That was very thoughtful of Irma.”

“I think,” said the Judge, glancing elaborately at his watch, “I think it’s far past my bedtime. Well, good-night, Beth. Good-night, Fred.”

Their good-nights followed him as he left the library. An ember broke in the fireplace, softly invading the dull silence after the old man had gone.

“Well, I hear you’re riding into the hills with Colin in the morning,” Fred observed lightly.

Elsbeth stared at him. “I had meant to tell you that myself. I suppose Irma carried the news to you?”

“It’s nothing to be so upset about, Beth. She called in at the Messengers’ on her way down town, to ask if she could have one of the horses tomorrow. She thought she could get around better in the Flats if she had a horse. Colin told her that you and he had planned to use the horses tomorrow.”

“Irma has a gift!” Elsbeth exclaimed.

“Look here, Beth,” Frederick broke in sharply. “There’s no point in your being so touchy about everything. I know how difficult it is for you, but let’s be fair. Just as soon as——”

“I’m unreasonable to-night,” Elsbeth admitted. “I know I am, Frederick. Let’s forget it, shall we?”

“How did you find Colin?” Frederick asked. “I haven’t had time to do more than shake hands with him.”

“He’s interesting. I agreed to go riding with him to-morrow because there seems to be nothing much for me to do if you won’t let me work with you. I’d far rather be down there. I don’t see what harm a little dampness could do me—now.”

“It isn’t that—not altogether, at least,” he told her with harrowed patience. “You haven’t built up your resistance sufficiently yet. Right now, we’re running into the danger of typhoid down there. I’m not going to expose you to anything like that.”

“Is the Miller place still safe?” Elsbeth asked anxiously.

“Sadie was over at the clinic for milk this afternoon. She says their vegetable garden is already under six inches of water. But they’re not as

badly off as many of the others.”

“It’ll be terrible for old Mrs. Miller!” Elsbeth cried. “And little Jimmie—with that well water. Fred—we must get them out of there!”

His voice was irritable with fatigue as he replied, “I talked with Sadie to-day till I was hoarse. Those people, Beth, are just plain stubborn. They’ll stay with their old shacks till they’re afloat. I suggested to Sadie that they move in with her brother, over near the roundhouse. She refused, point-blank.”

“Frederick!” Elsbeth looked at him quietly. “Why not let them have our——” She bit her lip, and felt the warmth in her cheeks. “——the Adams house? They could move in enough clothing and things to do them until the danger is past. You wouldn’t mind, would you?”

She waited breathlessly for his reply, her heart sinking as she saw the dark bars of his eyebrows come together.

“I suppose I’m being sentimental,” he confessed, “and this isn’t exactly the time for sentimentality. But I’ve asked the carpenters to start work in there early next week. I—well, I——”

Elsbeth’s mouth straightened. “You’re not objecting on Sadie’s account especially, are you?”

“No!” he exclaimed angrily. “It has nothing to do with Sadie—or the kid. It wouldn’t matter who—I—well, I’ve been thinking of it as a place for us to—to start over in.” He stood up suddenly, gave Elsbeth a queer, dazed look. “I must be tired,” he muttered. “I seem to be talking nonsense. Offer the house to the Millers, by all means.”

An apologetic voice spoke from the hall doorway.

“I’m not intruding, am I?” Irma asked, as she came into the room. She had a quilted blue satin robe wrapped snugly about her. “I didn’t think there’d be anybody up at this hour. I got a little chill down in that dismal place to-night, and I’ve been sneezing. I just came downstairs to make myself a hot lemonade. Oh—this fire is nice!” Her teeth chattered as she stood up close to the red glow.

“You stay here,” Elsbeth said. “I’ll go and make you a hot drink.”

“I’m going to turn in, Beth,” Frederick said. “I’ll talk to Sadie first thing in the morning.”

As he left the room, Elsbeth saw Irma Trent’s eyes following him with a look that roused her pity and then a surprising, sharp resentment. She hurried through the side door and into the kitchen.

When she brought back the hot lemonade a few minutes later, Irma was crouching in a forlorn attitude on a cushion close to the dying fire.

“Thank you, dear.” Irma shivered and drew her robe about her. “I do think Fred might have built up the fire a little before he left!”

Elsbeth made no comment.

“He’s not a bit like himself these days,” Irma went on. “I know there’s something weighing on his mind. What was that he was saying about Sadie Miller when I came in?”

“We’re going to move the Millers into—into the Adams house.”

Irma’s eyes flew open, then narrowed. “Oh. You’ve been awfully kind to Sadie, haven’t you, Elsbeth?”

“Sadie’s a friend of mine,” said Elsbeth shortly. “If you don’t mind, Irma, I think I’ll go up to bed.”

While she stood creaming her face in the bathroom that separated her room from Frederick’s, she listened tensely, vainly, for some sound in his room. A small flurry of panic came over her. Had he not, just recently, begun to grow indifferent, detached? Perhaps he was seeing his mistake at last; perhaps his regard for her now arose merely from a sense of duty. Yet she could not believe that. Had he not spoken of a new beginning for them both when they moved into the new house? But that would be another month, two months.

She went close to his door, raised her hand, then fell back a step in consternation at what she had been about to do. She crept back to her room, into bed, and lay for a long time in the dark, listening to the night sounds in the budding garden.

FROM the opening in the dense evergreens on Ludlow’s Shelf where the Messenger lodge had been built years ago, one could look down into a valley that was like a pocket full of bright and indistinguishable toys. Treed knolls, rocky pastures, white farmhouses and red barns were knotted along the narrow ribbon of the railway track and merged presently with the variegated jumble of streets, buildings, and gardens that was Bloomhill. But now, with the river swollen far beyond its banks, the meadows shining like wet mirrors, the usually modest creeks tumbling through woodlands, the quiet country that Elsbeth remembered seemed to have gone entirely mad.

She had been sitting with Colin Messenger in the veiled grey sunlight outside the lodge for half an hour or more. The ride up to the Shelf had been enjoyable, not tiring as she had feared it might be. Colin had examined the

interior of the lodge, the fireplace, doors, windows, stove, and furniture, and had remarked that the old place hadn't changed greatly although his father spent very little on its upkeep. It would, said Colin, be a neat little spot to run up to for week-ends from New York. At Elsbeth's question, he had disclosed to her that not even his parents knew that he had been placed in charge of the exporting end of his company in New York.

Then Colin talked in his lazy, half-jeering but wholly fascinating voice of his life in China, the Malay States, the Dutch East Indies, with their slumbrous, darkly-perfumed, moonlit, fringed names. Names like Saigon, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Penang. Elsbeth clasped her breeched knees and stared down into the valley.



“I used to be sure—once,” she said, “that I’d see all those places. You make them sound so enchanting, Colin.” She laughed and added facetiously, “Perhaps I’d better not listen to you. I might just get up and go!”

He looked at her with an unabashed intentness that brought the color surging to her cheeks. But he did not stir toward her as he said reflectively, “I don’t know about you, Elsbeth. Perhaps you would—just get up and go. And perhaps you will. You don’t belong here any more than I do.”

Recovering herself, she was about to protest heatedly when he stood up with his elusive, disarming smile.

“We’ll come up here another time shall we?” he suggested easily. “And bring some grub. I’m very handy with the skillet, you know.”

Elsbeth forced a laugh but did not reply. But when she was in the saddle again she glanced back at the log cabin and a cool sense of foreboding swept over her.



Sadie Miller, her parents and her son had been occupying the kitchen wing of the Adams house for three days. Although the flood waters had receded from the Flats, they had left a noxious waste of mud and debris which could be cleared away only through weeks of work. Two cases of typhoid and three of pneumonia had been reported from the district, besides numerous minor ills and accidents. A considerable number of the residents of Patchtown still clung to their evil-smelling, soggy shacks, and from the obstinate ignorance of these pitiful folk sprang the imminent menace of epidemic.

Doctor Frederick Stowell had done his best, but the responsibility for the menace lay squarely at the door of the Bloomhill Board of Health, whose chief, a cold, disappointed man, had long resented the popular esteem in which the younger Doctor Stowell was held. Doctor Creed had opposed Frederick at every turn. He contended now that the danger lurking in the Flats had been grossly exaggerated, that he could see no good reason for appropriating funds on behalf of people who were well enough off where they were. Doctor Creed, in fact, charged Doctor Stowell and his associates with malicious meddling. They were alarmists, malcontents, who found a perverse satisfaction in finding fault with those in authority.

Priscilla Van der Water was excited and indignant, when she called on Sadie Miller, after spending the afternoon in the basement of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, where she had been helping to sort and distribute clothing that had been sent in by charitable agencies.

"I never saw the like," said Priscilla. "That wife of Dr. Creed's didn't let up for a minute talking about Fred Stowell and the way he's trying to run things. Of course, she's just a parrot for her husband. But she's got a tongue of her own, let me tell you! She comes right out with whatever she has to say, no matter who's listening. But she came near getting it this afternoon, if ever a woman did.

"She was telling us that Fred Stowell ought to keep his eye on his wife running around with this Colin Messenger, instead of trying to run other people's affairs, when—what do you think? In walks Fred Stowell himself! You should've seen it, Sadie! His eyes were like holes in a blanket, I swear they were. Anyhow, he must have heard what Mrs. Creed was saying, because he just came in and then stood and smiled at her, and then he told her to stop taking in any more clothes because they had enough now and what they needed most was dry kindling and kerosene and bedding.

"She didn't say a word, she was that flustered. Then—honest, Sadie, I was scared! He put both his fists down on that long table and leaned across to Mrs. Creed, and what do you think he said? He said—and he didn't look

at the rest of us—he said, ‘You’re a woman, Mrs. Creed, and this happens to be a church.’ That was all. With that he straightened up and swung round and made for the door. He was just going out when in came that little Ferguson boy—the minister’s kid.”

Priscilla stopped to draw a deep breath.

“And what?” asked Sadie.

“It was a telephone call for Doctor Stowell. There was an explosion in the foundry and one man was killed and another one was hurt bad and wouldn’t have anybody touch him but Fred. Fred dashed out without saying anything. Imagine, Sadie—him going out maybe to operate on a man right after hearing his wife talked about like that!”

“I wonder how it turned out.” Sadie said anxiously, her face pale. “I’d hate to think——”

“So would I,” Priscilla nodded, as Sadie hesitated, at a loss. “But nothing’ll happen, I know. Fred’s head is screwed on pretty tight. I wonder how that dance at the Stowells’ will come off to-morrow night? It’s the first party they’ve given since Elsbeth came into the house.”

“It’s for the flood fund, of course. And Elsbeth says it was the Judge who thought of the idea. He’s a pretty smart old fellow, Judge Stowell. From what Elsbeth said, I’m sure he’s putting it on to-morrow night so that it’ll have to be held in the Stowell house. There isn’t any place else to hold it. The country club basement is full of water and there isn’t any room in the community hall, because it’s full of beds.”

Priscilla chuckled. “I never thought of that. You mean—he’s using the benefit dance—in his house—just for a show-down?”

“Well, what do you think? He talked her into being the hostess for the evening, Beth told me that herself. He wants to see how the pack will act. They can’t refuse to come—it being for charity, and everything. I’d give anything to be there, just to see how they’ll take Elsbeth—and how she’ll take them.”

Priscilla picked a slice of raw potato out of the dish on the table beside her and ate it.

“If she’d only put on a dance for them!” she giggled. “Well, I’ve got to get along. I’ll drop round with some of that currant jelly for your mother to-morrow, Sadie.”

A LITTLE past midnight, Nurse Moffatt, at the reception desk, and young Nurse Severn, who was still tender and impressionable, watched the tall

figure of Doctor Frederick Stowell vanish down the quiet, dim corridor of the hospital and disappear through the entrance doors. The two nurses exchanged glances, the older observing that the eyes of the younger were suspiciously moist.

“No good crying about it, Severn,” Miss Moffatt said. “If anyone could have saved the man, Doctor Stowell would have done it.”

“I know that,” the younger nurse murmured softly. “There was no chance. But he looked so desperately tired when he was through. He——”

“Look in at 213,” Nurse Moffatt interrupted.

As she spoke, Doctor Creed approached from the direction of the operating room. Even in the subdued light his face showed an unmistakable smirk. He nodded off-handedly and continued his way to the main entrance.

“Old Snoops,” Nurse Severn whispered as she turned away.

Outside, in the faintly starlit driveway, Frederick Stowell found his car and sat in it for some minutes before he thought to put it in motion. Weariness surged over him in great, heavy, pressing waves. Automatically it came to him that he would have to be careful driving home. He started his car.

Creed had been skulking about, of course—on some feeble pretext. Well, let him gloat, now! Doctor Stowell had bungled a job! That would be something for Creed’s wife to tell her friends to-morrow.

Not that it mattered, really. Frederick knew the truth of it. Anderson knew it, too. Anderson had been there, assisting—and later had congratulated him. An internal hemorrhage was something else—something that laughed at you just when you were beginning to draw a breath of relief! Fate had been against Heine—that was the simple, surgical, truth! Frederick pressed his knuckle against his eyes. There was a pain somewhere at the back of them, and another crawling along between his ribs down on his right side.

This benefit party to-morrow night—he’d have to freshen up for it somehow, he supposed. Since Colin Messenger’s return a week ago, Frederick’s work had given him little time at home. He had seen very little of his cousin. He had seen very little of Elsbeth, in fact, during the past few days. He had trusted her to understand that he was not wilfully neglecting her. But how much of him did she really understand?

Until this afternoon he had actually felt grateful to Colin for arriving at a time when he could be useful in diverting Elsbeth, saving her from the boredom that idleness had forced upon her. She had told him briefly of

Colin's accounts of his travels, accounts that had an Arabian Nights magic about them. And Frederick had grinned, knowing his cousin.

Now, vulnerable from fatigue, and an unavoidable failure that mocked man's power over death, he was suddenly beset by a humiliating doubt. A long-ago phrase of Elsbeth's came rushing back at him through the years. "The low sun," she had said. The low sun! In contrast with himself, what was Colin Messenger but another low sun, picturesque, romantic, foot-loose and fancy-free.

When he reached home, only the hall light was burning. Upstairs, he listened for a hopeful moment at Elsbeth's door, but there was no sound from within. And when he entered his own room he wondered out of a grey mesh of enveloping fatigue just what it was he would have talked to her about.

• • • • •

At seven in the morning, when the maid knocked on his door to awaken him, he felt as if he had been beaten during the night. Every bone in his body flamed with pain as he roused himself and looked with resentful disbelief at the clock. A warning voice within him counselled that these were symptoms of which he should take heed, but in the sharp recollection that he was due at the Mercy Hospital over in Hampden at eight o'clock, he throttled the voice and hauled himself by sheer will out of bed. A bracing shower, a hot cup of coffee, and he would be as fit as ever.

It was with a feeling of disappointment—quite unreasonable, of course, since Elsbeth never joined him at his early breakfasts these days—that he finally threw himself into his coat and started for the door. Then he heard her voice on the stair landing.



He looked up and saw her, pale and oddly tense in her dark blue silk robe that made her seem like a slender boy.

“Frederick!”

She came quickly down the stairway, her robe gathered about her.

“Good-morning. Beth,” he said. “I’m in a hurry to get over to Hampden. Young Laidlaw wants me to help him with an appendix.”

“Just a minute, please,” she said. “I waited up for you until after one last night. Then I didn’t get to sleep for hours. I heard you come in and I did so want to talk to you, but I knew you must have been tired out.”

“I was a bit,” he admitted. “That emergency didn’t come off very well.”

“Heine Holtz?”

“He passed out—on the table. Internal hemorrhage.”

“Oh, dear! I’m so sorry!”

“Couldn’t be helped. Are you feeling fit—for to-night?”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. I don’t feel the least bit comfortable about it, really I don’t. The Judge is so sweet and—and so well-meaning about it, but——”

“But what?”

“I’ve never been afraid—like this—before. Frederick—you will be here, won’t you?”

He bent and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “I’ll see that I am, Beth—unless something absolutely serious comes up. Sorry I have to rush off now. But don’t worry about to-night. It’ll come off all right.”

He slipped quickly out of the door, whistling determinedly as he hurried down the porch steps.

The day turned out to be even more maddeningly perverse, more confounding with unexpected emergencies coming at the most awkward moments, more blocked with obstacles than any of the whole week preceding. For the first time since the onset of the flood, the task of caring for the ailing victims seemed to Frederick an absolutely thankless one. A mulish recalcitrance, a baffling unwillingness to co-operate in the simplest routine, afflicted most of them like some undiagnosable disease.

The climax came at seven o'clock. A sour dusk had fallen and a cold rain was setting in again. Frederick himself drove as close as he could get to the Purvis truck farm which tottered sorry and uncouth in a liver-colored desolation of mud. Then, as he had done twice a day for the past week, he struggled the rest of the distance on foot. Mrs. Purvis met him at the door with a hostile glare.

"We don't need you any more," she said insolently. "Jeff wouldn't of had pneumonia if you'd of let me keep the winders shet like I said in the first place. As for the medicine you sent Jeff—here 'tis!" She threw a small box and a bottle at Frederick's feet.

"Just a minute, Mrs. Purvis," he said with an effort. "I'd like to—"

"I got no time for you," the woman interrupted and tossed her head scornfully. "I sent for Doctor Creed over an hour ago. I been up to town to-day an' I heard people talk. An' I seen Mrs. Holtz too. You let Heine die under yer very eyes last night. Kilt him, that's what you done—an' you know it! Because yer head's too full o' that dancin', flirtin' wife o' yours to have room for anything else, that's what!"

She slammed the door in his face.

Frederick stood for an instant too dumb-founded to feel either wrath or humiliation. He ran his hand across his eyes in an attempt to brush away the reddish, queerly spangled mist that seemed to be crowding before them. Then with a muttered imprecation he turned on his heel and trudged back to his car.

The fools! The ignorant ungrateful, worthless riff-raff! So they thought he had killed Heine Holtz! And—what was it the woman said about a wife? He couldn't have heard right. Twice to-day he had felt a chill and had taken something for it—too much, perhaps. His senses were playing abominable tricks with him. The feeling in his right lung now was like something gnawing at a thickened substance. He realised that for hours he had deliberately kept his breathing shallow to avoid the knife-like thrust that came with every deep inhalation.

Whatever scurrilous detraction of him Creed was promulgating, it could not possibly have included the case of Heine Holtz. Poor little Mrs. Holtz had been almost prostrated this morning, and when Frederick had tried to comfort her, she had clung to his hand in pathetic gratitude for his kindness and had assured him she knew that he had done all that was humanly possible for her husband.

Ingram met him in the clinic vestibule looking grey and shredded. It seemed there had been a telegram from his mother that afternoon. His father was not expected to live till morning. Would Frederick do him the eternal favor of taking over that confinement to-night up the Ludlow Shelf Road?

Remembering mechanically that Doctor McIntosh was to be at the hospital this evening, Frederick said, "Of course, old man, I'll look after it. I'm very sorry about your dad."

In the reception-room, Frederick found Miranda Guest still seated at her desk, a belligerent expression on her homely face.

"You here yet? Why haven't you gone home?" he asked.

"Why haven't you?" she countered with a scowl. "Didn't I see you taking quinine and stuff to-day?"

"I'm all right. I'm taking that case for Ingram. Too bad about his father. You'd better call Elsbeth—after I've gone—and explain that I'll be home late. I'd call, but I'm in a rotten mood."

"You didn't by any chance run into Mrs. Holtz this afternoon, did you?"

"No. Why?"

Miranda flushed and bit her lip. "Oh—nothing. I——" And then her eyes were suddenly stormy with indignation and something more—something like protective pity. "She was here—half an hour ago. Somebody has been pumping her full of a lot of nonsense about why her husband died last night. I tried to get her to sit down and talk—I was as nice as I could be—but she wouldn't stay. She said, 'All right—what I have to say to him will keep.' If she'd been hysterical I could have understood it, but she—there was a deadliness about her calm. Do you suppose Creed would stoop to _____"

Miranda Guest stared at him apprehensively.

IT was eleven o'clock, and the music of the orchestra, discreetly and not too obviously more sedate than that produced by the same instruments at the Country Club, drifted up to Elsbeth's ears from the drawing-room downstairs. She sat pale and taut on the edge of her bed, staring before her

with eyes that were brilliant with hatred. Brenda Townes was pacing nervously to and fro.

“Far be it from me to stick up for the old cats,” she said judiciously, “but you may have been imagining slights where none were intended, Beth. After all, in Judge Stowell’s own house—I can’t believe anyone would go so far as——”

“No, of course you can’t!” said Elsbeth. “And I don’t care so much, for myself—but the Judge can’t help seeing it. He went to such trouble—the potted palms and the gilt chairs and the orchestra—it’s pathetic!” She laughed unsteadily.

“Don’t you think he can put up with it?” Brenda asked. “He knows the crowd as well as you do. I’ve had my own ideas about this affair from the first. He’s not so interested in it as a means of raising money for relief. Why should he go to all the trouble to give a party of this size? You know the answer as well as I do. He wanted to bring the crowd into the open.”

“Well, of course! He wanted to sell them the idea that I was fit to be Frederick Stowell’s wife.”

“You put it rather plainly, darling, but that was my idea, too. The poor old fellow has run into some pretty stiff sales resistance, that’s all. But what of it? There’s only one thing—you’re forgetting how funny they are. And that’s bad!”

Elsbeth leaped vehemently to her feet.

“Fred might have been here!” she broke out in passionate protest. “He didn’t want to be. Brenda! I—I’m convinced of it!”

“Fred?” Brenda earnestly simulated bewilderment. “But—he phoned, didn’t he? He’ll be here as soon as he can get back from—from wherever he is. Don’t be silly, child!”

“I’m not being silly!” Elsbeth retorted bitterly. “He could have sent someone else to Herndons’. But he didn’t want to. He knew what this would be like—and he just couldn’t bear to be here and face it!”

“That doesn’t sound much like Fred Stowell to me,” Brenda declared. “I think you’re being a little unfair, Beth.”

“As long as I stay here. I’ll be a burden to Frederick, socially and professionally. They’ll be cutting him soon if he keeps me here. I’m—I’m simply in the way!”

“And that,” snapped Brenda, “is snivelling self-pity! Get out of this tantrum, Beth. Get up and put on some lipstick and powder and come along down.”

She watched Elsbeth with misgivings as she saw her swiftly cross the room and fling herself down before the dressing-table. In this distracted, rebellious mood she was capable of anything. Brenda waited in silence while Elsbeth applied lipstick with fingers that trembled.

Downstairs again, they found Colin lounging about in the hall, a look of tedium on his handsome face. But he brightened at once when he saw Elsbeth. With a scant grin of apology, he said to Brenda. “Mother was looking for you, old dear. Wanted your opinion on a play or something.”

He steered Elsbeth off in the direction of the conservatory.

“Well, I warned you, my dear!” he said. “The tradition of respectability still lives on North Hill. I can’t see that the place has changed one whit since I was one-and-twenty.”

The conservatory seemed like a haven to Elsbeth, since there was no one else in it besides herself and Colin.

His face became abruptly serious.

“You’re miserable—aren’t you, Elsbeth? I’ve known it ever since——”



“Please, Colin, I’d rather not——”

“The gallant little lady, still!” he interrupted with a rough kind of sympathy. “But don’t be alarmed, my dear. I’m not going to forget that I’m supposed to be a gentleman. It would be easy enough to forget—to-night especially, with these sanctimonious dodos who’ve been looking down their noses at you! But I’m under perfect control, Elsbeth.” He looked at her steadily for a moment. “I’ve decided to go back to New York to-morrow,” he said finally.

“To-morrow?” Surprise was in her voice, her eyes.

He went on as if she had not spoken. “I’d like to take with me—the assurance that you—that you won’t quite forget me, Elsbeth. I needn’t tell you that I shan’t forget you.”

She lowered her eyes from the simplicity of his regard and said lightly, "I'm not particularly gallant, Colin—to-night, especially. And I don't think I'm miserable—sanctimonious dodos and all! But I am sorry you're going away to-morrow. And why should you think I might forget you?"

"I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I shall see to it that you don't." He smiled his quick, disconcerting smile that always dissipated any momentarily serious mood. "We understand each other, I think."

"Yes," she began, her voice thin-spun, a little unnatural, "we do——"

She bit down hard on her lip, flushed and stood up suddenly. The Judge was coming towards them, a tremulous agitation in his lean face.

"What is it?" Her first thought was of Frederick. "Has something happened?"

"No, no—nothing serious, my dear!" He moved his hand impatiently. "There's a woman here—she wants to see you. Name is Holtz—Mrs. Holtz, I think. Wasn't that——"

"Yes, of course," Elsbeth said quickly. "Her husband was—he died from that explosion yesterday. She wants to see me?"

"She asked for Fred, of course, but when I told her he wasn't here, she insisted on seeing you. She's waiting in the library."

Out of consideration for Mrs. Holtz, Elsbeth closed the library door behind her to muffle the sound of music and voices that came from the drawing-room. But she had taken no more than half a dozen steps towards the woman in shabby black who sat crouched oddly forward on the edge of a chair, before she knew with chilling insight that the act had been a rash mistake. Mrs. Holtz's stolid control changed abruptly to an unbridled fury that shook her spare body, distorting her grief-lined face to an effigy of shocking venom. She leaped from her chair as though she had been released by a spring.

"So—you come to face me, do you?" Mrs. Holtz said, in a hoarse whisper. "Playin' innocent, ain't you!"

Elsbeth stood dumb and white, her eyes widening in terror.

"I don't understand you, Mrs. Holtz. What——"

"You don't understand me, eh? I suppose you don't know my Heine's dead, either?"

"Yes—I—I was very sorry to——"

"Sorry! Hah! Why should you be sorry? You killed him!"

Elsbeth stared at the woman. "Mrs. Holtz, you—you must be ill——"

“Ill am I? Ill? None o’ your fine words to me, miss! My Heine was ill, wasn’t he? And he’d be alive to-night if Fred Stowell had done his work the way he should—if he’d been tendin’ to his business. Everybody knows that—an’ they’re all sayin’ it!”

Elsbeth, frightened, took a step backward in the direction of the library door, but Mrs. Holtz came close to her.

“No, you don’t! You’re not leavin’ this room till I’m through with you. Fred Stowell was a good man, a good doctor, till he married you. But he knew all about you. He knew that when he brought you here. Everybody knew it. And that’s what’s wrong with Fred Stowell. What man can do his work right with a thing like that hauntin’ him every minute of the day? That’s what killed my Heine, if you want to know.” She came towards Elsbeth, choking and inarticulate, her bony fist flung out.

Elsbeth retreated, wild terror gripping her again. But just as she felt the door at her back, she saw Mrs. Holtz slide cunningly to the library table and pick from it an onyx book-end in the form of an Aztec god. The ornament crashed into a marine painting on the wall a few feet to Elsbeth’s right and delivered a shower of glass into the room, just as the door burst open and Harkness with two or three women stood looking in, transfixed.

Exactly what took place in the next few moments Elsbeth could never quite recall. It seemed that Mrs. Holtz collapsed in an hysterical black heap on the floor, having first given a sufficiently coherent explanation of her behaviour. Harkness fumbled helplessly, while Adeline Stowell rushed out to fetch the Judge. And then, dreadful and clear, stood the moment when Sarah Messenger—or was it Mrs. Leslie Payson?—Elsbeth could not remember. But one of them had said, “You might have expected something like this! But to bring it on poor Frederick!”

Elsbeth fled past them, into the hall, into the conservatory, where she found Colin. “Take me out of this house, Colin,” she gasped, “anywhere—now—right away!”

SOMEWHERE back along the interminable black miles of Ludlow’s Shelf Frederick had lost control of the car and had been obliged to leave it there, hanging precariously on the side of a slope that fell away to an unguessable, rain-filled void. Whether the treacherous road had been the cause of the mischance, or whether his hands for an instant had grown numb at the wheel, Frederick could not be sure. And yet, he had been able to walk—if you could call this weaving stumble through the darkness a walk—back

to the main road and three miles down the valley, his clothing a sodden weight on his body.

That he was ill, perhaps gravely, even allowing for the impact of fatigue, he admitted now with an almost childish petulant rage. He, Frederick Stowell, who had never suffered in his life, anything worse than a cold in the head! He had given little thought to the cough that had been annoying him for the past two days. But there was no gainsaying the pain that raked his lungs now as he pressed forward against the wet darkness, or the fireworks he saw when his lids dropped like hot lead down over his eyes.

He must cling to some fragment of reality in order to get back home, he reflected. Think about the party the Judge was giving for Elsbeth—no, for the flood sufferers! It must be close to midnight now. He should have been there with Elsbeth.

A little farther—and, at last, the sidewalk in front of the Thomas place. The street was dimly lighted. Rhododendron bushes flanked the walk on either hand. Only another quarter of a mile! But now that he was so nearly home, his strength seemed to ebb from him maddeningly.

Under the blurred street light, between the rhododendron bushes, a black roadster flashed by. Frederick looked dully after it and saw with lax surprise that it continued on beyond the intersection, up into the dark of the Ludlow Shelf road. It had looked like the Messenger car. Was someone going in search of him, he wondered.

He turned again, forced himself erect, and continued on past the orderly homes of North Hill.

A line of automobiles was threading out of the Stowell driveway when he came through the gates. It was not customary for Bloomhill to leave any social function so precipitately, en masse. Only four or five cars, which he recognised as those belonging to various Paysons and Messengers, stood under or near the porch.

The moment he entered the house, his incuriousness, his lassitude left him. He was met by the distraught Harkness, who with a miserable wringing of his hands recounted what had happened.

“All right, Harkness,” Frederick interrupted him shortly.

He threw off his wet coat and hat. His face was pale and drawn, but the light-headed feeling had gone. He was coldly master of himself. The supreme wrath he possessed was a murderous weapon in his hands. He ran up the stairs to his grandfather’s study.

The old man sat morosely before the fireplace. As Frederick entered, he shook his head resignedly.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Harkness has told you about——”

“Yea. He says that Elsbeth went out with Colin.”

“They went away in the Messenger car, I understand. Someone saw them go. I can’t say that I blame her. The affair was a blunder on my part, my boy. It was a farce—completely so. It was more than Beth could stand—and then this Holtz woman coming——”

“I’m sorry,” Frederick broke in, his voice taut with barely controlled violence. “I should have been here, of course. I’d have been back two hours ago, but I ran my car off the road. Would you mind if I took your car for an hour or so? I must find Beth. I think I saw——”

Judge Stowell glanced up sharply, uneasily from beneath his white, shaggy brows. “Take it, of course. But just remember—two wrongs don’t make a right, Fred.”

Frederick laughed from between clamped jaws. “I’ll remember. You can trust me.”

He was not aware that the old man’s eyes followed him with grimly humorous approval as he strode from the room.

He stood for an instant in the library doorway, his eyes raking the six women and two men who were holding righteously scandalised discourse within the room.

“So!” he said as he halted abruptly on the edge of the group.

Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce turned quickly and fluttered toward him. “Oh, my poor, dear Frederick!”

Millard Stowell cleared his throat. “This has been most regrettable, Frederick, most regrettable! I—er——”

“Oh, Freddy!” Sarah Messenger buried her face in a handkerchief.

But Irma Trent laid her hand on Frederick’s arm and gazed up at him with tear-filled eyes. Without glancing at her, he shook his arm free.

“Just eight of you!” he observed evenly. “The pack left as soon as the hunt was over, eh?”

“Frederick!” Irma exclaimed, reprovingly.

He brushed her roughly aside. The smile he swept over the group was gaunt, terrible, his eyes blackly alive above the flushed cheekbones.

“I have another job waiting for me,” he said coldly. “I haven’t time to stand here and talk. But just let me tell you this, all of you. Don’t flatter yourselves that you’ve driven Elsbeth away from me. I know how you’ve tried. I’ve been watching it for weeks. But you haven’t done it. I’ve done it!

I haven't had the spirit to tell every one of you to go to the devil! Well, I'm telling you now. Get out of here—and stay out!”



Millard Stowell coughed importantly. “We are guests in Judge Stowell’s home, Frederick. I think—under the circumstances—”

“Get out, I tell you!” Frederick interrupted. “I’ll square my own account with the Judge.”

“Just as you say,” said Mrs. Tarrant-Boyce’s husband. “Are you ready, Regina?”

Frederick turned on his heel. When he had reached the door of the library, Irma Trent was beside him.

Irma’s eyes were suddenly ablaze with anger. “If you’re going to look for Elsbeth, you’ll probably find her up at——”

“Thank you,” Frederick said as he went into the hall. “It happens that I know where Elsbeth is.”

The savagely lucid interval had passed. Fever was leaping anew in his temples, clawing at his lungs, and only some coldly impregnable force of his will kept it at bay as he drove up the Ludlow Shelf road at a speed he didn’t even bother to ascertain. He knew only that it gave him a sense of reckless and bitter satisfaction.

But the brilliant projectile of his thoughts moved even more swiftly than the swift car he was driving. It moved away from his wrath at the vindictive narrowness of North Hill. It moved and centred with ruthless precision upon Colin Messenger and Elsbeth. His brain, his heart, the length and breadth of his body flamed with the frustrated love and the tender patience of months, years, which had been thrown back now in his face.

He grinned ferociously into the spread of the headlights before him. So Elsbeth had seized the excuse to get away from him to one she considered her own kind, had she? And how she had done it, flaunting her contempt for

him before them all! The low sun! That was it—another low sun! Another Cecil Andrews!

So be it, then. But first, she would know Frederick Stowell for what he was—what he really was!

• • • • •

There had been plenty of dry wood in the lodge to build a roaring fire, and for this Elsbeth was infinitely grateful as she sat huddled with her feet curled under her in one corner of the couch before the fireplace, the tweed coat she had caught up in her flight still wrapped about her shoulders. It had seemed to her during the drive up here that she would never be warm again as long as she lived. The last few minutes in the Stowell house had frozen her to the very pith of her being.

“Tea, my lady,” said Colin, and seated himself beside her, cup and saucer in hand.

His grin was light-hearted, festive, but his lashes played curiously across his eyes as Elsbeth had seen them play before. She threw back her coat, and took the tea he offered her.

“It isn’t raining now, is it?” she asked, and sipped the excellent tea.

He made an exaggerated theatrical gesture. “The goddess Diana is riding the midnight sky. I just now saw her through a diaphanous cloud.”

Her mouth moved unsuccessfully toward a smile. “You’re being awfully nice to me, Colin. If you had talked seriously—for even a minute, on the way up here—I don’t think I could have stood it.”

He turned and put a hand out to the lamp on the table behind the couch. Slowly he turned the wick down until it sputtered and the light went out, leaving only the ruddy glow from the fire to light the room. Elsbeth made no protest and for a moment they sat together on the couch, neither of them speaking.

Finally Colin set his cup aside and leaned forward, gazing into the fire.

“You’re really pretty crazy about that saintly cousin of mine, aren’t you?”

Hot color flooded her cheeks. “For a long time,” she said, “I haven’t known what I felt about anything.”

Colin turned and looked directly at her, something painful under the mockery of his eyes.

“It’s time you knew, Elsbeth,” he said. “You’re not precisely a child. You ——” She started to speak but he checked her. “No—look at me and listen. I

like you, Elsbeth—I like you very much. A little too much, perhaps. If I were the kind of man who surrenders himself easily to a woman. I might have done so long ago—often, as a matter of fact. But I’ve come closer to it with you than with any woman. You have a satisfying beauty—and you have a mind. And yet—you’re unhappy. What is it you want?”

“I know what I want, Colin,” she said after a moment. “But it doesn’t help much to know what you want—when you know it is beyond you. I want Frederick’s love—it’s as simple as that. I am sure he loved me once. And I can’t blame him if he doesn’t care for me now. Love dies when it has nothing to help it live. I’ve managed to kill it. Frederick has grown tired waiting for me.”

“Suppose you were to discover that you’re mistaken in that?”

“Even then, it would be useless. It’s too late now, Colin. To-night proved that. What those women said is true. I’ve known it for weeks. I’ve all but ruined Frederick’s position in Bloomhill—just by marrying him. The longer I stay here the worse it will be for him. I must leave and——”

She tried vainly to force back the tears. He moved close to her and put an arm about her shoulder. “Could you think of—of leaving with me, Elsbeth? We could try for happiness together.”

“How could I go with you—anywhere—when I’ll always be thinking about Frederick? No, Colin—I’ve got to get away from—from everybody.”

She drew back from him and he took her hands with a strained smile.

“You needn’t be afraid of me, Elsbeth,” he said. “Let me take you to Brenda’s to-night. To-morrow——”

He paused abruptly. An automobile had driven up close to the lodge and come to a stop. Elsbeth’s eyes flew to the door. Colin did not move from his place.

Frederick stood in the open doorway, hatless, his hair a wild, black disorder. As he stepped toward them in the firelight, he looked so bizarrely changed, his blunt nose white about the nostrils, his forehead covered with beads of perspiration, that Elsbeth was unable to stir or speak.

Colin got easily to his feet. “Well,” he said equably, “we hadn’t been expecting you, Fred. As a matter of fact, we were just getting ready to leave. I hope you——”

“I don’t care what you hope!” Frederick bellowed. “I have things to say to my wife. Get out of here!”

Elsbeth flashed up straight. “Frederick! I asked Colin to bring me here
——”

“Be quiet! You’ll have your turn to talk.” While he spoke, his voice shaking with uncontrollable fury, he snatched Colin’s hat and coat from an arm of the couch and threw them into his face. “I told you to get out!”

Colin blanched and stood for a moment hesitating. Elsbeth saw his right hand close into a knot.

“No, no, Colin!” she cried, rushing at him. “Go—please go!”

His lip twisted, he nodded curtly and turned away. The door had scarcely closed behind him when Elsbeth felt herself swept violently about into Frederick’s arms.

“You haven’t changed much, have you? You and your low suns!” He pulled her hair back from her temples so that the lids of her fear-dilated eyes grew taut. Elsbeth sobbed, laughed, and then with sudden abandon threw her arms about his neck.

But to her bewilderment and fright he all at once seemed to reel away from her. His arms went lax, his head slumped forward, he stumbled and fell, his body sprawled half on the couch, half on the floor.

“Frederick! What is it? Oh, darling!” She bent and looked closely at him, then rushed to the door. “Colin! Colin! Come back! Something terrible—it’s Frederick, Colin!”

SOMEHOW, ELSBETH helping with all her strength, they got Frederick into the car, and Colin took the wheel. It was after the nightmare drive back into the valley to the Stowell house that Elsbeth got the answer from Doctor Anderson. Frederick had pneumonia.

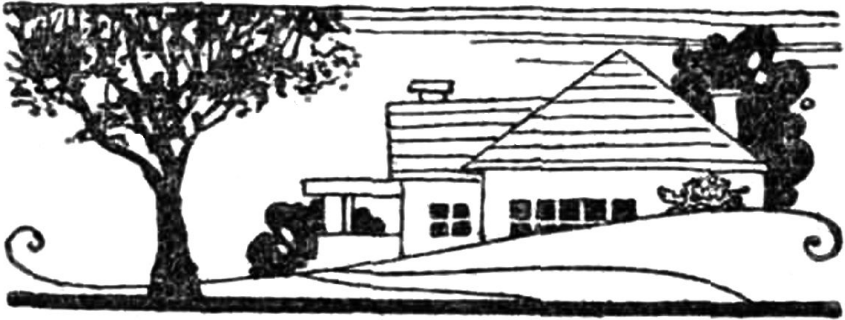
Because of the crowded condition of the little Bloomhill hospital, Frederick Stowell was put to bed in his own room in his grandfather’s house, a circumstance which afforded Elsbeth a bleak comfort, since it meant that she would be near him.

Hours, days, nights were indistinguishable after that. Time was a grim thread upon which were knotted the capricious changes in Frederick’s fight for life. To please the old Judge and Frederick’s mother, Elsbeth made a pretence at eating although the sight of food revolted her.

One question flamed relentlessly in her mind, under the constant dread that Frederick might die: Had he really known what he was doing that night in the Messenger lodge, when he had swept her so completely off her feet, and would he remember it when he was rational once more? She could not believe that his outburst had been merely a perverse expression of hatred towards her. That was unthinkable. But her fear was that when he recovered

he would be closed in again upon himself, that he would believe her intention had been to go away with Colin Messenger.

Certain things had come to pass during those days of agonising suspense, but not until afterwards did Elsbeth reflect upon them as important. It became known swiftly throughout Bloomhill that Elsbeth Stowell was devoting herself day and night to the care of her husband, and, in the manner of small towns, sentiment towards her underwent a magical change.



Aunt Kate and Aunt Felicia Payson called. It was days afterwards that Elsbeth, reconstructing their visit, saw how pitiful it was—Aunt Kate's anger at what she had heard about the Judge's party, her defence of Elsbeth, her denunciation of the conduct of North Hill; Aunt Felicia's tears, stirred by emotions too deep and too complex to be explained by anyone, Aunt Felicia least of all. Elsbeth had hidden her indifference to their change of heart and the two elderly sisters had departed with their consciences eased.

Colin Messenger had gone to New York, and had sent by way of Brenda Townes his sympathy to Elsbeth and Frederick. Fleeting, Elsbeth thought of him—and visualised his satirical smile at this fickle turn of chance. She forgot him, then, so far as he himself was concerned, but she could not forget that he still existed in Frederick's mind. Or did he?

It was this that made her fearful when she passed into Frederick's sunlit room, aware that his first rational acknowledgment of her would tell so much—or perhaps so little!

That first time Doctor Anderson permitted her to sit beside him for only a few minutes. She came away in trembling uncertainty, knowing only that she had choked when she had tried to speak to Frederick, and that he had seemed too weary to care to hear her voice.

There followed other times, each so like the last in the painful constraint that lay like a palpable thing between Frederick and herself.

Then one morning she gathered a great bouquet of lilacs, white and purple, and took them to his room. In the hall she passed his mother, and Adeline Stowell did a strange thing. Almost timidly, she placed her hand on Elsbeth's arm and said:

"My dear, you must not wait for Frederick. I did that for his father—and now I have forgotten what it means to be young. The Stowells are a difficult people. If you are to live your life, begin to live it now. Let Frederick follow."

Tears sprang into Elsbeth's eyes. She leaned quickly forward and kissed Adeline Stowell's austere cheek.

The nurse tactfully left the room when Elsbeth entered. Frederick looked up at her, and although he smiled weakly—politely! she thought with an unhappy pang—the guarded, untrusting expression came again to his gaunt face. Elsbeth's throat tightened sorely, and for a moment she thought it would be impossible to remain even to arrange the flowers.

But suddenly Frederick lifted his hand. "You're very beautiful—with those lilacs in your arms," he said. "Wish I were an artist—'Picture of a lady in sunlight.' I don't seem to be so good as a doctor, do I? 'Physician, heal thyself'!" He laughed ironically and Elsbeth drew a sharp breath.

"That sounds, at least, as if you were getting better, Doctor Stowell."

"I shall probably live," he said idly.

She longed to go to him then, throw her arms about him, tell him that he was going to be strong and happy.

"Doctor Anderson says you're ever so much stronger to-day," she told him. "He expects you to make a rapid recovery. You'll never know how—how worried—"

She stopped, her mouth dry and stiff. Frederick had leaned slightly towards her and was searching her face intently.

"Why do you look—" she began in desperation.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said gently. "Give me your hand, Beth." She slipped her hand into his and at his touch a wave of color rose in her cheeks. He saw it, and his eyes grew suddenly dark and eager.

"There's something I have to know, Beth. They've probably told you not to talk to me about anything serious. But they don't know. I know better than they do what's best for me. Anyhow—I can't lie here and—and wonder. What are your plans for the future, Beth? I've got to know that."

She returned his ruthless gaze with her head high, her eyes brilliant.

“I hadn’t meant to tell you. But to-morrow I’m going to start furnishing our house. Your mother and I——”

“Beth!” He laughed huskily, and she could not believe there could be so much strength in the hand that drew her towards him. “It wasn’t a dream, then? I seem to remember that you put your arms around my neck—that night up in the lodge when I must have behaved like a maniac. You really did, didn’t you?”

She was kneeling beside him now, her wet cheek against his. Frederick’s arms were close about her.

“Oh, Freddie!” she cried softly. “You didn’t behave like a maniac. You—you meant it, didn’t you? Tell me you meant it!”

He laughed, not very steadily. “I’ll tell you—later—in our own house, my sweet.”

(THE END)

(All characters in this novel are fictitious, and
have no reference to any living person.)

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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.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *And the Town Talked* by Martha Ostenso]