PROLOGUE TO LOVE

MARTHA OSTENSO

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PROLOGUE
TO LOVE

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WILD GEESE

THE DARK DAWN

THE MAD CAREWS

THE YOUNG MAY MOON

THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

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PROLOGUE TO LOVE

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To

MY FRIEND,

J. J. KERR

What's past is prologue—
The Tempest.

CHAPTER I

For one of those minutes that are not reckoned as time, but rather as a curious vessel to hold experience, she had stood still on the station platform, rapt and breathless and unmindful of the inquisitive glances that rested on her taut figure. The desire had been acute to fling out her arms to the circle of the mountains that rose from the valley like a prodigiously wrought gold and purple bowl filled with the wine of sundown in May. She had stood, aware of the cool star on the southern crest, and of the silver scallop of the new moon a-sail with its veiled and mystical cargo. Then the words had shaped themselves in silence upon her lips, words she knew now had paused far back in her childhood, waiting for her return: "You beautiful! Oh, you beautiful!"

Only a few moments before, she had checked her luggage without giving her name, and the slight narrowing of the old clerk's eyes had brought a twitch of amusement to her mouth. She remembered him well enough, and although it was nine years since he had seen her—she had been but fourteen then—it was evident that some recollection stirred behind the old man's eyes. Perhaps, after all, she might have told him she was Autumn Dean, so that he might be the first to know that the Laird's daughter had come home. He was one of the "relics of Barkerville," as her father used to call them affectionately, those old men who had become as legendary as that long-dimmed field of gold. It would have been fitting to tell him first, this old man who was the essence of everything to which she was returning, this fabulous, romantic northland of her girlhood. But it amused her to keep her secret a little longer, to be to herself alone the daughter of old Jarvis Dean, the Laird of the "Castle of the Norns." That phrase brought an almost unbearable ennui for what had been when she herself had so named her father's house.

The murmur of the valley town, like the warm sound of a human heart within the cool heart of the hills, lay below her now as she made her way quickly up the steep dark street to the house she remembered in the mountain's cleft. A few new dwellings had appeared, the shade trees had grown, there was a denser thicket of shrubbery flanking the street, but the curious upward climb of the way was unmistakable. There, where the gravel road took a prankish turn as though seeking greater seclusion under the brow of the hill, old Hector Cardigan's cottage peered through, half suspiciously as she had remembered it, as though it had made its way from the inner

secrecy of the mountain and were of half a mind to return there. Her heart gave a little leap of delight as she saw the "monkey-puzzle" tree on the tiny front lawn, and the two somber, meticulously clipped yews on either side of the shell-lined walk. The ancient wrought-iron Italian lamp hung as of old in the narrow crypt of the porch, but instead of the wanly flickering oil wick, a dim electric bulb glowed steadily behind the parchment. Old Hector had had his house wired, then!

Her impulse was to go bounding up the steep little steps two at a time, as she had been wont to do, but she reflected quickly that Hector, grown older and more than ever given to solitude, from her father's reports of him, might be startled at such an intrusion. Instead, she ran lightly up the flight to the carved, narrow, oak door, and clutched her handbag to still the excitement of her heart as she lifted the heavy brass knocker. She remembered that the knocker had been level with her eyes when she was a reedy kid of fourteen.

That was Hector's step now, quick and military still in its precision. She could remember that long polished panel of hardwood floor of the hall within, polished to mirror luster by Hector himself, as no servant could do it, had the old man ever been able to afford a servant. The door opened quickly, boldly, in its old manner of brusque inquiry. And there stood Hector, erect and fiery, fastidiously groomed as of old, severely dinner-jacketed, his gray hair grayer now but combed as ever with sculptured nicety. He stood very little above her own height, so that it seemed to her that she was smiling on a level with his eyes.

As she waited for his recognition, a curious thing was happening. She had snatched off her hat and stood with her head flung back, her hair shaken vividly about her cheeks. Hector's eyes were fastened upon her face with a look that grew from strange, incredulous amazement to something verging upon pain. His hand reached uncertainly out toward her, as though he expected her to vanish before his eyes, then his fingers grasped the door knob until the knuckles gleamed white. His face had become drained of all color, and although she saw that his hand leaned heavily on the door knob for support, Autumn laughed gayly, stepped over the threshold, and flung her arms about his neck.

"Hector, Hector! Don't you know me, you old goose?" she demanded, shaking his shoulders as she smiled up at him.

A flush mounted like a brand over Hector's brows. He stared back at her, a man in a dream. Then he ran his fingers over his eyes in a gesture of weariness. All at once his manner changed.

"Forgive me, child," he said. "You—you startled me. I hadn't expected—but here, come inside. My manners are abominable!"

They proceeded into the low, shadowed living room, Autumn pausing just within the door to let her eyes sweep over the place. She wanted to make sure that the character of this extraordinary room had not changed. No, except for an added piece or two, it was the same as when she had last seen it—a haunting medley of the centuries, the oak walls dim and secret with their tapestries, the Louis XIV Gobelin, the fragile and priceless Renaissance Grotesque with its quaint assembly vanishing irretrievably into the weave, vanishing back into the dead hands of the weaver, and the bold François Spierinx of Delft with its heraldry challenging Time. Autumn's eyes moved quickly over the room, resting for a fleeting moment of delight upon one dearly remembered treasure after another, until Hector's voice, from where he stood near the fireplace, recalled her.

"But—when did you get back, Autumn?" he asked, his voice firm now, with its old courtly inflection.

"I've just come. I walked right up here from the station."

"But your father didn't tell me you were coming home."

Autumn tossed her hat and purse on the low Spanish settle, ruffled her fingers through her hair, and came over and stood beside him, her feet spread boyishly apart, her hands clasped behind her back. She looked at Hector with grave amusement.

"He isn't expecting me," she said lightly.

Hector started. Autumn looked at him sideways, frowning a little. Then he began fingering the black silk guard of his glasses, his lips tightening.

"He isn't expecting you? You mean he doesn't know you are coming home?"

"Just so," Autumn told him. "And I haven't phoned the ranch, because I want to surprise him."

Hector turned slowly away. "H-m-m, yes," he said, thoughtfully. "It *will* be a surprise to him."

"Besides, you old fraud, I wanted to surprise you. Think of it, Hector, it's nine years since you saw me last."

"Nine years! It seems impossible. Well—we're getting older. I'm approaching my dotage, child. But you—you are eternal youth itself. You have the heritage of your mother."

Autumn's laugh pealed out deliciously. "But not her beauty, Hector!"

"That was what startled me when I saw you at the door. You are her image."

He moved to the couch that faced the fireplace, seated himself, and clasped his hands between his knees. Autumn turned and looked down upon him, and a wave of swift pity for him swept over her, obliterating for a moment the bewilderment and dismay that were growing upon her at the strangeness of his reception. Time, the merciless invader, was storming the fine citadel of that gallant old soldier, and already had come an intimation of the ruin that was to be. Autumn went quickly and seated herself beside him, taking his brown hand in her own.

"Is this all the welcome you give me?" she asked. "You look as if I had brought you the plague. What's wrong, Hector?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, then got to his feet.

"There's nothing wrong, my dear. It's just the surprise, I suppose. It has knocked me quite silly. Here—let me get you some tea."

"No, no, Hector," Autumn protested. "I had dinner just before I stepped off the train. Besides, I must hurry along before it gets too dark."

"Yes, yes, of course. There'll be time enough for visiting later on."

"Plenty," Autumn declared. "I'm coming in to spend a whole day with you just as soon as I get settled at home."

"How are you going out?"

Autumn patted one of his brown hands affectionately. "I'm going to ride one of your hunters," she told him. "It wouldn't look right for the daughter of Jarvis Dean to go home in an automobile, would it?"

Hector smiled. "*One* of my hunters? I have only one left, my dear, but you are welcome. Are you going to ride in those clothes?"

"No. I'll telephone for my luggage. I have a riding habit handy in a bag. You see, I had it all planned. Where is the telephone, Hector? Isn't that frightfully stupid! It's the only thing about the house I have forgotten."

Hector pointed to a low Japanese gilt and black lacquer screen that stood below a seventeenth century brass lantern clock with single hand. "Back there," he said.

When she had arranged for the immediate transfer of her luggage to Hector Cardigan's house, she returned to the fireplace. Hector had laid another log on the fire, and the pitch was snapping spiritedly. He had also brought out a remarkably cut old English decanter with a ruby glass snake wound about the neck. Two fragile wine glasses stood on the tray beside it,

and the liquid within them glowed with a fixed and inviolate coruscation. On a Meissen porcelain plate were tiny frosted cakes and shortbreads.

"Oh, Hector! You sweet!" Autumn cried, kneeling before the wine to look at the light flaming through it. "I take back all I said about my welcome." She seated herself upon a battered hassock and took the glass he offered her. She sipped the wine and reached for one of the tempting little cakes.

"Chablis, isn't it?" she remarked.

Hector smiled at her over his glass, and it seemed to her that he was more his old self again, the surprising and eternally enigmatic old self that she had known, Puck and Pan and Centaur, all in one, and sometimes Ariel and sometimes Caliban—all the naïve and grotesque and impish legendary beings she knew.

"Your education is complete, I see," he laughed. Autumn laughed too, and ate another cake in one mouthful.

"Oh, when I went over," she said, "they were teaching children to drink so that they would stop begging for another war." Her mood changed then and she frowned down at the last drop that lay in the crystal hollow of the glass. "Seriously, though, that's why I wanted to come home, Hector. I had to get away from the constant reliving of a nightmare that my generation missed."

"I know—I know," Hector remarked.

"The only real thing in the pampered life of Aunt Flo was the loss of her son—my cousin Frederick, you know. I don't know whether there is such a word or not—there ought to be—but Aunt Flo simply *voluptuated* in her loss. I couldn't live with it any longer."

"It isn't the same back home as—"

"Oh, I don't mean they are all like Aunt Flo," she hastened to add. "But there is something smothery about England now, with all those hungry-eyed women stepping on each other's toes. *Do* you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Hector admitted. "I think I do. You wanted room to breathe in. Well, you are right, too. Only—your father isn't the same man either. You will find him very difficult at times. He rarely comes to see me any more—and you know how devoted I have been to him."

"Father has always been difficult, Hector. But I've always loved him, nevertheless—and he has always loved me."

"Certainly. He loves the ground you walk on. I think, perhaps, that was one of the reasons he didn't want you to come back."

“Listen, Hector,” Autumn said, shaking a finger at him, “I know father wanted me to stay in England. He wanted me to marry and settle down over there. Why?”

Hector coughed lightly and took another sip from his glass. “If Jarvis has any reason for not wanting you back here,” he said finally, “he’ll probably tell you what it is better than I could, my dear. Though, for that matter, I am inclined to agree with him in this, I think.”

“What do you mean by that, Hector?”

“I mean—you should not have come home,” Hector said abruptly.

Autumn got impatiently to her feet and stood before him, her hands on her hips. “Now, see here, Hector,” she exclaimed, “are you going to be as unreasonable as father has been about my coming back where I belong? He has been perfectly ridiculous about it all this time. I’ve been fed up with Europe for two years. I wanted to come back when I was through college—and I certainly should have come if it had not been for Aunt Flo’s illness. If I ever see a French watering place again I’ll explode!”

Old Hector rubbed his palms nervously together. “I know, Autumn, I know. But—your father is not a happy man, my dear. He—he is given to moods of melancholy—of—of brooding. Moreover, he has never considered the ranch a proper environment for you. I’m afraid it will distress him very much that you have come back.”

Autumn flung her head impetuously upward. “That is simple nonsense!” she declared. “Is Monte Carlo my proper environment? Is Mayfair?” She reached for a cigarette on the low lacquered table beside the couch, lit it and waved it triumphantly. “I’ve put up with erudition and polishing and attempts to marry me off to anemic noblemen until I’m sick of it, and now I’m home. I’m home because I belong here—here in British Columbia—here in the Upper Country—here between the Rockies and the Cascades. Doesn’t that sound dramatic? And here I’m going to stick!”

But her hand, as she flicked the cigarette ash down upon the tray trembled a bit, Autumn observed. In spite of herself a ripple of uneasiness passed over her. Could there be something really wrong with her father? She had had a letter from him only the day before she sailed, and if Aunt Flo had heard anything in the meantime she would certainly have radioed her on the boat or telegraphed her on the train. She sturdily dismissed the momentary fear.

“You’ll probably stick, as you say,” Hector commented. “You’ve got enough of Jarvis Dean in you for that. And if you hadn’t—there’s still the

blood of Millicent Odell. If you don't get what you want from sheer stubbornness, you'll get it because no one will have the heart to refuse you."

"A very dangerous combination, eh, Hector?" Autumn observed.

She refused a second glass of wine, although Hector filled his own once more. She moved to the mantel and examined one or two of the curios upon it, amulets, ancient dice, an Italian dagger with a jeweled hilt, a string of Inca beads hanging down over the Dutch tiles. Some of the things she could recall, others had been acquired by Hector in his travels since she had last seen him. Presently her eyes fell upon a strange brass object with a strap attached to its top. She picked it up. Instantly a sound of unutterable purity pierced the room with a thin, thrilling resonance that seemed to drift on and on, beyond the confines of the bedecked walls. Startled and entranced with the beauty of the sound, Autumn turned to Hector and saw that he had risen and was coming toward her.

"I picked that up in Spain on a walking trip I took one year through the mountains," he told her. "It is a Basque bell—a Basque sheep-bell."

"I've never heard anything so lovely!" Autumn exclaimed, turning the bell up to examine it more carefully.

Hector looked down at it and whimsical wistfulness came into his face. "I should like you to have it, Autumn," he said. "When you come in again, take it out with you. There is no one else I would give it to, my dear—not even your father."

She looked up at him in quick, pleased surprise, holding the bell so that it chimed again, light and clear as the echo of a fay song in some unearthly place. "Do you really mean that, Hector?" she said softly. "I know how you hate to part with your treasures—and this one—"

"It's very old," Hector murmured, and his eyes narrowed with a strange absent dimness, as though he were looking into the remote past where his spirit abode in a brilliant reality. "Some shepherd—in the Pyrenees, perhaps—heard that bell fifty years ago—when your grandmother was a girl here in these hills, just over from Ireland. When your grandmother was breaking hearts up and down the Okanagan, my dear, some shepherd boy was listening to that plaintive note on some mountain-side—on the other side of the world."

"What a lovely thought," Autumn observed eagerly. "But was Grandmother Odell such a heart-breaker, Hector? I have never been told much about her. For that matter, they have never spoken much of mother, either—and I have always wanted to know—" Her voice faltered and she shrugged her shoulders as if to dismiss the subject.

Hector took the bell from her hands and held it thoughtfully on his palm, stroking the satiny texture of its semi-spherical upper half with his eloquent fingers. “The Odell women,” he said slowly, “had small respect for hearts.”

Autumn leaned back, resting her elbows on the mantelpiece behind her, and glanced up at him diffidently from beneath her lashes. “Even mother?” she asked.

He swung the bell just perceptibly, and the eerie threne of it, a vanishing wraith of sound, caught at her throat. It might be the mingled tears and laughter of a ghost heard from infinity. Hector did not reply at once.

“You knew mother very well, didn’t you?” she prompted him. “She couldn’t have been more than ten years younger than you.”

“Millicent Odell—” It might have been the wine he had had, Autumn thought, but it seemed to her that for an instant he was quite oblivious of her presence. His narrow, brown face with its myriad fine seams glowed as though he were listening ardently to the music of that name, the name of her mother, twenty years dead. Then he glanced down at the bell once more. “I have fashioned a little conceit about this bell, Autumn. Perhaps you would like to know what it is.”

“Do tell me, Hector.”

He smiled boyishly. “It is like the Odell women. Its beauty casts a spell over a vast distance. Its music echoes and reëchoes into eternity—and haunts you forever. It has an elfin soul, my dear, and its power is blackest magic.”

Autumn clasped her hands and laughed with delight, although an incomprehensible tremor stirred within her. “You were meant to be a poet, Hector—not a collector of antiques,” she said gayly.

The doorbell rang and Hector went quickly to answer it. Autumn’s luggage had arrived.

CHAPTER II

AUTUMN DEAN reined in where the road curved out to a steep incline above the town, and looked back down upon the diamond-studded valley she had left. When she was a little girl she had thought of the town of Kamloops by night as a jeweled brooch lying on a bed of black velvet, the river a ribbon of dim silver festooned about it. Now she drew in a breath of quick rapture in the knowledge that the metaphor still held. To the north and west the great hills slept darkly with their brows against the stars, the majestic and awesome sleep of the colossal spawn of earth. The vast, silent flood of darkness in the valley below her seemed to be a mystic emanation from the heart of the mountains, for the sky was luminous as a green jewel. The pale road led southwestward, with erratic dips and curves through bald hills and sudden, deep ravines gloomy and sweet with balsam and pine. Autumn turned her horse swiftly into the way that she must go.

The miles slipped away behind her, and now she recognized the features of her father's land, the beginning of those thirty thousand acres that led sheer up into the dusk of the southern mountains, and spread fan-wise to the river on the north. There on one side of the trail was the somber promontory now, that jutted out like a monk's cowl above the abandoned copper mine, and on her right the grassy trail that led through ghost-gray hummocks of sage up a steep hillside and down again to the sheltered valley where the lambing corrals were. She paused to listen for a moment, and across the dim solitude came the lonely tinkle of a sheep-bell. The sound carried her poignantly back to her childhood, when she had ridden her pony on spring evenings such as this—the Laird's disapproval notwithstanding—to visit old Absolom Peek, the faithful herder, where he tended the lambing ewes. At the sweet thrust of memory her eyes filled with tears. She shook the reins and followed the trail westward along the valley.

Here, at last, was the little schoolhouse, with its pile of seasoned firewood, its pathetic little outhouses, and its elfin host of memories that lurked in every shadow and danced before her under the pale light of the stars. What had become of that troop of boys and girls with whom she had romped in the days when she herself had been one of them? The Careys and the Cornwalls, the Lloyds and the Murrays? Just there, under that dark pine, young Larry Sutherland had washed her face with a handful of the first snow of the year. And here young Sandy Cameron had fought with Bruce Landor who had elected himself her champion—though she had been a mere slip of

eight or nine years at the time, and Bruce had been five years her senior—Bruce Landor, whose father had shot himself down there in the little ravine that ran through the northern end of the Dean acres. She had often thought of Bruce, the wistful-eyed young dreamer, always a little sad because of the tragedy that had befallen him, and of his spirited mother, who had struggled along somehow and ruled the Landor ranch with a fierce will that had won the respect of the countryside. It was ten years since he had bade her a rather lofty and grown-up good-by when, at eighteen, he went away to college. She had been thirteen then, and had wept despondent, little-girl tears at the departure of her hero who had outgrown her. Before his return for the summer vacation, she herself had been despatched, protesting, to England.

Three miles beyond, she came to the massive pillars of field stone that stood at the entrance to the Castle of the Norns. The name still suited the place as it had done when she was twelve years old, her fancy steeped in ancient lore. Her father had been pleased with the name she had chosen for that odd pile with its curious gray stone turrets and parapets, the like of which had probably never adorned another ranch house in all the world. Uncharitable people in the community had called it "Old Dean's Folly," but Autumn had adored it from her earliest memory.

She checked her horse to a walk as she rode up the gravel approach between the tall pines. A light was discernible now in the east tower of the Castle. Her father's study was there, and he himself would probably be seated now in his deep leather chair, lost to his surroundings in the pages of one of his old and beloved books. Except for the subdued glow of the light in the spacious hall the house was in darkness. Old Hannah, the housekeeper, who had been Autumn's nurse, would have gone to bed long since.

A dog barked sharply from the direction of the lodge, a short distance from the house. Immediately a clamor rose from the stables and sheds beyond, and almost before she could dismount Autumn was surrounded by a half dozen bristling, growling and suspicious sheep-dogs. One great shaggy fellow drew closer than the others, then darted away timidly when she stooped to pat him.

"You old bluffer!" she laughed, and hastily knotted the reins of her horse to the branch of a flowering peach tree.

Now from within the house another dog barked—once, twice, a deep-throated and ominous sound. Autumn hurried up the steps and glanced through the heavy glass panel of the door. Her father's great Irish wolfhound was coming down the staircase with his loping, magnificent gait. She tried the door, found it unlocked, and entered.

Old Jarvis Dean, his heavy briar stick in his hand, was coming slowly down behind the dog. At the first sight of her he let his cane fall and supported himself with one hand on the shining black balustrade. The other moved slowly across his brows.

Autumn rushed up the staircase. “Hello, Da!” she cried, and flung her arms about his stooping form. “Don’t faint, darling, it’s really me! Down, Pat, you jealous old thing!”

“God bless my soul!” Jarvis exclaimed. “What’s this, what’s this!”

“I tell you, it’s me, darling!”

Her father placed an arm tremblingly about her and held her for a moment without speaking. Presently she heard his voice, a voice almost a whisper, the defenseless voice of a sleepwalker.

“Autumn—my little Autumn!”

She thrust him back from her, laughing with excitement. “Oh, Daddy—let me look at you!”

He stooped and picked up his cane, then turned and took a couple of steps up the stairway. His great voice resounded in the hall. “Hannah! Hannah! Come down!” He beat his cane sharply on the stairs. “Hannah, I say!”

The old woman’s voice responded from above, breathless from excitement. “I’m coming, I’m coming. What in the world has happened?”

“Come down, you dunderhead, and see for yourself!”

He turned to Autumn and put his fingers to his lips to warn her against crying out. Then he began walking uncertainly down the stairs, Autumn moving before him, her voice vivid and young in the austere silence of the lofty hall.

“Oh, Da! I can’t tell you what it means to be home again.” She turned upon him suddenly and threw her arms about him once more. “I didn’t say a word to you about my coming, darling, because I—I didn’t want you to know. I wanted to surprise you.”

He looked at her sternly. “Don’t lie to me, you young brat,” he warned her, with enough humor in his eyes to take the sting from his words. “You didn’t tell me about it because you knew I’d forbid it. That’s why.”

Autumn kissed him and laughed. “What difference does it make, you dear rascal! We belong together—and we belong here. That ought to be reason enough for anything.”

“Reason? Reason? There is no reason in anything you do. You’re a woman, and the devil himself is in women! But go into the room there and

get some light on you so I can see what you look like."

Autumn turned from him and skipped toward the doorway that opened into the drawing room. She pushed the button on the wall and the long room became flooded with a pleasant amber radiance. Autumn clasped her hands as she stood still for a moment, her senses possessing the room, making its simple harmonies her own again. This had been her mother's room and had been furnished and decorated under her mother's direction. Old Hector Cardigan had assisted her, as Autumn knew, and together they had finished it exquisitely, in Queen Anne delicacy. The room had always made Autumn think of chrysanthemums—lushness, soft and feathery and cool and golden. Old Hannah had told her years ago that "Miss Millicent" always had yellow chrysanthemums here when they were in season.

Jarvis seated himself before the white marble fireplace, where a pink glow slumbered in the violet-colored ash. From a tiny, lemon-hued satin settee opposite, Autumn looked at him. His long, bony hands were clasped above his cane, his leonine head jutted forward, and there was in his eyes a naked look of—was it fear or mere perplexity? Autumn did not know.

A hideous feeling came upon her that this was not her father at all who sat facing her, but some grotesque old changeling with a demon-ridden soul. His eyes burned as he searched her face, his massive hands clenching the arms of his chair.

A tremor took possession of her so that her shoulders quivered involuntarily. She twined her fingers tightly together and bent forward.

"Tell me—what is wrong?" she said softly.

The old man's body seemed to sag, exhausted, into the depths of his chair. "Your mother's hair—burnished as October," he said absently, then lifted his head slowly. "Nothing is wrong, my child, nothing."

The sound of Hannah's footfall on the stairway broke the moment's spell and Autumn got up as the old housekeeper hurried nervously into the room.

"Hannah!"

The woman halted suddenly, her hand clutching at her breast. She eyed Autumn incredulously, then drew her breath in a quick gasp. Autumn hurried toward her and put her arms about the bowed shoulders.

"Hannah—don't you know me?"

The only immediate response was a sob that shook the old woman's frame as she clung to Autumn.

"My baby—my baby!" Hannah said at last, her voice thin and broken and incredibly old.

Autumn drew her close and soothed her with little words of endearment remembered from her childhood. “Hannah, Hannah! Little old Muzzy-wuzzy!”

Jarvis Dean drew himself up ponderously in his chair. “Come, now!” he thundered. “There’ll be time enough for that! Put the kettle on the fire and make us a pot of tea.”

Hannah drew away and Autumn patted her affectionately on the shoulder. “Yes, Hannah, make us some tea. We’ll have days and days to talk. I’m never going to leave home again.”

The old woman pattered away to the kitchen and Autumn sat down again on the satin settee.

“So you are counting on staying here,” her father said.

“If I have to turn sheep and run with the flock, Da,” Autumn laughed.

Jarvis Dean’s head sank forward on his chest. “Were you not well enough off with your aunt, then?” he asked her.

“I have nothing against Aunt Flo, Da. She has always been lovely to me.”

“What brings you home, then?” Jarvis Dean’s voice was deep, his breathing labored.

“I’m fed up with all that meaningless existence—and this is my home.” Autumn’s voice quivered and broke at the realization of the fantastic heartlessness of the situation. Bewildered and appalled and crushed, she struggled to regain control of her voice. “Do you mean—you really don’t want me here, Da?” she asked.

The old man shifted uneasily in his chair. “Here? What kind of a place is this for a girl like you?” he demanded.

Autumn’s eyes darted helplessly from one object in the room to another, as though she were seeking refuge from the overwhelming and cruel stupefaction that had come upon her. “Why—whatever can you have against my being here— I can’t believe—”

Her father held up his hand with a peremptory gesture. “What did I tell you in England last Christmas when you wanted to come back here with me?”

“I never believed that you really meant that I couldn’t come back. Why, it’s—it’s the most unreasonable thing I’ve ever heard of. We’ve always had such wonderful times together and I—”

Jarvis Dean rose abruptly to his great height and the anguish in his face wrung her heart in amazement and mystification. “Let’s talk no more about

it," he said with an effort. "You have come and you will have to stay—for a decent length of time, anyhow—or people will have something to wag their damned silly tongues about. I'll not have them talking—about the Deans."

A change came over him, so swift and brilliant that the horrible thought swept through Autumn that perhaps he had, for the agonizing period just past, been mentally deranged. His head, with its smooth waves of white hair, rose proudly, a half mocking smile played about his stern mouth, but his eyes were wistful as he came toward Autumn with his hands outstretched.

She got up quickly and put her arms about him, beating back the tears that threatened. "Poor old Da!" she said softly. "I should never have come if I—"

"Enough of that! You are here." He turned from her. "What's keeping you, Hannah?"

"I'm coming directly," Hannah replied querulously.

The old man shook his head slowly. "She's about done, that one," he muttered. "She's more misery to me than she is help, but there's nothing I can do about it. I can't kick the old dunderhead out at her time of life."

"The more need you'll have for me about the place, Da," Autumn observed archly.

Her father turned on her brusquely. "It'd be a poor creature that couldn't get along better without either of you," he told her.

"That'll be enough of that fool talk for this night," said old Hannah as she entered the room and came toward them bearing her loaded tray.

Autumn laughed and placed a small table before the fireplace as her father sank once more into his chair.

Later that night, when she was in bed in the room that had been her mother's, Autumn lay awake for hours trying to establish in her mind the peace and serenity to which she had hoped to return in this land of spacious loveliness. From the sounds that came to her from her father's study, she knew that the old man was awake and moving restlessly about the room. As sleep folded about her at last, an unfathomable dread wove itself into her dreams, so that time after time during the night her eyes flew open upon the darkness in startled fear as though there were some presence in the room like a hovering menace.

CHAPTER III

JARVIS DEAN stood before the great windows in the hall, looking out upon the world where the light of early morning was aflame above the spires of the pines. He moved away once and called up the stairs to assure himself that Autumn was getting ready for the ride she had insisted on taking with him into the sheltered ravine where the lambing was in progress. When she replied, he strode back to the window and looked out upon the softly lighted mosaic of the world that was his, the rosy headland on the southeast, the cliffs studded with copper, the pallid swells of grazing land to the north where the new green had the delicacy of silver, the violet troughs of the wooded ravines, and the half-discernible, bone-colored basin of a soda lake. He had loved this domain of his with a fierce and obstinate pride, and had sworn that so long as there was breath in his body he would not surrender it to any pressure of circumstance. But now as he stood, weary and haggard from a sleepless night, it came to him that it had been better had he sold it last winter when he had had a substantial offer for it. Why had he not sold it? He was getting old. Pride, pride! Pride and vanity. Vanity of possession, of power, of triumph! Yes—that had been it—triumph! The triumph, as he had thought, of his own conscience over a catastrophe of twenty years ago. That was why he had stayed on here, stubbornly, bitterly, when his world had seemed ready to crash about his ears after the death of Geoffrey Landor, and then—Millicent.

Ah, Millicent, forever loved, forever lost! Her slender red smile, red still as she died in fever, red in the undying love of another, slender in hatred of himself, seemed to pierce the brooding east now as he stared at it with vacant eyes.

"Fool, fool!" he muttered to himself. "I might have known—I might have known!"

He turned as Autumn, dressed for the ride, came down the stairs.

"Let's go!" she sang out, and stood before him slapping her boots with her quirt.

Two horses stood before the door, Jarvis Dean's big black and Hector Cardigan's hunter. In a moment they were in the trail and heading eastward over the way that Autumn had come the night before.

"I hope old Hector won't mind my riding his darling over the hills," Autumn said. "It's slightly more than I bargained for."

Her father grunted. “Him? He thinks of nothing but the damned gimcracks he’s got packed into that house of his.”

Autumn smiled. “You mustn’t be hard on Hector, Da. He’s been very kind and he’s getting old and he loves every piece he has stored away in that funny place. I love it myself.”

“You’re a woman,” Jarvis Dean replied shortly, and was satisfied that the subject had been closed. He shook his reins and Autumn flicked her horse’s flanks with her quirt.

As they followed the trail, Autumn looked about her at the rolling hills and the softly lighted valleys on either side of her. This was her land, the land where her heart had always lived, where the morning was domed with a bluebell loveliness, the afternoon a charm of sunny languor, and the evening a crystal hung in the dark chalice of the mountains. It was difficult to recall, amid thoughts of such beauty, the mysterious shadow that had loomed above her homecoming. Even her father seemed now to have emerged from his dark mood into the splendor of the earth and sky, and was gay and companionable as she had known him in the old days when he had gone about with her on the ranch and on her visits to town.

They were on their way to visit old Absolom Peek at his camp in the ravine. When they turned at last from the main trail and took a winding path that led toward the camp, Autumn remembered a roundabout and more picturesque way to the place, down through a gully where a tiny creek ran and where the white birch grew in a dense wall up either slope. Landor’s Gulch it was called locally, partly because one-half of its length marked the boundary between the Landor and the Dean acres; partly, too, because it was down there beside the creek among the birches that the body of Geoffrey Landor had been found years ago by one of his own men. The years had dimmed the details of that tragic story, though they had served only to deepen the legendary color that invested it. Years ago, old Hannah had told Autumn that sheep herders had encountered Geoffrey’s ghost among the white birches there, of a moonlit night in spring, and had heard his voice calling to his sheep-dogs when the wind came up from the river. Autumn had all but forgotten the legend, but its memory smote her now as she drew rein and turned her horse toward the gully.

“Come on, Da!” she called. “Let’s go down this way.”

Jarvis drew up short and looked back at her.

“There’s quicksand along that creek,” he replied. “Don’t you remember?”

Autumn laughed. “Come on! I used to find gold pebbles down there. I want to see if there are any left.”

Jarvis exclaimed under his breath. “Damn it, my girl, I have no time for such fooling! Are you riding with me or are you not?”

Autumn held her horse for a moment in perplexity, then followed her father along the trail of his own choosing. One of these days, she thought to herself, it would be necessary to warn Jarvis Dean that his daughter was grown-up and would not be spoken to as if she were no more than a child. But there would be time for that.

When she drew abreast of him again, the old man’s face was oddly rigid and colorless. Hector Cardigan had been right, then. Her father *had* changed. He was not the man she had known in other years. He was getting old, and the burden of living had lain too heavily upon him. Her impatience with his mood melted to pity as she thought of him.

“By the way, father, how are the Landors?” she asked casually, when they had ridden a short distance.

“Eh? The Landors? Ah—they’re well, I presume,” he said absently.

“You told me at Christmas time that Mrs. Landor had been ill,” she reminded him.

“Oh, yes, yes of course,” he said hastily. “Old Jane has been very low. She’s not long for this world, I’m afraid.”

“And Bruce?”

But Jarvis had fixed his eyes suddenly on a straggling bunch of frail new weeds close to the trail. He dismounted abruptly and pulled the grasses up by the roots.

“Milk vetch,” he remarked, and got back into the saddle.

When they arrived at the camp, old Absolom was in his shack, brewing coffee and frying bacon. While her father went indoors, Autumn lingered for a moment outside, her eyes sweeping the rounded skyline above her, where the morning sun was burnishing the hills. The snug little valley into which she had ridden was filled with the bleat of ewes and the tiny cry of hundreds of newborn lambs. On the sunlit slope above her, the main flocks grazed, ewes with their lambs old enough to be released from the pens, or ewes which had not yet dropped their young.

In the corral, on the dry level of the shelter behind her, her father’s men were busy at their work. A full, tender feeling rose in her throat at this spectacle of the rich routine of spring birth—the patient mothers with their young, the delicate birches in their film of green, the creek below turbulent

with the freshets of May. A feeling almost of anger took possession of her at the thought that her father had willed deliberately to deprive her of all this, her inalienable birthright.

Jarvis Dean's voice called to her from the doorway of the shack. There was old Absolom Peek, grown more wizened and gnome-like than ever, his weathered face contorted in a shy grin. He held the screen door open and she ran up to him.

"Hello, Absolom!" she called.

He shook hands with her, his old eyes beaming and watering with delight.

"Welcome home, Miss Autumn!" he said, achieving a gallant little jerk of a bow. "You've been gone a long time. But a fine young lady they've made of you, I see."

Autumn laughed and glanced at her father who stood by, tall and elegant in his riding clothes, smiling indulgently down upon his old herder.

"I've been gone too long, Absolom," Autumn said. "But I'm home for good now, and I'll be over to see you often."

"We'll be makin' for the hills right after shearin'," Absolom told her. "In about another fortnight."

"Stay and visit with Absolom while I go out and look over the new family," Jarvis said, starting for the corral. "Come along when you feel like it."

Autumn entered the shack and seated herself while Absolom tended to his coffee and bacon.

"It'll be like old times havin' you back at the Castle, Miss Autumn," the old herder said. "You'll be puttin' new life into the old place."

"Perhaps the old place could stand a little new life," Autumn replied.

Absolom turned to her with the frying pan in one hand, then glanced quickly through the doorway.

"And I'm telling you it could stand a lot of it," he said. "You never saw such a place as that's got to be. The Laird's a great man, an' still hearty for a man of his years, mind you, but there's need of some one about the house there besides that poor old body that does the cookin' and the cleanin'. In the old days we used to have a bit of a dance now an' then, or something to keep a man from gettin' old before his time—but yon's a morgue, gettin' to be."

"You give me an idea, Absolom," Autumn said. "It isn't every day in the year that a daughter comes home. I'm going to celebrate. I'm going to invite

the whole countryside to a dance. Will you come? We couldn't give a party without you."

"We'll be leavin' in another fortnight," he reminded her.

"We'll make it next Friday night, then."

Absolom's face lighted up with enormous pleasure. "I'll come, right enough, if I can get away to it. But ye'll promise to put on a few o' the old dances, mind. I'm gettin' too stiff in the j'ints for the stuff they call dancin' nowadays."

Autumn laughed. "If some of the youngsters to-day tried your reels, Absolom, they'd have to be carried off the floor."

"Aye, that's right enough, too. But who'll ye be askin', now?"

"Everybody!" Autumn replied.

The old fellow's eyes became dreamy with reminiscence. "I've had many a good turn in my time with Katie Macdougall, down at The Bend—if ye'll think of it to ask her," he suggested archly.

"We'll send her a special invitation, Absolom," Autumn promised, getting up. "I'd better leave you to your coffee, now, while I go and take a look at the lambs."

"Aye, an' they're worth lookin' at. Nigh unto five hundred was dropped durin' the night."

Autumn went out and found her father beside one of the pens that opened off the corral. Within it a large, robust ewe stood in maternal dignity, while about her pranced a day-old lamb on its ridiculous legs, flicking an absurd cottony tail.

Autumn laughed in sheer delight. "Oh, you little rascal!" she said. "I'll have to learn about sheep all over again, Da."

She glanced up at him and noted the wistful eagerness that came into his eyes, and the quick, unaccountable restraint that immediately masked them.

He sighed heavily. "It's no business for a woman, my girl."

"That's a man's opinion, Da," she countered.

"And it's my opinion that a woman can talk a lot of damned nonsense, given the chance," her father retorted. "With the help of God, I'll be out of the business myself before another year."

"Out of sheep-raising?"

"I'm going to sell," he told her.

Autumn caught her breath with dismay. "Now who is talking nonsense? You'd die without all this—you know you would."

One of the sheep-dogs, a graceful collie, came bounding up to them and Jarvis stooped to pat him. “I know, I know. But I’m getting too old for it, Autumn.”

They moved to another pen and Autumn laid her hand affectionately on her father’s arm. “I never heard anything so absurd in my life,” she said, then decided to turn the conversation into another channel. “Now, that ewe, Da, is a Rambouillet, isn’t it?”

“Right enough,” he admitted.

“Do you remember old Cho-Cho—the one I brought up on a bottle? And her brother, Fan-Tan? And don’t you remember what beautiful spiral horns Fan-Tan grew? I almost died when he had to go. And how I spoiled Cho-Cho! She had no idea she was a sheep. Do you remember the time she walked into the kitchen and pushed Hannah’s cake off the table—and Hannah went after her with the poker?”

She laughed aloud and looked up at her father. He was smiling in an abstracted way, and Autumn was disconcerted with the feeling that he had not been listening. After a further round of the pens, they walked back to their horses, Autumn chatting resolutely about what she could recall of sheep lore, determined to reinstate herself in what she regarded as the glamor of Jarvis Dean’s life.

“. . . and in 1785 Louis XVI imported fine Merino sheep from Spain and began improving them at Rambouillet, near Paris. Thus we have the name to-day. N’est-ce-pas, Daddy? You see, I do remember some of your lectures, after all, though they were so long ago.” She pointed confidently to a ewe grazing on the hillside with her lamb at heel. “That sweet-faced one is a Cheviot, isn’t it? It’s so clean-cut and stylish. You used to tell me they had Roman profiles. And those knobby, black-faced ones over there—they are Hampshires. And those two in the hollow—let me see—they must be a cross. That high head—Shropshire and Merino?”

Jarvis smiled appreciatively, drawn out in spite of himself. “I sent you to Europe to forget all that,” he mused aloud. “But it’s little you can do with a woman, it seems.”

With a lighter heart, Autumn mounted her horse and rode beside her father up the steep trail that led back to the highway.

CHAPTER IV

It was ten years or more since the Laird had opened his wide doors to the purposes of merry-making, and people had come from as far away as Kelowna to welcome his daughter's homecoming. The drawing room and the hall thundered with the lusty measures of a Highland schottische; Old Country folk stamped resolutely on the polished floors—middle-aged and elderly Scots, their gnarled faces scarlet and streaming, swung their partners with the earnestness of warriors going into battle. Not the least conspicuous and nimble-footed, and certainly the most terrifying of all, was old Absolom Peek, whose flaming red necktie rested companionably on the shoulder of his partner, Katie Macdougall.

Autumn stood near the doorway and applauded the efforts of the old sheep-herder, who beamed his gratitude and pursued his course more desperately than ever. She watched her father in his dinner clothes that seemed somehow awkward on his vast, rugged frame, and her heart smote her at his evident determination to assure all his guests of his happiness in their presence. He moved from one to another, as though in an effort to be attentive to the polite conversation in which he was engaged. She was convinced that underneath it all he was preoccupied and miserable.

When the dance came to an end and the exhausted performers scattered to find chairs or to go out into the evening, two or three of the younger men hurried toward Autumn. One took her peremptorily by the arm and drew her aside.

"The next dance is ours, Miss Dean," he informed her a little complacently. "I have asked the orchestra to favor us with a tango."

Florian Parr was reputed to be the most dashing young man of the countryside. The Parrs, a wealthy Scotch family with a ranch in the Okanagan Valley, had left their son in England to complete his education and had brought him out a year after Autumn had left to join her Aunt Flo in the Old Country. Her father had introduced him to Autumn earlier in the evening and her eyes had surveyed him, with a penetration subtly careless, from head to foot. He was just under thirty, blond, tall, firmly knit, and dressed in white flannels and impeccably tailored blue sack coat. In that amusing medley of rustics and bland sophisticates who were her father's friends, Florian Parr stood out like a man from another world.

His manner was an immediate challenge to Autumn. "Our dance, Mr. Parr? I cannot recall making any engagements."

He stepped closer to her. “It is not so much a matter of engagement, Miss Dean, as it is—a matter of preference.”

She laughed. “Yours—or mine, Mr. Parr?”

“I can only speak for myself,” he replied.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “You seem to find little difficulty in that.”

“Are you going to make this awkward?” he countered.

Autumn chuckled softly. “Not at all, Mr. Parr. Besides, I should think a man who plays polo and pilots his own plane—”

“A splendid alliteration,” he put in.

Before she could reply, he had swung her out upon the floor. The orchestra had already begun to play. The crystal chandeliers of the drawing room were turned off, and immediately the long floor was a dim pool of violet light from the colored lanterns that had been strung below the ceiling. Autumn noted the eyes that followed herself and Florian, shadowed eyes of envy or of admiration, and overheard one or two comments that were unequivocal. She permitted herself to drift in the joy of the dance, glancing up at her partner now and then with that rare, long look of half-closed eyes that is the piquant complement of that most subtly articulate of dances.

In the encore that followed the tango, Florian maneuvered so that they became separate from the main body of the dancers, and moved through the open French windows, out across the piazza and down the steps into the garden.

The moon, almost full, hung like a quaintly misshapen Japanese lantern in the blossoming peach tree. She looked up at it through the blown pallor of the tree. Then, feeling the intensity of Florian’s eyes upon her, she let her own gaze drift deliberately, provocatively back to his, in the way she had learned in the light, unimportant nights of English gardens and of olive groves in Italy. The oldest game in the world, the game of coquetry, her heart not in it, but vanity allaying the moment’s boredom.

Florian leaned above her with one elbow resting on the bough of the tree. She saw him smile as he lifted a lock of her hair and pretended to peer at the moon through its mesh.

“Mr. Parr,” she said, with mock severity, “I must remind you that I am hostess this evening—and must be treated with the dignity due my position.”

“You might also add that we met for the first time not more than an hour ago,” he said.

“I do.”

“But it has been an unforgettable hour,” he responded.

Another couple strolled by in the moonlight.

"Look here," Florian said suddenly. "Why can't you come down for the week-end in Kelowna soon? The family will be keen on you. They've all heard about you from your father. My sister Linda wanted terribly to come up to-night, but she had a sprained ankle. She'd be crazy about you."

"I should love to come," Autumn assured him.

"I'll tell you what," he suggested. "Drop down for the polo game a week from to-morrow and stay over Sunday. I promise you a good time. Your father owes my governor a visit too. He hasn't been down for months. Let's make a real party of it."

"I'll speak to father about it."

"Right!" he said.

"Let's go back, Mr. Parr," Autumn remarked. "I'm forgetting my duties."

"I'll come if you'll call me Florian," he stipulated, in a voice so low and engaging that it brought her throaty, pleased laughter.

"Very well, Florian," she responded, and they retraced their way to the brilliantly lighted house.

The music floated out to them when they mounted the steps to the piazza that was completely festooned with honeysuckle in sweet and heady bloom. Florian caught her arm.

"Let's finish this dance before we go in," he said, and drew her lightly away on the rhythm of the waltz that was being played.

The piazza was in darkness, away from the moon, and as they waltzed to the farther end of it, they found themselves alone. There Florian paused, drew her close and brushed her hair with his lips.

"I think I'm going to love you," he whispered.

Autumn's lips and cheeks glowed faintly, and she experienced the old, swift sensation of being deliciously drugged. Then, for some unaccountable reason, she thought of her mother, Millicent, whom she could recall only as a dream, and of that other Odell woman, known only as a myth, the woman who had been her grandmother. She thought then of men in England and men on the Continent, whom she had played with until they merely bored her. One especially she remembered—a blue-eyed youth who had been maimed in the war. The Odell women had been no respecters of hearts, old Hector had said. The Basque bell! She winced suddenly and drew away from Florian. Was it for this, then, she had left behind her that life she had lived for the past nine years?

Casually, and without a word, she led Florian back into the rectangle of light from the open French windows, and a moment later they were among the dancers in the drawing room.

When the waltz had ended, Autumn spoke a quiet word to her father and slipped away up the rear stairs to her own room.

Autumn knew not what mad impulse had possessed her to desert her father's guests and come out here to be alone on the silver-lit range. In her own room it had taken only a minute or two to change into her riding clothes, steal down again and out to the stables where she had saddled her horse, and come galloping away under the pallor of the night. Some yearning for escape, she knew, had prompted her act. She realized now that she had run away from Florian Parr. It was from the Florian Parrs she had run when she had left that shallow life she had known in Europe—the Florian Parrs, in whom deep passions were merely quaint and laughable.

She was well within the Landor ranch before she realized the direction she had taken. She discovered now that the ruddy glow toward which she had been riding for the past few minutes was at the entrance to a deep ravine that was flowing with moonlight, the white birches ghostly fountains within it. Beyond, she could see the lambing pens, the herder's cabin, and on the hillside the strange, nebulous forms of hundreds of recumbent sheep, as though fixed in a silver spell. Faint currents of dewy air brushed her cheek, the fragrant wraiths of mountain lilac, mallow, wild-rose and fern.

She had been sitting there for minutes, breathing deeply of the night's enchanted perfume, when a sound behind her caused her to draw sharply on the reins and wheel her horse about. Another rider was coming down the narrow trail, his form looming black and high against the moon.

"Hello, there!" a man's voice challenged her, a level voice, unhurried, its intonation rich and deep.

As he drew closer Autumn could see that he was bare-headed, dressed in riding breeches and the collar of his dark shirt carelessly open.

"I am Autumn Dean," she announced quickly, as he came alongside her and halted his horse.

Although the moonlight made an obscure mask of his features, she thought she saw a look of puzzled surprise cross them.

"Autumn Dean!" he exclaimed, and extended his hand.

"Why—Bruce Landor! It *is* you, isn't it?"

Above their clasped hands, Autumn saw his smile—the boyish, quizzical smile she remembered.

"I was sure it was you—at once," he told her.

A thrill of uneasiness coursed through her—a queer, unsteady feeling that left her ridiculously irritated at herself.

"Why didn't you say so, then?" she demanded.

He held her hand warmly and smiled at her. "I have learned to take nothing for granted," he observed. "But—I understood you were celebrating over at your place to-night. How do you happen to be here?"

"I don't believe I could even explain that myself," she said a little blankly. "I just rode away, and—I'm here."

He smiled again and took a cigarette from his breast pocket, struck a match and lighted it between his cupped hands. In that one brief moment she saw the dark, crisply curling hair that was cropped short, straight dark brows rather heavy above eyes that she remembered now were a deep blue, a nose well-formed and sensitive about the nostrils, and a mouth that was somewhat full but straight-drawn and obstinate. In the sudden realization that she was giving him a shameless scrutiny, she wrenched her gaze away in the instant that he looked up at her.

"I had expected to see you over at our dance to-night," Autumn said. "Or were you not the least bit curious?"

"Curious?" He regarded her intently. "Scarcely—curious. I should have come if I had been able. This happens to be a very busy time for me—and besides, mother has taken another bad spell."

"Oh, I'm very sorry. Father told me she had been quite ill. I should have been over to see her if I had had time. Do you think she would remember me, Bruce?"

His eyes rested gravely upon her face. Her hand moved nervously to her cheek as his look held hers, the moonlight seeming to go thin and extraordinarily translucent between them.

"I doubt it," he said at last. "You are grown-up now."

"Won't you take me down to see her?"

"Now?"

"Why not? It's still early, and I can ride back that way. Unless, of course, she's asleep."

"She never goes to sleep until I come in," Bruce told her.

"I should love to go down, then," she said.

Bruce glanced once in the direction of the ravine. “I can come back here later,” he said. “Let us go this way, then.”

He led the way across the slope to a point from which the light in the Landor house was plainly visible.

“I hope you will not be shocked at mother’s condition,” he said. “She has had a stroke, you know, and it has left her partially paralyzed. She may not even remember your name.”

“What a pity,” Autumn said. “She was always such a proud, capable woman.”

They rode side by side in the flickering tree shadows under the moonlight and talked of what had happened to them since they had been together at school. Autumn found it hard to tell of the petty interests that had occupied her mind during those years while Bruce had been struggling forward on the sacrifices his mother had made in order that he should achieve an education that would fit him for the business of living. How purposeful his life had been, how pampered and futile her own!

It was only when they reached the long avenue of Lombardy poplars leading to the Landor house that their voices ceased. Bruce seemed suddenly to have become preoccupied with something apart and remote as he rode slowly forward, his eyes fixed upon the house that stood among the shadows at the farther end of the avenue. A cool ripple of apprehensiveness passed down over Autumn’s body, a feeling ominous and totally strange to her experience. She recalled now that as a girl she had always been afraid of Jane Landor, though she had never known the reason. And now, within a room there beyond that glowing window, lay the helpless form of the woman whose forbidding manner had often caused Autumn to shrink from her. It was not fear that overcame her now, but pity—deep pity for the woman whose staunch fortitude had been reduced to frailty by a life that had beaten her at last.

When Bruce finally dismounted before the doorway and stretched his hand up to her, she laid her own slender one within it and got down. For a moment she clung to his hand and hesitated.

“Wait, Bruce,” she whispered, and the thought struck her that she should not have come like this to see Jane Landor.

He smiled down upon her and folded his other hand over hers. “You look —frightened,” he said, leaning close to her.

At his nearness she experienced a faint swaying of the senses, as she had done when she had paused alone there at the entrance to the ravine, the

turbulent fragrance of earth and air borne in upon her. “Not frightened,” she told him, “only—somehow strange.”

He laughed softly. “I can understand that,” he said. “I have sometimes felt it myself. But that will pass. Come along in.”

She followed him into the house. The large room was in darkness, but a light from the open doorway of an adjoining room cast a soft glimmer over the old-fashioned furnishings of the place.

Immediately a woman’s voice, small and nervous to the point of querulousness, spoke from the inner room.

“Is that you, Bruce?”

“Yes, mother. I’ve brought a visitor to see you.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then, “A visitor? Who?”

“I’ll let you figure that out for yourself,” Bruce said, and led Autumn into the room.

Jane Landor was in a half-sitting position among the pillows, a light attached to the bed above her thin, colorless face. Autumn had expected to find her changed from the woman she remembered, but she was not prepared for what she saw there under the soft light of the bed-lamp. She drew back instinctively before the look from the fierce black eyes that were turned upon her as she stepped through the doorway.

“Come in where I can see you,” Jane Landor ordered, and struggled to draw herself up for a closer look at her visitor.

Autumn stepped into the light and stood for a moment smiling down at the frail woman.

“Don’t you remember me?” she asked in a soft voice that was none too steady.

Jane Landor’s face twisted suddenly as if in spasm. She lifted her thin hands to her wasted cheeks and drew her breath in a quick gasp.

“You! You!” she cried. “Millicent Odell! What brings you back here? Take her away, Bruce! Take her away!”

Her voice was a hysterical shriek now. She covered her eyes with her hands as she lay back sobbing among the pillows.

Bruce was beside her instantly, his arms about her shoulders. “Mother—mother, it’s Autumn Dean,” he tried to reassure her. “Don’t you remember Autumn? She has come back.”

His face under the light was shocked and bewildered.

“Take her away, I say!” Jane Landor insisted vehemently. “Nothing but death follows in the way of the Odells!”

She clung to Bruce, who tried in vain to soothe her, and Autumn stole in a trembling daze from the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER V

BREAKFAST in the Dean household had always been a ritual. In his busiest season Jarvis Dean nevertheless attended his table of a morning with the leisurely grace of a country gentleman. If a man could not begin the day becomingly, the Laird maintained, he had better remain in bed.

He was in good spirits this morning as he sat in his place, his daughter on his right and old Hannah opposite him at the end of the table nearest the kitchen. Hannah Stewart had, since the death of her mistress twenty years before, been accustomed to eating with the family unless there were guests. This arrangement had seemed to Jarvis to be the most sensible one while Autumn was small and had to be attended to, and later Hannah was so much one of the family that it was unthinkable that she should eat alone. Hannah had seen to it that the paper streamers and other decorations that had festooned the dining room for the dance of the night before had been cleared away and the place restored to its wonted homely austerity. She would give her attention to the drawing room and the rest of the house as soon as the meal was over. Here in this room, however, life had returned to its accustomed way.

To Autumn, it seemed that some perverse fate had ordered the quiet scene so that she might find it impossible to seek an answer to the questions that had assailed her mind throughout an almost sleepless night. She had ridden home from the Landor place and had returned to her father's guests with a feeling that some curse had been laid upon her. She had moved about under a black spell that was as unreal to her as a delirious dream. And when it was all over and the last guest had gone, she had hurried to her room and lain awake until dawn.

Her father turned his eyes searchingly upon her as she seated herself at the breakfast table.

"It was a little too much for you, that business last night," he observed gently. "You look stale this morning."

"I didn't sleep well," Autumn admitted. "I'll be all right when I've had a little rest."

She had permitted her father to know only that she had indulged an impulse last night to get away alone for a ride in the moonlight; it had been impossible to tell him of her frightening visit to the Landors.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with the women nowadays,” Jarvis continued. “In my time a young woman could dance all night and go to work the next day and be none the worse for it. But the women to-day have gone to pot.”

Old Hannah sniffed. “I don’t see that your men nowadays show much to brag about.”

The Laird smiled. “Aye, they’re a feckless lot, and have a mighty high opinion of themselves.”

“It’s hard to judge the present by the past, Da,” Autumn ventured.

“Aye, my girl, there’s something in that, too. It’s the times that make the difference. It was a hard life we lived when I was a youngster—and it made hard men of us.”

And hard women, too, Autumn thought, her mind upon Jane Landor.

“It’d take more than a hard life to make anything o’ the like o’ that Parr lad, I’m thinking,” Hannah suggested.

“There’s no way of telling that,” Jarvis countered. “There’s good blood in the boy. His father comes of a good line.”

“The world’s full of fools who can boast of good fathers before them, then,” said Hannah stoutly.

“Right enough,” declared Jarvis, chuckling to himself. “It takes two to breed even a flock of culls.”

“Will you be using the car to-day, Da?” Autumn asked abruptly.

“No. I’ll be down at the pens till supper. Haven’t you done enough traveling to be content for a while?”

“I have some things to do in town,” she said. “I’ll leave right away and be back early.”

“There’ll be no call for haste,” the Laird cautioned her. “You drive that car like something that had lost her wits.”

Autumn smiled at him. “I’d lose them completely, Da, if I had to sit and watch you drive it.”

Her father grunted. “There’s no taming you, I’m afraid. Well, you didn’t get that from me.”

“No,” observed old Hannah, “*that* she didn’t. She’s her own mother over again, and there’s little fault to find with her for that.”

Silence fell upon Jarvis Dean as Hannah told of how Millicent Dean had ridden to the hounds in the days when the Cornwalls of Ashcroft Manor were still famous disciples of the chase. Autumn listened eagerly and would have ventured a question here and there but that her father’s brows grew

darker and his countenance clouded the more as the garrulous old housekeeper proceeded.

"That will be enough now," Jarvis interrupted finally, in a voice that quieted Hannah at once and the breakfast was finished almost in silence.

"You'd better be getting away," the Laird advised Autumn as they got up from the table, and Autumn felt that her father had no desire to leave her alone with Hannah. "Get your things together and I'll have the car brought out for you."

And while Autumn was in her room preparing for the trip to town, she could hear her father's voice in stern admonishment to poor old Hannah.

Hector Cardigan possessed a horror of glaring daylight, and the rays of the late morning sun that filtered into his drawing room between the heavy drapes of the windows suggested to Autumn the curious fingers of the present prying into the crypt of the past. She sat in one of Hector's armchairs, a glass of iced tea in her hand, her lids half closed upon that searching beam of light from the window.

Hector had just given her the tea and was standing now with his back to the open fireplace, in which glowed still the smoldering ash of his morning's fire. Autumn stirred her drink, the ice tinkling lightly against the glass, and thought of Hector's look and manner when he had opened his door to her only a few moments ago. There had been a hint of apprehensiveness in that look, as though he had been living for days in anticipation of some disaster and expected now to hear of its having come. But that, after all, was Hector's manner at any time. It was rather that for a second or two he had stood and looked at her and said nothing, his eyes searching hers in swift and uneasy expectancy, until finally, with an embarrassed cough, he had bidden her enter. He had suggested a cold drink at once and had lingered unnecessarily, Autumn thought, over its preparation. Now he was himself again, standing there with his hands behind his back, making odd little snapping sounds with the joints of his fingers.

"Hector," she said, glancing up at him with sudden directness, "I came to have a talk with you. Do you mind?"

Hector smiled at her. "We used to get on very well with our talks, if I remember."

"I was a child, then, Hector."

"Yes—that's so, that's so. I really hadn't considered that aspect of our—our friendship, may I say?"

“I am no longer a child, Hector.”

“Very true, my dear. I recognize the fact—and I am forced to confess that I have never been a spectacular success in conversations with women.”

“You don’t have to be on this occasion, Hector. I am not here for small talk.”

“Hm-m-m—well, of course—”

“I want to ask you some questions.”

“I cannot promise—ah, definitely, you know—to answer any question a young woman might put to me. Can I, now?”

Autumn could not tell whether his manner was becoming evasive or merely apologetic.

“You can answer the questions I have in mind, Hector. I am sure of that.”

“Well, we shall see, perhaps. What, for example, are you going to ask?”

Autumn drained her glass and set it aside.

“I went over to visit Jane Landor last night,” she began.

“I thought you were giving a dance.”

“I left it for an hour or so—and rode over to the Landor place. I met Bruce and he took me to the house to see his mother.”

“I see. Rather singular conduct—for a hostess, I should say.”

“I’ll admit it was—for the time being, in any case. I saw Jane Landor.”

“You—spoke to her?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps a word. I forget. It was what she said to me that I have come to ask you about.”

Hector moved uneasily. “Poor Jane Landor is not to be held to account for anything she says these days, my dear. I understand she is no longer—coherent.”

“I am not going to hold her responsible for what she said, Hector. I want to know the meaning of it, that’s all.”

“Hm-m, well, my dear—what did she say?”

“When I stepped into the room with Bruce, she became hysterical. She declared to Bruce that I was Millicent Odell and pleaded with him to put me out.”

“Was that all?”

“Not quite. As I turned to leave, I heard her say that death followed in the way of the Odells.”

“Anything else?”

"Nothing. I hurried out and rode back home as fast as I could."

For several seconds Hector remained standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands folded behind him, his eyes at gaze across the room.

"Well, now," he said at last, "it was a somewhat curious greeting you received, I confess, and one likely to give you pause, but as I said before, the poor woman—"

"The poor woman, Hector, has lost her sense of time and place, but there is no use in your attempting to convince me that there was nothing significant in what she said."

"Hm-m—well, perhaps you had better ask me your questions, my dear, and I shall consider them."

"What sort of woman was my mother, Hector?" Autumn asked him bluntly.

He looked at her quickly, a startled expression in his eyes. "Your mother? She was the most beautiful woman I have ever known, my dear."

"I have heard that—years ago—from Hannah. Was she in love with my father?"

Hector smiled. "How can one know what is hidden in a woman's heart?"

"I know my father loved her—and loves her still, after twenty years. Did any one else love her?"

"My dear child, we all loved her," Hector replied with a sigh. He turned slightly away from her then and picked up one of the yellowed dice on the mantelpiece. "She was the only woman I ever loved."

The simplicity of the statement brought a momentary silence to Autumn. She was aware suddenly of an awed thrill, as though some haunting fragrance of the past had for a fleet instant possessed the room. But then, as she glanced covertly up at Hector, it seemed to her that she had always known that the elderly soldier had cherished a romantic and hopeless passion for Millicent. Autumn made an effort to regain her composure.

"Did Geoffrey Landor love her?" she pursued.

"I don't see how he could help it, really."

"Please, Hector. I want the truth. You know exactly what I mean. I must know."

Hector Cardigan stepped slowly from his place and seated himself in a large chair opposite Autumn. He spread his feet before him and slowly brought his hands together, the points of his fingers meeting.

"In my time, my dear," he began, "we were accustomed to living our lives in the best way we knew how, without giving much thought to the past.

This country was settled by men who had left their pasts behind them in the Old Country, and were eager to begin life anew in this. It is only natural if I should feel a bit embarrassed, perhaps, in the presence of a young woman who demands that I tell her what manner of mother she had. I have not grown used to the ways of young people to-day. It happens, however, that I can be just as direct in my answer as you were in your question. You say I know exactly what you mean. I do. And I tell you that Millicent Odell, who became Millicent Dean, was a woman of honor and integrity and would have gone to her grave before she would have broken the vows that bound her in marriage to Jarvis Dean." He paused for a moment and gazed unflinchingly into Autumn's eyes. "Is that an answer to your question, my dear?" he asked finally.

"Partly—as far as it goes," Autumn replied.

"I think it goes quite far enough," Hector said. "I confess I—"

"Let me come to the point at once, Hector," Autumn interrupted. "Behind what Jane Landor said to me last night there exists a life-long hatred—or fear—of mother. A woman doesn't ordinarily hate another woman without reason, and somewhere at the bottom of it all, if you take the trouble to search, you find a man. It isn't reasonable to suppose that father is the man in question. We know him too well for that. What I want to know is whether Geoffrey Landor is the man."

"I think I have answered that, my dear."

"Please, Hector!" Autumn was losing her patience. "Do you think that Geoffrey shot himself because he loved mother too much to live without her?"

"It is too late—too late by many years, my dear, to answer that question. I could believe it. I knew Geoffrey well. He was headstrong. He was—romantic, I should say. But he was hopelessly in debt at the time—and he had been drinking heavily, as I recall, for several days before the tragedy. Given the facts, I should imagine your guess would be as good as mine."

"And your guess, Hector?"

He considered the question a long time before he made his reply. Then he got suddenly to his feet and stepped toward Autumn, his shoulders drawn back and his head erect in soldierly bearing. "I refuse to answer that question, my girl. You should know better than to ask it. There is a point in such matters beyond which a man of honor cannot go. I must ask you to consider the question closed."

There was no mistaking his meaning. He would say no more about it in his present mood. On the other hand, his very manner was in itself a

confession. Autumn's question had been answered. She had no desire to leave her old friend in an unpleasant frame of mind. She looked up at him and laughed.

"Hector, you old goose," she said, "I believe you are almost angry. After all, there isn't much that either of us can do about it now. Come along, darling, and show me your flowers."

In Hector's orderly garden at the rear of the cottage, blue flags stood tall and brave, cupping the sunlight. Autumn stared at them and tried desperately to check the shaking uncertainty of her own heart; it was in Bruce Landor's eyes that she had seen that same clean and gallant blue.

CHAPTER VI

THE moods which had attended Bruce Landor all day had been of two disconcerting extremes. In one moment he would be swept up to heights of emotion as he thought of how Autumn Dean looked at him on their meeting last night, the quick, shy veiling of those luminous gray-green eyes of hers, a concealment that had brought a strange throb to his blood. In the next moment he would be in the depths, remembering how she had been sent away.

When Autumn had gone, he had done his best to soothe his mother and dissipate the fears that had beset her wandering mind. When he had finally succeeded in getting her to sleep, he had sat beside her for a long time, reluctant to call the nurse from her room.

All his life, it seemed, Bruce Landor had been compelled to adjust himself in one way or another to his mother's humors. He had scarcely known a day at home that had not been marred by her variable temper that often flared up over the merest trifle. It had begun when he was eight—twenty years ago now—and very soon he had grown, in his pathetic boyish way, to understand that his mother's sudden outbursts were her only means of preserving her sanity after what had happened to his father, that dashing figure romantically and tragically limned in memory. She must have loved Geoffrey Landor with a singular and rather awful intensity, and Bruce could imagine the dreadful scene in the birch-hung gully recurring to her with cruel suddenness in the midst of some familiar task. He could imagine her lifting her eyes from her sewing or from her work among her flower-beds, and beholding again the stark verity of Geoffrey Landor lying face downward in the shallow, amber-clear creek, his head lying downstream and the white stones under the water there becoming red as sullen garnets. Out of his own young heartbreak had grown a great pity and patience for her.

In all those twenty years Bruce had never heard his mother speak the name of Millicent Odell until she had spoken it last night. His memory of his father was on the whole very vague. But he could recall one afternoon in summer—it had remained with him like a vivid dream—when they had ridden together down the birch-filled gully where they had gathered pocketfuls of rounded pebbles from the creek and Bruce had used them in the sling-shot his father had made for him. He did not know how he had come to think of his father and Millicent Dean as friends, but somewhere in that dimly recollected past he had seen them riding together down some

forgotten trail and his boyish fancy had clung to the picture so that he had rarely been able to think of them apart. He remembered, too, the day when Jarvis Dean's wife had died. He had forgotten the words his mother had spoken that day, but the bitter spirit in which she had spoken them had lingered with his curiosity concerning the relationship of the two women.

And now, after nearly twenty years, Jane Landor had once more spoken the name of Millicent Odell, with a bitterness and hatred that time itself had failed to vanquish. Of late, he knew, there had been something almost fanatical in the proud manner in which his mother had spurned Jarvis Dean, but Bruce had found some excuse for that in the haughty arrogance of the old Laird himself, who for years had lived almost as a recluse in his formidable turreted house. Jarvis Dean's manner to the world in general had been hostile, people said, ever since the death of his beautiful wife. If Bruce was perplexed at the Laird's stony refusal to acknowledge him even as a neighbor, there was at least some consolation in the fact that the dour sheepman treated every one alike, granting each a sort of individual eclipse with the extraordinary power of his unseeing eye.

It was mid-afternoon, the light falling moist and sweet from the green of the hills into the curved valley where the Landor ranch seemed to hide in humility from its more magnificent neighbor, the domain of Jarvis Dean. The ancient weeping-willow trees drooped like a ceaseless lovely rain into their own dark and earthy shadow, and like a phalanx of green-tipped paint brushes the long avenue of Lombardy poplars stroked the sky, swaying in a whispered rhythm from the corrals to the Landor ranch house. In the tiny patch of sunlight that lay like a gilded shield between the house and the somber poplars, Jane Landor's irises bloomed, purple, yellow, and then again purple, on each satin lip a brilliant sunny stain. Jane Landor's hands would probably never trim those beds again, Bruce thought as he strode down the walk leading from the house to the corrals. The voices of the ranch hands, the bleat of sheep, the occasional barking of a dog, were rarefied to unreality through the blue filament of the air.

From the woolshed came the whir-r-r of the shearing machine. Two or three hundred sheep stood in the corral outside, a ranch hand running them into the shed as quickly as the signal came from within. These were the pick of Bruce's flock of more than three thousand; they were great three-year-old Merinos, their bodies richly wattled, and their average yield of wool would be well over fifteen pounds. They were his great experiment in feeding for the best possible results in wool texture, and while other sheepmen had laughed at him and called him finicky and impractical, he had gone serenely ahead.

He went into the shearing pen, where the great tall hemp sacks were rapidly filling with wool. As the nervous sheep passed from the hands of the shearer, they were being caught by the brander, who gave each a smear from his branding brush. Bruce stood by and laughed at the ungainly look of a great-horned ram as, shorn of his magnificent coat and duly branded, he dashed to freedom.

When he had inspected the work and instructed his men, Bruce went out and made his way to the small pasture back of the poplars, where he whistled to his horse. When he had saddled him he mounted and rode off to the southward to visit one of his camps. He found the camp deserted. The flock, he knew, was grazing to the eastward, close to the edge of the Dean property. He caught sight of the sheep edging their way across the face of a hill. The herder was bringing them back to camp for the night.

Bruce rode out and circled to the rear of the flock, where he found his herder at work with his dog, bringing up the stragglers and keeping the sheep on the move toward camp.

"We'll be ready for your bunch to-morrow, Ned," he told the man.

"Right, sir! I'll start 'em in first thing."

Bruce ran his eye over the flock. "They'll feel better when they've been to the shearers," he said. "It was very warm for a while this afternoon."

"It was warm, all right. I found it hard to keep my eyes open for a while."

"You've seen nothing more of that big coyote hanging around?"

"I'm thinkin' ye'll see little o' that one from now on," said the herder. "Them two shots I got at him day before yesterday come close to puttin' him away for keeps. But, since ye're askin', I *did* hear something this afternoon over on the Dean place. Seemed like it was down there somewhere near the Gulch—or beyond."

"You heard something?" Bruce asked.

"It sounded like one o' them cats we get up in the hills sometimes—like a young-one cryin', it was."

"Did you go down to see what it was?"

"I went as far as the Dean place, but I could hear nothin'. I heard it once or twice after then an' I could 'a' swore it was a kid cryin'."

"When did you hear it last?"

"Mebbe an hour back—after I started headin' for home. I thought I'd come out in the evenin', just to make sure."

Bruce turned his horse about and looked eastward beyond the line that separated his own land from that of Jarvis Dean.

"Perhaps I'd better ride down that way," he said, then bethought himself. When he had been very much younger, he had heard the men talk among themselves of the haunted gully known as Landor's Gulch. His herder had doubtless been loath to venture too far that way alone. "You're sure you heard a cry of some sort, Ned?" Bruce asked him.

"Oh, indeed I did, sir. As I say—like a young-one cryin', it was."

"I'll go down and take a look," said Bruce and rode away.

At the entrance to the ravine, Bruce swung his long body out of the saddle and walked slowly into the birches, letting his horse wander off to nibble the sweet young grass. On a little rise of ground he stood and listened. The shimmering air held a sad stillness; even the coquettish young leaves of the birches drooped in a melancholy quietude.

He had been standing there only a moment when from somewhere deep within the birches came the tiny bleat of a lamb. Bruce knew it could not be one of his own flock. Ned was too experienced a herder to permit any of his wards to stray. Besides, the sound had come from well within the land of Jarvis Dean. The responsibility was not his and yet—he stepped down from the rise of ground and strode through the birches till he came to the creek. He followed the shallow stream downward until he came at last to the fatal spot which he had marked years ago and which he had visited occasionally during the summers that had come and gone since his boyhood—the spot where the sheep-herder had found the still form of Geoffrey Landor lying in the shallow creek.

He paused a moment and looked about him. The light of the waning afternoon was a pure amber sprayed with lacy leaf-shadows. Here it was, and on such a day as this, that Geoffrey Landor had last looked upon the world he had loved.

He lifted his eyes suddenly at the sound of a child's whimper. Only a few yards away, half-hidden behind the shining birches, a small boy was leading a lamb at the end of a rope. At first he could not believe his eyes. But when he called and the boy turned his face toward him and began to cry, Bruce knew him at once. It was the young son of Tom Willmar, Jarvis Dean's foreman. In a moment he had the boy in his arms.

"Why, Simmy! Where did you come from?" he asked.

Simmy buried his face on Bruce's shoulder and sobbed. The lamb promptly lay down in the fern that grew beside the water.

Bruce laughed as he hugged the boy close. “Where in the world do you think you’re going, Simmy?” he asked.

“I want to go home,” Simmy sobbed. “I want to go home.”

“Sure you do. Come along, son, and I’ll take you home,” Bruce comforted him.

He caught up the lamb under one arm, and carrying the boy on the other, made his way quickly out of the birches and whistled to his horse. Almost at the same instant he heard a woman’s voice call from the hilltop to the northward and looking up he saw Autumn Dean riding toward him. He hailed her and waited until she had come down to him and had dismounted beside him.

“Where did you find him?” she asked Bruce.

“Down there in the gully. He looked as if he was getting ready to put up for the night.”

“Simmy, you little imp!” Autumn said, stretching her arms out for him. “Come to me, darling.”

Bruce surrendered his charge and stood by, the lamb still in his arms, while Autumn wiped the boy’s eyes and cheeks with her handkerchief and kissed him to still his crying.

“Don’t cry, darling. Autumn will take you back home.” She looked at Bruce. “Could anything be sillier?” she said and laughed. “That’s Mo-mo you have in your arms. The men told Simmy that they were going to dock Mo-mo’s tail this afternoon and Simmy just wouldn’t stand for it. He ran off to hide Mo-mo in the hills. He must have been gone for hours before any one missed him.”

“How did you know where to look for him?” Bruce asked.

“We have young Dickie to thank for that. After all hands had made a frantic search about the place, Dickie confessed he had seen Simmy go away in this direction and I rode out at once. The men are scouring the hills. I had no idea he would have come so far.”

“It was sheer luck on my part,” Bruce told her. “One of my men was over this way and told me he thought he had heard a child crying. I took a run over and—”

“Simmy, you little idiot!” Autumn scolded the boy. “We might never have found you. If it hadn’t been for Bruce—”

She cuddled the youngster and smiled over her shoulder at Bruce who stood watching her.

“Send the reward to Ned, my herder,” he said.

She set the boy on his feet and drew a sigh of relief as she looked down where the birches stood along the creek. Abruptly and disquietingly out of the obscure weave of the past, a pattern, a color, stood out vividly before her. This was the gully she had visited years ago against her father's desires.

"I used to come down here often," she said.

"I still do—sometimes," Bruce replied slowly.

She was sorry then that she had spoken. A wistfulness had come into Bruce's eyes that caused her to turn away.

"Come along, Simmy," she said quickly. "We've got to get you back home."

"I'll go along with you," Bruce suggested. "You won't be able to manage alone."

"Thanks, Bruce," she said, and got into her saddle at once.

When he had seated the boy before her, he lifted the lamb and mounted his horse, and in a moment they were riding slowly up the hillside on the way to the trail that led back to the Dean ranch house.

"I hope you will try to forget what happened last night, Autumn," Bruce said when they had gone a little way in silence.

Autumn turned to him and smiled reassuringly. "One doesn't try to forget such things, Bruce," she replied. "One tries to understand them."

"That's better, of course," he said. "I am sorry it happened."

"It couldn't be helped. It was I who insisted on going down. Besides—I think I'm glad rather than sorry."

"I can't quite see that," Bruce protested.

Autumn was silent for a moment before she replied. Finally she turned and looked squarely into his eyes. "You and I, Bruce, have grown up together—without knowing much about ourselves. I lay awake last night wondering why your mother should have hated mine for twenty years or more. I think I have learned the reason. I spent an hour to-day with Hector Cardigan."

"Hector?"

"Yes. Has it ever occurred to you that your mother's bitterness comes of __"

She hesitated and Bruce spoke up. "Of jealousy?"

"Do you think it possible that the two—your father and my mother—may have been in love with each other?"

Bruce's eyes were straight before him as he replied, "I have never thought of either of them—without the other."

There seemed to be nothing to be said after that. They rode forward together, aware of a deep and silent understanding that was more than words. Once Autumn permitted her eyes to move quickly over his strong brown hands and along his arms to the powerful curves of his shoulders. And once he turned and saw that her rippling hair had come loose from its knot at the nape of her neck and had fallen deliciously about her rose-blown cheeks. Her hair must be a sort of auburn, he thought, but in the low sun it had tints of plum color. He found himself thinking that she had deep-sea eyes—mermaid's eyes, luminous gray-green. He wanted to tell her so, but forebore.

And just then a rider came racing toward them across the range. It was one of Jarvis Dean's men who had been searching for the lost Simmy.

CHAPTER VII

In his somber-toned study Jarvis Dean sat smoking his cigar. On a small, low table beside his chair a large book lay open, face downward, at the page where he had left off his reading nearly two hours ago. It was now five o'clock and the Sunday afternoon sunshine lay in long slanting beams across the dark green rug that covered the floor. He must have dozed off, he thought, as the clock on the mantel chimed the hour. He had no idea it was so late. Dinner would be on before he knew it. It was odd that Autumn had not yet come back. Florian Parr had come up from Kelowna for the day and the girl had gone motoring with him. They would be in any moment now, surely, drinking their abominable cocktails and shattering the Sunday quiet with their inconsequential chatter.

Well, the younger generation had come to claim its own. It was only natural, after all, he supposed. But the coming had irritated him. He had never given much thought to the younger generation until Autumn had returned unannounced and taken possession of the gloomy old house with no other thought, apparently, than that the place was hers. It was surprising, too, how immediate and complete the possession had been. Even old Hannah had readjusted her whole psychology with Autumn as the center and controlling force of the new order. That, no doubt, was what irritated him. He could never have admitted to himself that anything or any one in the world could have usurped his place in this house that had sheltered him for almost a quarter of a century. Nor was the girl conscious of what she had done—he would say that for her. She would be the first to protest that he was still master in his own house and his word was law. She was loyal, if loyalty could be said to exist in the hearts of these young irresponsibles, and she was affection itself. He had loved the girl devotedly during the years she had been away from him, but the feeling he had for her now that she was back had grown so deep that the tears started to his eyes now as he thought of her.

He was getting old, of course. That had much to do with it. But a man of sixty-odd had no right to think of himself as old. His shoulders were still erect, his eyes were as good as they had been twenty years ago, his voice was still resonant and steady. He could do a day's work with any of them. It was ridiculous to think of himself as old. It was no sign of senility that one's daughter had reached an age where she had a will of her own. She had come back here, of course, in spite of his expressed desire that she should remain

abroad. That had been regrettable. But he would have to face it out as best he might until he had had time to arrange his affairs so that he could take her away with him.

Just now he was more resolved than ever that they should quit the country. He had seen Autumn in the company of this young Parr. There was a nincompoop, if ever there was one. What was wrong with a man like old Elliot Parr that he could breed nothing better than a hare-brained numbskull like Florian? The race must be going to the dogs! And what could a girl like Autumn see in him? He wasn't even thoroughly a bad one—he was a mere nothing! Why in the devil hadn't the girl found herself a decent husband long ago? He blamed her Aunt Flo for that. Flo never had been one you could count on. Well, he would have no daughter of his mate with Florian Parr—much as he admired Elliot.

A cold chill passed over him as his thoughts turned to Bruce Landor. Jarvis had seen Landor and Autumn riding home together last night after that fool affair of the lost Willmar boy. What was getting into people that they couldn't take care of their own brats any longer? Damn it all, parents nowadays had no sense of responsibility. Well, he would look after his own, at any rate. If he was called upon to do so, he would tell Autumn emphatically that the Deans and the Landors belonged to different worlds and they would stay where they belonged. If that wasn't enough, he would go further. He would— But why get so wrought up over a mere hypothesis?

He got up quickly at the sound of a motor coming to a halt before the house. He tossed his half-smoked cigar into the fireplace and stepped to a small cupboard that stood back in one corner. He poured himself a sizable drink of his favorite Scotch blend and held it for a moment toward the sunlit window before he drank it. He closed the cupboard and went to his room on the same floor. He would have to brush up a bit before going down to dinner.

Florian Parr filled the two glasses a second time and handed one to Autumn. He was well pleased with himself. He had spent a large part of a beautiful Sunday afternoon in the company of Jarvis Dean's daughter and had watched her as she swung her car dizzily over trails he had never traveled before. He had listened to her gay chatter and had done his best to contribute his own share of small talk about London and Paris and the men and women that belonged to the world he had left when his father had made it plain that if he wished to remain in it any longer he would have to pay his own bills. It had been a delightful outing—almost like a visit with an old

friend. He felt very much at home here in the Dean drawing room; the furnishings of the place were somewhat outmoded, perhaps, but their delicacy was in fine contrast to his own masculine forthrightness. It was not difficult to feel robust and courageous in surroundings that were so obviously feminine. Besides, he had mixed the cocktails himself while Autumn was changing her dress and he had found it necessary to sample the contents of the shaker two or three times to make sure that the flavor could not be improved.

He had thought Autumn beautiful when he had sat beside her during their ride but he had never seen any one quite so ravishing as the girl who stood before him now and lifted her refilled glass. She was gowned in a coolly glowing white satin that clung the length of her body and flared out almost to the floor; small tips of green pumps peered out from below the white, and at her throat on a platinum chain hung a large single emerald, her father's gift, she had explained, on her twenty-first birthday.

He raised his glass toward her and smiled. "You may drink to what you please," he said, "but I'm toasting the queen of the Upper Country!"

"Queens are becoming so old-fashioned, Florian," she countered. "I am not flattered."

"My error," he apologized with a slight bow. "I'll compromise on the Princess—they're still in style, aren't they?"

"Expatriated," she observed.

"Good enough," he said, and drained his glass eagerly.

Autumn sipped her cocktail and took a cigarette from the box on the low table that held the shaker and its tray.

"You know," Florian went on, setting his glass aside, "I can't help thinking of you as carrying on the legend of your forebears—your mother and her mother. They must have been lovely creatures to have given life to such traditions as they have handed down."

"Lovely," Autumn said, "—and flaming."

"Lovely—and flaming!" Florian repeated. "My father has told me about your mother, especially. You must be very like her."

"I know very little of my mother," Autumn replied, "except what I have been told."

He came and stood beside her, erect and confident in his manner. His eyes were narrowed as he looked down at her.

"You will find me very abrupt at times, Autumn," he said. "I have learned it simplifies matters very often to speak one's mind. I have been

thinking about—us."

"Us, Florian?" Autumn smiled. "I'd almost swear you were going to propose to me."

"But I am," he said. "I believe you and I were made for each other."

She laughed lightly. "Why, Florian—what a quaint idea! I don't believe those words have ever been used before!"

"They may have been," he admitted, "but never more appropriately. We both come from adventurous stock. There is something untamed in both of us. We are both—gamblers. But I've never been more serious in my life. I want to marry you."

Autumn could not doubt his seriousness. The knowledge made her thoughtful. "Florian," she said, "you really *are* a dear." A perverse humor seized her. "Suppose I tell you that I'll think it over?"

"Excellent!" he replied, placing an arm abruptly about her shoulders. "You are permitting me to hope, then?"

She laughed up at him. "Not at all Florian," she said. "I am—in effect—refusing you."

His serious mood vanished suddenly. He was actually amused at the situation. He chortled and stepped back from her. It was the first time he had ever really proposed to any girl in earnest—and she thought she was turning him down! Jarvis Dean's girl at that, with a background as iniquitous as sin! It was that background that lent piquancy to his quest, after all, and besides, by the Lord Harry, he was crazy about the girl!

Presently his amusement subsided and his lips drew to a thin, petulant line.

"I'll give you time to think about it, Autumn," he said, striving to carry it off with a gay, inconsequential air. "When we are alone again, I'll tell you how I love you."

"And *how* do you love me, Florian?" Her tone was gently mocking.

Florian stepped toward her again and grasped her wrist. Autumn was amazed to see that his face had gone suddenly pale.

"Don't be a little fool!" he said. "You know when you've met your equal—in nerve—in contempt for life. You are going to marry me, Autumn, because we see—eye to eye."

He released her and walked away as Jarvis Dean's footstep was heard descending the stairway. Autumn turned to greet her father.

"Come along in, Daddy!" she called. "Florian has just been proposing to me."

Jarvis Dean's face lighted with a smile as he entered the room. "He'll be safe enough so long as you don't accept him," he said.

"I think it was the cocktails that did it," Autumn laughed.

"A good dinner will fix that," said the Laird, giving Florian his hand. "How are you, my boy?"

"Topping!" Florian said, as their hands crossed. "I hope you have no objection to my proposing to Autumn. I really couldn't help it, you know."

"None whatever, sir. It's my opinion that she has had some experience in the business. She ought to be able to look after herself by this."

"Rather," Florian drawled. "She managed the affair quite nicely, I should say. Can I help you to a cocktail, sir?"

"No," Jarvis replied, "I'm a serious man and have too much respect for my stomach, thank God, to punish it with such infernal concoctions."

Florian laughed and filled his own glass. "Father sends you his respects, sir," he said, "and would like to see you when you can take a day off."

"And I'd like to see him, too," Jarvis replied, seating himself.

"I have asked Autumn down for the polo game next week-end," Florian went on. "Perhaps you could find the time, sir—"

"Not yet, not yet," Jarvis replied. "It's a busy time of the year for me. Besides, you youngsters will have more fun without too many old codgers hanging about."

His big white head was thrust forward in its characteristic way as though he were eager to show an interest in the plans and projects of these youngsters while his mind and his obscure spirit remained withdrawn, remote. Autumn had seen the deaf and the blind make that same piteous effort at sociability.

"Now, Daddy!" she rebuked him. "You're just fishing. You want us to assure you that you are the best-looking and most fascinating gentleman in the Upper Country, and that no party would be complete without you."

The tapers of the Laird's infrequent smile lighted for a brief moment of pleasure in his eyes.

"I could go—perhaps," he admitted. "I'll see how things are in a week's time. I'd enjoy a day with Elliot Parr."

Old Hannah stepped into the doorway and announced dinner.

CHAPTER VIII

An hour before sunset the sky had been overcast, with a purple caravan of thunderheads in the west; the thrumming of insects and the humid, flower smell of the air presaged rain. On a grassy hilltop ten miles eastward from the Castle, Autumn dismounted from her horse and let the animal graze while she stood and looked into the valley below.

On the slopes that streamed into the valley like smooth reddish cascades in the low sun, more than seven thousand head of sheep moved in bands, twelve hundred to a band. At dawn the herders had started them from home on the trek up into the mountains to the very margins of the eternal snows, in the relentless, lonely quest for grass. They were being gradually maneuvered now to the bed-ground which would mark the end of the first day's journey. With to-morrow's sunrise the vast herd would be moving again, moving, with slow, colossal patience and trust, ever upward toward the world's rim. As Autumn gazed down upon that gray-white, living tide, into her senses came a strange, nameless nostalgia, a yearning of racial memory, an inscrutable awareness of remote ages when primitive man had driven his flocks upward into sweet hills in this same inexorable quest. Her throat filled with an inarticulate emotion as her eyes were held fascinated by that slow, silvery drift of life—the gentle, indomitable surge of the herd in a dreamlike unity.

Now, from the hillside directly opposite her across the little valley, a crow's flight half-mile away, came the limpidly sweet note of a bell. It seemed to Autumn that the sound was almost visible, floating like some silver bubble within that rosy dome of silence, lingering and vanishing into the infinity whence it had come.

It was the note of the Basque bell.

A fancy had seized her that morning while she had watched her father's men preparing for their departure. Only a week before, there had come to the ranch a youth of nineteen or twenty whose appearance had been so bizarre that the Willmar children had gathered around him with frank curiosity. He had come from the soda mines up north, and was seeking employment as a herder. He was slight of build, not over medium height, and on the back of his head he had worn a shapeless homespun cap, set so that a twine-colored mop of hair started out abruptly from beneath its peak. He had worn a short, tight-fitting coat, a jerkin, Autumn had supposed it was, also homespun and of a faded pea-green, so incommodious in the sleeves that the red joints of

his wrists stuck painfully out from beneath them. Under the jacket he had worn a checked shirt and where the jacket gaped aside, suspenders of a brilliant green drew his threadbare trousers almost up to his armpits, leaving his bare shins exposed. He had worn hobnailed boots, and had carried a birch stick over his shoulder, at the end of which a gray bundle had been securely lashed. The Laird out of the kindness of his heart, and probably a whimsical humor, had given him employment as old Absolom's helper. His name, they had discovered, was Clancy Shane, but Jarvis Dean had jocularly nicknamed him "Moony."

On a sudden impulse, Autumn had gone back into the house and brought out the Basque bell. She had entrusted it to the keeping of Clancy Shane, who had secured it to the wether of his flock. And now, from the opposite hillside, came the pure sound of the bell, singularly innocent across the hollow distance.

The sound turned her thoughts again to Bruce Landor, who had scarcely been out of her mind during the past week. She thought of their meeting at Hector Cardigan's, when she had gone to fetch home the bell, and of her telling him about Hector's conceit concerning it. There was something in the sound of the bell now that brought the lovely wraith of her mother before her out of the nebulous glamor of the past. This had been Millicent Odell's world, the world of the pioneers and the subtle architects of empire, and now in turn it was her world. Suddenly she was glad, glad with all her heart that she was back home where life had meaning, where life was a profound harmony.

All day this feeling had been strangely with her. All day, too, within her consciousness of powerful and elemental things had moved the awareness of Bruce Landor, or rather it was as though thought of him had lain, bright and constant, in the depths of her mind and was being revealed now in her own passionate response to the life forces about her. He was part of this life as she was, essentially a part of this spacious harmony. Her heart felt suddenly heavy and sweet with its insupportable burden of knowledge, the knowledge of herself and Bruce. She knew no defense against it. The reticent tenderness of the evening—the small murmurings in the sage, the plaintive note of a whip-poor-will in a wooded ravine close by, the wild, faint bleat of a stray lamb hurrying back to the flock, the slow, idyllic beauty of that onward drifting herd in a deep symbol of man's struggle and hope, a symbol of life itself—all surged in upon her with destruction to her defenses.

She pulled a bit of bloom off a sage bush and began to pick it to pieces with her fingers. There had come upon her a revelation that dismayed, frightened and exalted her. She stood for a moment looking down into the

valley where the shadows were beginning to deepen, then, impetuously flinging away the shrub which she held, she mounted her horse again and rode westward toward the Landor ranch.

Bruce Landor sat before the rough plank table in the herder's cabin in the ravine. The place was deserted now, the men having gone to the hills the previous day. The lamp stood lighted on the table before him. He had put the place in order and was ready at last to leave for home. He drew together the papers on which he had been idly speculating, making estimates of his returns from the season's shearing, and noting the increase over last year's gains. The season had begun auspiciously. He swung quickly about in his chair as a slight sound came to him from the door. Autumn Dean stood there in her black riding habit, a russet scarf at her throat, the dim light casting little facets on her brown leather boots. Her hat was in her hand, and her hair had blown free. Her face was a glowing cameo against the outer darkness.

"Am I intruding?" she asked, entering almost hesitatingly. "One of your men told me I should find you here."

Bruce got up hurriedly and drew out the other chair. A flush had mounted to his brows, and as he stood for a moment uncertainly before her, he drew his hand diffidently back across his hair.

"You certainly aren't intruding," he said. "I was just wasting time—with figures. But wherever did you come from?"

She seated herself and tossed her hat upon the table.

"Out in the hills," she said. "We had an early dinner, and I took a ride out for a look at the sheep. The men left for the range this morning. The evening was so soft and cool—I just couldn't go indoors. I came deliberately to see you after I got back. You see—I'm a bold woman, Bruce!"

"I'm glad you are! I've been as lonely as hell to-night. With the men all gone—"

"Loneliness is in the air, I guess. The sound of that darn bell did for me."

"Bell?"

"That bell I got from Hector, you know. I gave it to a young Irish lad that father hired last week."

"You mean you sent that Basque bell of Hector's into the hills? You'd better not tell Hector that."

"Oh, I don't know. I think Hector would understand. That bell wasn't meant to hang in a drawing room."

"But it's such a precious thing—out on the range all summer—"

"It will come back. It's charmed. Anyhow—I like the idea."

Bruce lit a cigarette and Autumn, watching him, thought how well-shaped and brown his hands were. "May I have one?" she asked.

"Sorry," he apologized. "You see, in spite of myself, I still think of you as the little schoolgirl I used to know."

"The one you fought for?" she asked as she accepted a light.

"The same," he replied.

"You'll have to get over that, Bruce," she told him. "I'm very much grown up."

"Perhaps I'm afraid of getting over it," he said bluntly.

"Why?"

"Because—as a woman you've been in my mind constantly ever since I saw you again that first night." Bruce leaned forward slightly and looked directly into her eyes. Her glance fell slowly, and a line of quick pain appeared between her brows.

"And that frightens you, Bruce?"

He rose abruptly, strode to the open door and stood looking out. A thin, misty rain had begun to fall. He tossed his cigarette out into the wet darkness and kept his eyes upon the spark until it died. He turned where he stood and looked at her.

"Autumn," he said simply, "you have been living in a world where men who were skilled in the art have made love to you. I know very little about that sort of thing. When I tell you that I've thought of nothing but you since that first night—I mean just that."

She looked at him gravely. "I rode over here to-night because I have thought of no one but you," she said softly. "But it hasn't frightened me."

"I've been thinking of one other thing, perhaps."

"I know, Bruce."

"Of course you do. We have talked about that. We will never know whether it was love that caused that tragedy twenty years ago. Perhaps no one knows."

"We do know they loved each other, Bruce."

"And we must settle between ourselves, once and for all, what bearing that has on our own lives. I have settled it for myself."

He moved back into the room and leaned against the table looking down at her. She returned his gaze for many moments without speaking. At last

she got up impetuously and began to pace to and fro, her hands deep in the pockets of her coat. Bruce looked at her, and his muscles seemed to ripple all over his body. Her lithe, tempestuous motion back and forth across the room was like that of some beautiful, caged animal.

Presently she turned on him. “You and I have our own lives to live,” she said vehemently. “It’s absurd to think that we should be ruled by something that befell two people whom we can scarcely remember. They lived their lives as they wished—I shall live mine, in my own way.”

She turned away from him abruptly and stood in the open doorway. The rain seemed to float across her face delicately spun as a gray veil. She remained quite still, knowing that Bruce had left his place and was now standing beside her.

He lifted one of her hands and kissed its soft palm. Then he took hold of her shoulders and turned her about so that she faced him. She let her head fall back and met his eyes solemnly.

“Autumn,” he said. “My darling Autumn!”

Autumn slipped forward and was in his arms, and Bruce was kissing her in a glowing dimness which seemed to have caught them both up from the surrounding shadows. The rain drifted in gently over the still depth of their kiss. It was a rain that left a light, glistening web over their hair, their eyes, a young rain that spun them into one indistinguishable passion.

“I love you, Bruce.” Her voice was a stumbling whisper. “Terribly—so terribly.”

Her lips moved softly over his eyes, over the line of his brown cheek where a hollow came when he smiled, and over his lips and throat. Presently Bruce placed his hands strongly upon her shoulders and studied her face.

“Enough to stand by me against them all?” he demanded gravely. “It will not be easy, darling—at first.”

“I’m strong enough for anything—with you, Bruce,” she replied.

CHAPTER IX

THE LAIRD was still up, though it was already an hour past his usual bedtime. He had come back from town and had gone to his study to wait for Autumn's return. An unwonted feeling of uneasiness had come over him when he had returned to find that the girl had not yet come in. He had dismissed the feeling almost at once, however, and had gone to his room and prepared for bed. Autumn was quite capable of looking after herself—he would have to get used to the fact that the girl had grown up and was no longer in need of his paternal guidance. When the rain that had threatened earlier in the evening began to fall, however, the feeling of uneasiness had come back upon him. He had put on his heavy dressing-gown and slippers and gone into his study where he had made a fire and seated himself to await her return.

When he finally heard the door open downstairs, he was startled. The dead stillness of the house and the sleepy patter of light rain had drugged his senses so that any sudden sound would have disquieted him. But as he got up and went to the door of the study, his heart throbbed so that he pressed his hand to his side and caught his breath.

In a moment Autumn was at the head of the stairs.

"Why, Da!" she exclaimed. "I thought you would have gone to bed long ago. You haven't been worried about me, have you?"

"It's late," he said. "I had begun to wonder what had happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling," she said, coming into the study and throwing off her jacket. "But I'm glad you're up. The fire feels good."

She went and stood before it, ruffling her hair with her hands.

"You'd better get out of those clothes," her father advised her. "They're wet."

"Not really," she protested. "I'll dry out here in a minute. I don't want to hurry away to bed just yet. It's so cozy here."

Jarvis seated himself before the fire. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"I've covered half the countryside," she said, smiling at him. "I started out early and rode up the valley for a look at the sheep. It's the first time I've seen them like that in nearly ten years, Daddy, and it was lovely—in the sunset and—"

"You had a lot to do," Jarvis said, disgruntled.

"Now, darling, you're not going to be cross with me for that," she coaxed. "I'm in no mood for a scolding."

"A lot of good it would do you anyhow," the Laird replied.

"Not a bit, dear." She laughed at him, then went and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "But I don't want you to worry about me one bit. I don't want to do anything to make you unhappy—and you know it."

Jarvis stirred uneasily in his chair. "You're going to drive down to Kelowna to-morrow—to the Parrs', aren't you?" he said, by way of changing the subject.

"Aren't you coming, too?" she asked him.

"There's too much to do here," he told her. "Besides, what would I do spending two nights away from home when there's no call for it? I like my own bed best."

"I may not stay over Sunday, then," Autumn replied. "I'm not sure that I won't be bored with it all—if the rest of them are like Florian."

Jarvis smiled. "You don't care much for the boy?"

"He's all right, darling—for what he is. I've seen so much of his kind during the past few years that I'm not particularly thrilled any more by the species."

"I can't say I'm sorry for that," the Laird observed. "They don't amount to much."

Autumn turned and gazed into the fire for a moment. She kicked a half-burned stick into place and watched the sparks go trooping up the flue.

"The fact is, Da," she said at last, "I came back to you to get away from all that. It doesn't mean a thing to any one except those who are cut out for it. And I wasn't cut on that pattern, darling. I never realized it so much as I did to-night when I stood and watched the sheep moving up the valley. It made me lonely as the devil."

"And so you stayed out all hours in the rain just to cure yourself of a fit of the blues," he retorted.

"No," Autumn replied softly. "I didn't do that exactly. I knew you wouldn't be home, so I rode on over to the Landor place and talked with Bruce for a while."

She glanced at her father's face to see what effect her words would have upon him. He gave no outward sign of having heard her except that his frame seemed to have become rigid and one corner of his mouth twitched nervously.

He spoke to her at last, his eyes gazing steadily into the fire. “I hope you are not going to make a habit of that,” he said.

“Of what, Daddy?”

“You know what I mean, my girl. I don’t want you going around with Bruce Landor.”

“Have you anything against Bruce?” she asked abruptly.

“Damn it all,” Jarvis burst forth, “must I be cross-questioned by my own daughter? Or isn’t it enough that I should give my opinion and look to have it respected?” He leaned forward in his chair and placed his hands heavily upon the arms, preparing to rise. “It’s time we were in bed. Let’s have no more of this to-night.”

Autumn did not move. She stared at her father, aware that she was becoming angry. She clenched her fingers and strove to control her voice.

“Da,” she said, “I am not trying to cross-question you—and I respect your opinion more than the opinion of any other man alive. But when I ask you what you have against Bruce, I naturally want to know.”

When he lifted his face after what seemed to her an intolerable interval, it was the face of a man grown incredibly old and worn. He passed his hand across his brows, and she could see that he was making an heroic attempt to speak.

Jarvis subsided into his chair. “I have nothing against the boy,” he said at last. “But you know as well as I do that there are reasons why I do not want you to go around with him.”

“I know what you have in mind, Da,” Autumn replied. “I have thought about it, too—and I’ve talked to Bruce about it. Bruce cannot be held responsible for the fact that his father took his own life—and I think it a little unfair that any stigma should—”

“Will you stop this talk!” her father commanded suddenly.

All Autumn’s resoluteness surged up within her. “If you insist, Da,” she said levelly. “I should prefer to talk everything over with you, but if I must order my life without coming to you—”

“Do you know that your mother and Geoffrey Landor were in love with each other?” His face was blanched as marble, and even his eyes seemed to have gone white with fury.

“I do, Daddy,” she said in an even tone. “And I know that Geoffrey Landor probably shot himself because of the hopelessness of that love. Bruce and I talked about it to-night.”

“You talked with him—about that?”

“We had to, Da,” she told him simply. “Bruce and I are in love. I’m going to marry him.”

The Laird had risen slowly from his chair, like some tremendous iceberg lifting its appalling shoulders above the frozen waters of the sea. “God in heaven!” he muttered, and then, completely and without warning, he crumpled back into his chair, his chin fallen forward on his breast, his gaunt frame heaving convulsively.

Autumn flew to him. Kneeling on the floor, she threw her arms about him.

“Da—for pity’s sake, what is it?” she pleaded, clinging to him.

He lifted one hand and placed it tremblingly upon her hair. His lips shook as he tried to speak, but the words would not come.

“Tell me, darling,” Autumn urged. “What is it?”

He swallowed as though he would strangle, and shook his head. “You—you can’t marry him,” he said thickly, and then his voice sank almost to a whisper. “Geoffrey Landor—did not take his own life.”

Autumn fell away from him, but her eyes were fixed upon him still as though in some terrible enchantment. Realization came upon her in agony.

“Da—tell me—did you—do you mean that you killed Geoffrey Landor?”

Her voice had been the merest whisper, coming remotely from her stiff lips.

The old man’s eyes became terribly revealed, as though some power had gone beyond his body and murdered his very soul. They were suddenly stark and desolate beyond any need of words.

CHAPTER X

THE brief interval that passed before Autumn heard her father's voice again seemed to encompass an æon of torture. She sat facing him, her hands tightly clenched, sat waiting against eternity, hoping against hope, for words from him that would dispel the horror that had descended upon her. She saw his lips drawn back in a livid grimace against his teeth, as though the thing he must tell were too cruel for utterance, too cruel to be transmitted from his own mind into the awful silence of that room.

Summoning her last reserve of courage, she leaned toward him and took his hands gently into her own.

"Tell me about it, Da," she said, scarcely above a whisper.

Her touch seemed to restore the life that had all but ebbed from his gaunt frame. She saw him make an heroic effort to draw himself upright in his chair; she saw his hands pass across his eyes as though to clear his vision, and then the rigid lips moved in barely audible words.

"You're getting me, Geoffrey," he said softly at last. "After all these years, you're getting me!"

Autumn turned from him, her limbs unsteady beneath her, and hurried to the small cupboard in the corner. Her hands trembled as she poured a drink into her father's glass and returned with it. To her surprise, he was sitting erect and staring before him with brilliant, almost fierce, eyes, and color lay along each rugged cheekbone like a bright leaf. He ignored the proffered glass at first and Autumn seated herself on a chair in front of him and waited for him to speak while the silence seemed a grotesque din of the throbbing of her own heart.

When she could wait no longer, she placed the glass at her father's lips, and spoke softly. "Da—take this, darling."

Mechanically he took the glass into his own hand, and without removing his eyes from their gaze upon vacancy, he drained the liquor to the last drop. Autumn took the glass from him and saw that his clenched hand relaxed upon the arm of the chair.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," he said.

"Let us talk quietly—and slowly, Da," Autumn said. "I shall understand."

She heard herself speaking, as though the words were coming through her from some one else, some one who had fortitude beyond fortitude, a

stoicism she had never known.

His eyes rested upon her in a brooding gentleness. He seemed to be contemplating her, she thought with a qualm, from beyond death. She rose quickly, took a cushion which she placed on the floor at his feet, and seated herself with her head against his knees. So they sat, looking into the flames that licked at the great logs of the fireplace, while Jarvis unfolded the tragic past, sometimes stroking Autumn's hair, sometimes letting his hand fall in absent idleness upon her shoulder, as though he were communing with himself and had quite forgotten her presence.

She did not interrupt him while he talked, but sat gazing fixedly into the fire. It seemed to her as if each detail of his story were fantastically visible there.

"Your mother was a siren and an angel, Autumn," he said, "—as her mother had been in her time. Your grandmother's hunt breakfasts were the talk of the Okanagan—she had sent to England in the early days for hounds and hunters and brought them all the way 'round the Horn. Her daughter, Millicent, was even more lovely than she was. You must know this if you are to understand what I am to tell you about your mother—and if you are to judge her kindly."

He paused, and into the monotony of his voice came a break.

"Every man who met your mother, Autumn, fell in love with her," he went on. "It was so before our marriage—and it was so after our marriage. I never found that hard to understand—I had fallen in love with her myself. Nor was it hard for me to understand how she came to fall back somewhat into her ways of coquetry after we had been married for a few years. Men would not leave her alone. They could not, it seemed. She loved me—I have never doubted that. But I was many years older than she and she loved life and youth and gayety. I was too set in my ways, perhaps."

He sighed, and Autumn patted his knee affectionately without speaking.

"There was nothing serious in any of these—these 'affairs,' as she called them—and she always tired of her admirers as soon as the novelty wore off, and as soon as they began to grow serious. It was an innocent sort of vanity with her, which she indulged quite openly. She loved the admiration of men, but she loved even more to let the world about her see that she was being admired. She would have found no pleasure in any sneaking love affair that was carried on where others might not see."

He paused while the clock on the mantel struck the hour. It was midnight.

"Not long after you were born," he continued, "Geoffrey Landor came here from the Old Country and bought the ranch that lay next to mine. We had been boys together in England. He was younger than I—a sort of ne'er-do-well who had married a woman of his own age who thought she might make something of him, I think. She had written to me and it was on my advice that they left England and came here to settle. I was as anxious to bring him around as if I'd been his brother."

One of the great logs broke softly in two, the sparks cascading into the glowing embers.

"Geoffrey was restless and reckless and full of charm. Millicent fell in love with him—and he with her. It was a new kind of love for her, but I mistook it for another of her brief infatuations. I knew it was different when it dawned on me that she never made anything of him when they were in public together. Discretion—that was new in Millicent. And then one day she told me—confessed that Geoffrey had won her heart."

Autumn heard Jarvis's hands moving slowly up and down the arms of the chair.

"I must have gone a little mad then," he went on after a pause. "There was no use in my trying to hold her. I knew that. She was gone already, you see. But I couldn't let her go. I hoped that I might do something to win her back, perhaps. The weeks went by, but I soon knew it was hopeless. She was kindness itself to me, but she would forget sometimes and go about the house like one in a dream. She would sit with me throughout a whole evening and never speak a word. I became bold one day and went over to see Jane Landor when Geoffrey was in town. I asked her if she knew what was going on between Millicent and her husband. She denied that it was so, but I knew she was fully aware of it. She was too proud to admit it. I was a little unreasonable, I guess. I told her what I thought of a woman who could not keep her husband to herself. She told me to go home and look after my wife. That was the last time I spoke to Jane Landor, except for politeness when we met in public."

His voice had become very low now, but strangely controlled.

"Spring came, and I knew Millicent and Geoffrey were having rendezvous, but there was not a breath of scandal. I said nothing at first. I said nothing until I could stand it no longer. Then I—I gave orders. I made Millicent a prisoner in her own house. I forbade her going anywhere beyond the grounds unless I went with her. Perhaps I was foolish in that. At any rate, I kept them apart. Millicent didn't protest. If this had been one of her silly flirtations, you see, she would have died rather than give in to me. But it

wasn't. This was real to her—and she didn't utter a word of protest. She obeyed me to the letter. Presently I heard that Geoffrey was drinking heavily and neglecting his work. The gossip of that was on every tongue. When he was found—shot to death by his own gun—it was easy enough to suppose that it was either suicide—or accident."

Autumn gathered her hands together tightly about her knees.

"I had gone up north to look at some wolf traps I had set the day before. I had told no one I was going there, for I wished to be alone in the woods and think over my problem. It was early summer and I went on foot. I carried a fowling-piece with me in the hope that I might raise a partridge along the way. Millicent was very fond of the breast of partridge. It was still early afternoon when I went out—along the way we go to Absolom's camp—but down the gully you wanted to follow that morning after you came home. At the farther end of the birches I flushed a couple of partridges and brought them down. I went on and inspected the traps I had set. I found them empty and returned the same way I had come. As I entered the birches, I came upon a brood of partridge chicks that kept running before me and hiding under leaves and keeping the woods alive with their ceaseless chirping. I realized then that they were the brood that belonged to the brace of birds I had bagged only an hour before. I was sorry for them, I remember, even then."

He paused for a long time, and a sigh of unutterable weariness seemed to pass all through his body. Autumn turned slightly and clung to his knees.

"It was there that Geoffrey Landor rode down upon me," Jarvis said at last. "He had evidently been drinking. I don't know what it was that brought him down there just then. He couldn't have known that I was there. No one knew. He seemed surprised at first, and looked at me as if he did not know me. Then he got down from his horse and came to where I was standing. He confronted me with an insolence that put me beside myself. I shall hear that taunting laugh of his to my dying day—and into eternity. I tried to quiet him, knowing that he had been drinking, but it only angered him the more. When I turned to go away from him, he stepped suddenly in front of me and whipped out his revolver. He told me he could not go on living without Millicent—that it had to be either him or me. It took me a minute or so to understand what he meant. He was actually challenging me to a duel. He looked magnificent as a god as he stood there instructing me with cool arrogance what I must do. Even then I did not believe that he meant to go through with it. To me it seemed an insane thing, even in those days. Then he called me something—it was an epithet that not only involved my own honor but Millicent's as well—and I struck him. I struck him with all my

might. I wanted to kill him. He lifted his hand quickly—the one with the revolver in it—probably to guard against the blow—perhaps to kill me. I do not know what was in his mind. I saw him fall face downwards—and I heard his gun explode at the same instant—a sort of muffled sound. I watched him then, and waited for him to get up. But he didn't rise. I kneeled and turned him over. Geoffrey Landor was dead."

Autumn's burning eyes were buried against his knees, but no tears came. The image behind her lids seemed to have seared away all emotion.

"What I did immediately after that I do not know," Jarvis continued. "My memory there is a blank. I think I dragged his body to the water to revive him if possible. When I saw he was past all help, I left him in the shallow water, face downward, his revolver in his hand. His horse had run downstream at the sound of the shot. I looked around me and wondered what I should do. And in the stillness came only the chirping of the partridge chicks. I turned and ran out of the gully. When I reached the open, on the top of the hill there where the trail turns eastward to the sheep camp, I sat down and thought of what I must do. I became very calm. I soon knew there was but one thing I could do. If I had gone to the authorities and told my story—just as it all had come about—I would probably not have been believed. I wouldn't have minded that, although life meant much more to me then than it does now. What I did not want was that the whole story involving Millicent should be brought to light. So far as any one knew, Millicent and I were as happy together as we had always been. For her sake as much as for my own, I think, I resolved to say nothing about it to any one. I came back home. Late that night, I saddled my horse and left word that I was riding down to Absolom's camp. Something drew me back to the spot where I had last seen Geoffrey alive. I think I expected to find him alive still. I don't know. I rode as far as the entrance to the gully and halted to listen for some sound that might reassure me. As I stood and listened, I heard nothing but the mad chirping of the partridge chicks. I have never gone back there since. The next day, one of his own men found Geoffrey's body where I had left it. I went to Millicent that night and told her that I was sorry. She had been weeping. I told her exactly what had happened. She did not look at me. She said, 'Your secret is safe with me, Jarvis.' Before the end of the summer she died of a fever."

His voice was emotionless now as the stark tale came to an end. He leaned forward slightly and clasped his hands.

"Now you know why I did not want you to come back here," he said simply. "I did not want you to come back—to this."

"You have nothing to fear, Da," Autumn murmured.

“Nothing to fear? God in heaven! Geoffrey Landor destroyed my life. It was not enough for him that he robbed me of my wife’s love. He laid upon me the responsibility of his own death. I have never recovered from that, Autumn. I have borne it all these years in secret. And now you tell me you want to marry the son of the man. It will kill me.”

The logs had crumbled down to loose and ruddy embers. Jarvis Dean’s head had fallen forward in complete exhaustion. His hand, that had been fumbling pathetically with Autumn’s hair, had fallen away. She heard him mutter broken phrases that seemed somehow unintelligible to her now. She tried to raise her head, tried to move, but a paralysis seemed to have gripped her body. She could not speak, nor would any relieving tears come to her scorched eyes. She knew then that this overwhelming thing was too colossal to find expression in the natural well-springs of grief; it was a tragedy fraught with the potential destruction of her very being.

As though she were suddenly invested with a strength not her own, Autumn got to her feet and smiled down at Jarvis as she extended her hands.

“Come, Da,” she said softly, “it must be as though it has never happened. We shall never speak of it again.”

He looked up at her and smiled in whimsical sadness. “My poor little Autumn,” he said, and the hand that had lain inert on the arm of the chair brushed across the stricken eyes, “my poor little Autumn—there seems no end.”

She lifted her head proudly. “You are wrong,” she said. “There is an end—even to this.” Her breath caught her, in spite of herself, like a barb in tire throat. “I must have been mad to-night—but I didn’t know.”

She threw her arms fiercely about him, all the pride and loyalty of her blood in the embrace. He patted her hand, and his lips moved without a sound.

Presently they got up together and walked in silence out of the room, Autumn’s arm about her father, his hand leaning heavily on her shoulder.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGHOUT the interminable night, Autumn knelt at her window in the darkness, watching the stars wheel across the sensuous velvet of a sky lately cleared of rain, until at last the blood red sail of a waning moon stood in the west, and she knew it was only a brief hour or so before dawn. Cramped with chill, she crept back into bed. In the fitful sleep that came to her, she dreamt that Bruce Landor was dead, and that somehow she had caused his death. She awoke to a thin, gray daylight, to find that her face was wet with tears. In the reality of her dream, she turned over on her pillow and gave herself up to despondent weeping.

When she rose at last to bathe and dress, she dared not look out of that west window where the red, dying moon had hung. In her despair it occurred to her that the moon had been suspended there in the west like a sinister symbol over the place where Bruce Landor lay sleeping. She hurried past the window to her bathroom, where she took a stinging cold shower as discipline to her rebellious, quailing body.

At their early breakfast table, which Hannah had made lovely with a centerpiece of daisies and cowslips on a yellow linen cloth, Autumn met her father with a mood as fresh and bright as Hannah's flowers. She had dressed in a skirt and jacket of bright blue wool, with a gay ruffled blouse of sheer batiste, a costume which had once before drawn from Jarvis one of his rare expressions of pleasure.

"I'm all ready to leave for Kelowna, Da," she said. "I do wish you were going along. It would do you heaps of good."

He looked at her with surprise. "I didn't think you were going till this afternoon," he said.

"I've changed my mind," she replied.

Hannah brought in the steaming cereal. As the old woman busied herself about the table, Autumn stole a glance at her father. It was apparent that he had had a sleepless night. Haggard lines underscored his eyes, and his stern mouth was set in a straight line of pain. But his manner betrayed nothing of what he had suffered during the night.

He glanced up with a heavy frown at Hannah.

"Did you remember to salt the oatmeal this morning?" he asked with elaborate severity.

Hannah glanced at him disdainfully. “Salt causes hardening of the arteries,” she retorted. “There’s plenty in yon porridge for you, sir.”

Autumn laughed, and Jarvis pretended to heave a deep, patient sigh. The meal progressed with small talk of things about the ranch, of the children of Tom Willmar, the foreman, of the likelihood of a good fruit and hay crop. If Autumn had never before been grateful for the presence of old Hannah, she gave silent thanks now to that homely, faithful body who sat at table with them, unconsciously helping to tide them over a painfully difficult hour.

The meal finished, Autumn prepared at once to leave for Kelowna. She did not again urge Jarvis to accompany her, but before she got into her car she threw her arms about his neck and clung to him for a long moment without a word.

“No doldrums now, Daddy,” she whispered.

He smiled at her, a grim, twisted smile, and she slapped him mannishly on the shoulder and then was obliged to turn away as she saw the tears start to his bleak eyes.

“So long, darling!” she sang and jumped quickly into the car.

“Take care of yourself,” he said huskily, “and don’t drive too fast. Good-by—good-by!”

She waved back at him and smiled through the blur of her quickly gathering tears. His stooped figure wrung her heart so that she was well out upon the road before she gave thought again to the resolution that had formed within her during the night. Then she brushed the tears impatiently from her eyes—there would be no more of that!

Unheedful of the Laird’s warning, she drove with reckless speed over the winding road, shutting out from her senses the painful beauty of the morning, with its assailing colors and perfumes of wildflowers that carpeted hill and glen. Where the sun slanted across a smooth hillock, violets, buttercups, larkspur and blue-eyed grass would be shining under dew as though beneath a great glass dome, and if she glanced aside in a sweet, leafy dell, there would be lily-of-the-valley and iris and lady’s-slipper. But these were not for her now, she thought bitterly, as she stared at the road that ran crazily before her, uncurling like a toy serpent of painted paper.

Where the trail branched southward to Kelowna, she swung her car to the left and followed the road to Kamloops. The morning was young and there would be plenty of time to run in upon Hector Cardigan before going on to the Parrs’.

Old Hector was at work among his flowers in front of the house as she drove up. She blew her horn and he lifted his head and looked at her.

“Well, well!” he greeted her as she came through the gate. “You’re abroad early.”

“I’m running away, Hector,” she replied with a laugh.

He cast an anxious glance at her. There was no way of telling what notions these youngsters might take. Besides, the girl was an Odell.

“From whom—this time?” he enquired, half banteringly.

“From myself, of course,” she stated. “Who else?”

Old Hector shook his head. “You’ll not find that easy, my dear,” he observed. “But come along into the house.”

She ran before him up the steps, through the open doorway, and into the drawing room where all the shades were drawn to exclude the morning sun.

“Let’s have light, Hector!” she cried and hurried from one window to another to lift the shades. “One would swear you were trying to hide something in this old house of yours. It’s positively spooky!”

He watched her, a helpless expression in his eyes, then smiled faintly as she tossed her gloves and hat upon a chair and helped herself to a cigarette from a box on the table.

“There’s little a man of my age has to hide from the world,” he said slowly.

“But you keep that little very well hidden, don’t you?” she countered, lighting her cigarette and tossing the match into the fireplace.

There was something in the girl’s mood that made him apprehensive. He moved uneasily to his accustomed position with his back to the open fireplace and clasped his hands behind him as he looked down at her.

“One never knows how well a thing is hidden, my dear, until some one attempts to seek it out,” he replied evasively.

Autumn looked about at the tapestry-hung walls, then flicked the ash from her cigarette.

“Nor how poorly it is hidden—until some one blunders upon it,” she added.

He smiled and rocked back and forward on the balls of his feet. He wondered what the girl was getting at. “Quite so,” he agreed, “quite so.”

Autumn got suddenly to her feet and tossed her cigarette away. “What a romantic old fraud you are!” she said abruptly.

“Me? I have never thought of myself—”

“Hector,” she interrupted him, “why didn’t you tell me everything you knew when I came here to talk with you last week?”

He regarded her suspiciously. “Did I withhold something?” he asked her.

She eyed him narrowly. “I am asking you why,” she replied.

Hector’s look was a challenge. “I prefer to be my own judge, my dear, as to what I shall tell concerning other people—or concerning myself, for that matter,” he said.

Autumn stepped close to him and laughed a little shrilly, he thought, a little bitterly. “Don’t you get hoity-toity with little Autumn, now,” she chided mockingly. “You can keep your old secrets. I know all that’s worth knowing about them, anyhow.”

Damn the girl’s taunting mood, Hector thought to himself. She was her mother all over again. How often he had seen Millicent turn suddenly flippant when she wanted to conceal her true feelings, whether of disappointment over a trivial thing or of grief so deep that it broke her impetuous, wild heart.

“The gesture seems oddly familiar,” he observed.

Autumn’s anger flared suddenly. “It will become even more familiar, then,” she retorted. “I have discovered who I am. From now on, I’m through with trying to be what I was never meant to be! It can’t be done. I’m going to be myself, Hector Cardigan!” The old man’s face had gone strangely pale. “Don’t look startled, Hector. Your secrets are perfectly safe with me—just as Jarvis Dean’s secrets. If men choose to fall in love and kill each other over a woman, it’s no affair of mine. Let the tradition go on. It’s the Basque bell, Hector, and nothing that you or I can ever do will ever stop it ringing!”

She snatched her hat and gloves from the chair and abruptly turned to the door.

Hector put out a hand. “Where are you going, Autumn?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“I’m starting for hell!” she retorted. “So long!”

He took her arm gently. “Won’t you let me talk to you?” he pleaded.

“You had your chance to do that last week,” she told him. “It’s too late for that now.”

She flung out of the house and ran to her car. In a moment she was climbing out of the valley on the winding trail that led to Kelowna.

CHAPTER XII

THE room into which the younger Parr girl led Autumn was cool and fragrant with roses. It had been done in pale green and ivory. A rug of fawn-color covered the floor.

"What a sweet room!" Autumn said as she glanced about her.

"I'm glad you like it," said the girl in a voice of careful indolence. "My room is there—next to this." She pointed with her cigarette holder, a long magenta affair which she held poised in her right hand. Under her left arm she carried a silvery mop which Autumn had already learned was a Belgian griffon. The girl was a slender ash-blonde, with eyes of a hazy violet, and lips that were brilliantly rouged.

The open doorway that led to the adjoining room revealed a mauve-toned boudoir that somehow seemed a perfect setting for the girl.

Autumn glanced at the room and then turned to pat the dog on the girl's arm. "What do you call him, Miss Parr?" she asked.

"His name is Koochook—which sounds a bit Eskimoish—but it's spelled C-a-o-u-t-c-h-o-u-c—which on the Ganges or somewhere means India rubber. And for God's sake, don't call me 'Miss Parr.' You'll scare everybody to death around here. My devoted parents tagged me with 'Melinda' when I was too young to have any opinions of my own. I get 'Linda'—but I prefer 'Lin'—if you don't mind."

"Rather not," Autumn replied. "I like it."

She saw that her bag had been brought in and unpacked, and her things laid out in orderly fashion on the bed.

"I had my faithful slavey attend to your clothes," Linda said. "You'd like a shower, perhaps. The bath is on the left, there, between our rooms."

"Thanks," Autumn said. "I'd like nothing better."

Linda reclined on a chaise-longue, smoking, her dog on the velvet upholstery beside her, while Autumn undressed.

"You're a sort of cross between me and my sister Elinor," she said as she watched Autumn appraisingly. "Elinor is the horse of the family. That may have sounded funny, but I didn't mean any reflection on you."

Autumn laughed, won out of her depression somewhat, in spite of herself. "Where is Elinor?" she asked.

Linda waved a languid arm. “God knows. Probably down pruning the apple-trees—no, I guess it’s not the season for that. Spraying them, maybe, or whatever it is they do at this time of year. Or she may be out shooting squirrels. She’s a little odd, poor Elinor, but you’ll like her.”

“I’m sure I shall like all of you,” Autumn said, a little helplessly.

“I’m not at all sure,” Linda protested. “We’re a bit touched, if you ask me. The stock is good enough, but something must have gone wrong in the breeding. The family takes itself quite seriously, too—except Florian and me. We spend most of our time laughing at the others—and ourselves.”

“There’s a saving grace in that,” Autumn remarked.

“You’re the only thing Florian has ever taken seriously—except polo,” Linda observed, blowing smoke rings. “The poor boy is hit—and hit hard.”

“Oh, nonsense!” Autumn laughed coolly.

But she colored as she felt Linda’s scrutiny change to a mobile, slow sort of approval.

“Can’t say I blame him, either,” Linda added. “You’d make a decorative sister-in-law.”

The girl was part and parcel of all that Autumn had left behind her in Europe. Behind her mask of indolence there was a rapacity for living. Autumn knew her kind very well, though she was somewhat surprised to find it here.

“Are you in love with Florian, by any chance?” Linda asked suddenly as Autumn tossed her negligee about her shoulders and thrust her feet into her mules.

Autumn smiled. “I don’t think so—not yet, at any rate,” she replied.

“I might have known as much,” Linda said. “The Parrs are such damned fools!” Her voice trailed away, as though it was too much of an effort for her to express her contempt for the breed.

Autumn hurried off to take her shower. When she returned, Linda was sitting where she had left her.

“I’ll be ready in a minute,” she said as she set about dressing.

“Don’t hurry,” Linda replied lazily. “No one hurries around here. Florian will probably be gnawing his nails if he isn’t getting tight. But it’ll do him good to wait. I was terribly sorry, by the way, that I couldn’t go to your dance. Florian said it was a great success.”

“He told me you were disappointed,” Autumn said. “I was sorry, too.”

“I had a bum ankle that day. Came home late the night before and tripped over a rubber hose somebody had carelessly left on the lawn. The

family accused me of being drunk, but I wasn't."

"We had the whole countryside there," Autumn told her.

"So Florian said. Bruce Landor didn't turn up, I understand."

Autumn started at the mention of Bruce's name. She turned away from Linda to pick up a garment from the bed, fearing that her face might betray the quickening of her heart. "His mother has been very ill," she said evasively.

"I know. She's been dying for a year. I believe nothing keeps her alive but sheer cussedness. She knows Bruce will have a chance to get around as soon as she's gone."

"You know Bruce—pretty well?" Autumn asked.

"As well as he'll let me," Linda replied. "I called him up again to-day to see if he couldn't possibly come down. Earlier in the week he was afraid he'd be too busy, but he said to-day he'd try to make it to-morrow night."

"He told me you had invited him," Autumn said. She wondered if Linda would note the unsteadiness of her voice. "And he seemed very sorry that he couldn't get down in time for the game."

Although her attitude was casual enough now, what she felt was something verging on panic. Bruce had told her that he could not go to Kelowna. And now—if he came here, it would be primarily because of her.

"You've known him all your life, haven't you?" Linda pursued with an interest that was agonizing.

"We went to school together."

"He told me so," Linda sighed. "Why didn't you fall in love with him?"

Autumn's hands trembled as she drew on her stockings. She got up and went to the dresser where she could see Linda's face in the mirror. The girl was stroking her dog idly.

"It probably didn't occur to me," Autumn observed with straightened lips.

"It occurred to me the first time I saw him," Linda said. "And no other man has meant a damn to me since."

"There's lots of time yet, Lin," Autumn told her.

"Time has nothing to do with it, my dear," Linda observed, her lids lowered in a resigned fatigue. "It happens—or it doesn't happen—and that's all there is to it. It happened to me in a minute. It won't happen to him in ten years—so far as I'm concerned."

Autumn, unable to reply, held her own gaze in the mirror, and, only half aware of what she did, applied a little rouge to the unwonted pallor of her

cheeks.

"Well, I hope he comes to-morrow night, anyway," Linda continued, as though to herself. "I feel rotten when he isn't here—and I'm worse when he is." She got up from the chaise-longue and walked across the room to look out of the window. "There comes brother Timothy. We'll have the whole family to dinner to-night. They're really not such a bad lot, Autumn, when they've had a few drinks. Almost human, in fact."

She remained standing at the window until Autumn had finished dressing, and was ready to go down.

"All set!" Autumn announced.

Linda turned from the window and gave her an appraising look. Autumn was dressed in a simple white net dinner gown, with turquoise drops at her ears.

"You're lovely," Linda said simply, and slipped her arm through Autumn's as they went together to join the others.

On the portico Florian met them with tall frosted glasses in his hands and led Autumn to one of the high-backed, deeply cushioned bamboo chairs. "I thought you'd never come back," he said. "I knew I shouldn't have let you get into Lin's clutches. From now on you're mine."

He went and got his own glass and returned and seated himself cross-legged on the floor at her side.

"How lovely this is!" Autumn murmured, as her gaze drifted out over the tessellated valley.

"It has never been really quite perfect before," Florian said in a voice that was flushed with a sort of urgency.

Autumn lowered her lids in the quick pain the words brought her. She bit her lips in vexation at her own feeble will, her inability to put Bruce out of mind, cleanly and definitively. She must play up now or be lost, she thought desperately.

"You are too free with your compliments, Florian," she said wearily. "You mustn't turn my head."

She looked across at Linda as she spoke. The girl had seated herself on the porch swing, her shapely legs hoisted above her and her feet braced against the chain upon which the swing was suspended.

"You might turn it and look at me," Florian ventured.

"Don't let him fuss you, Autumn," Linda said. "He always gets complimentary on a couple of silver fizzes."

Autumn smiled and looked out upon the panorama that lay below them. The Colonial mansion of the Parrs stood on a bluff overlooking the long crystalline mirror of Lake Okanagan. From the columned portico one could look down, in spring, upon a sea of bloom, the white, pink, and deeper pink froth of thousands of fruit trees in flower, apple, peach, cherry and pear. And beyond the rosy nacre of the orchards lay the long blue shaft of the lake, vanishing behind misty headlands on the north and south. Here, in the ample security of their well-being, the Parrs had lived for years, a lusty, swift-living and pleasure-loving family whose brilliant exploits had become colorful legend in the countryside. It was the boast of J. Elliot Parr that at the age of sixty he could still show his son Florian a point or two at polo, and that a fencing foil was still sweet in his hand. Certain people with a spiteful turn of mind might say that it was not surprising that Mrs. Parr had given up the ghost long ago, but that was neither here nor there so far, at least, as the younger generation of Parrs was concerned.

Here, thought Autumn as she continued to gaze down toward the lake, was beauty of another kind, a richer, more voluptuous beauty than that of the simple, vacant grandeur of the hills at home. There was, in comparison, a lush incontinence about this country that reminded her of a group of modernistic paintings she had seen in an exhibition in Paris. But as she watched the play of cloud shadows on the lake below, a pang of loneliness smote her for the majestic, uncompromising sweep of the mountains she knew, those mountains that belonged to herself—and to Bruce Landor. Ah, Bruce, Bruce! To be alone with him again in the rude cabin in the ravine, with the rain enclosing them, and all that had happened in the meantime only a hideous dream!

Florian's dog, a copper-colored Irish setter, came bounding up the steps and laid his head wistfully on Autumn's lap.

"You dear old fellow!" she said, pulling the dog's sleek ears. "How friendly he is!"

"Case of—loved by me, loved by my dog," Florian said, getting up and setting his glass aside. He proffered Autumn his cigarette case.

"What's his name, Florian?" Autumn asked, helping herself to a cigarette.

"Tantivy," Florian told her.

"He's adorable."

"You may have half of him," Florian replied, "whenever you say the word."

“I wish some one would bargain for half of Elinor’s hound,” Linda remarked. “Lord, how I hate that beast!”

“Has Elinor got one, too?” Autumn asked.

“She has,” Florian told her. “It’s an English bull and he eats anything—very fond of griffons.”

As he spoke, Elinor came up the slope from the orchards, her lugubrious-faced bulldog at her heels. She was dressed in khaki breeches and flannel shirt, and her short, dark hair hung raggedly about her head. She had striking dark eyes and a full, irregular mouth, and there was a certain shyness in her manner that won Autumn to her immediately. She shook hands briefly with Autumn.

“So this is Autumn Dean,” she said. “I’m so glad you’ve come to see us.”

“Thank you,” Autumn replied. “I’m very glad I was invited.”

“Where’s Tim?” Linda asked. “I saw him drive up several minutes ago.”

“He’s talking to father in the garage,” Elinor replied. “They’ll both be here in a minute or two. Isn’t any one going to offer me a drink?”

“Meaning me, of course,” Florian said, filling a glass and handing it to her.

“They manage things with bad grace around here, where I’m concerned,” Elinor said, with a fleeting smile at Autumn. “You’ll have to overlook that.”

“You’re scarcely human, dear,” Linda remarked, stretching her arms and yawning.

“I have my points, though, darling,” Elinor observed as she took a generous gulp from her glass. “I can at least tell a Shropshire ewe from a Macintosh red. Lin thinks a bobtail flush is a breed of dog.”

She laughed at Autumn, drained her glass and went into the house to prepare for dinner.

“Filthy!” Linda flung after her as she disappeared.

“Blame yourself for it,” Florian said. “You always get the worst of it when you run into Elinor. Here’s Dad and Tim.”

The two men came up the steps as he spoke. J. Elliot Parr was a tall, slightly florid man, his hair thinning a bit, his chest thrust out in the determined effort to defer an inevitable corpulence. He was dressed in white ducks and a polka-dot tie, a handkerchief bordered with polka-dots nattily pointing from his breast pocket. He greeted Autumn with a vigorous handshake.

"Well, I'm damned if this isn't a pleasure!" he boomed. "So this is Millicent's girl! Well, well—and a fine young filly she is, too. Eh, Florian?"

"Don't I get in on this?" asked Timothy.

Autumn took the hand he held out to her and met frankly the searching gaze he bent upon her. He was a heavy-shouldered, darkly good-looking man with eyes in which there was a constant and aggressive search.

"Don't be afraid of him, Autumn," Linda piped up. "He was divorced last year for preferring blondes."

"Shut up!" said Florian agreeably.

"I'm not narrow-minded," Timothy assured Autumn. "My only kick against the world is that there are too many good-looking women in it, regardless of coloring. A man can't get around to them all."

"Timothy does his best," Linda jibed from her place on the swing.

"But what did your pater mean by keeping you tied up over there in the Old Country all these years?" the elder Parr enquired.

"He probably thought it was for my own good," Autumn returned. "But I'm awfully glad to be back home again."

"Hell, yes! I should think so!" Elliot declared heartily. "There's no room over there for a girl like you. You want space to move around in, eh?" He turned away to enter the house. "Well, make yourself at home, my dear. Your mother had many a good time in this house, if I do say so myself." He took out his handkerchief and mopped his red brow. "But that was a long time ago."

He disappeared through the doorway as he spoke and Timothy took up the conversation as he poured a cocktail and seated himself.

"Well, I've laid a substantial bet against your chances in the game tomorrow, Florian," he said. "Alex Campbell seems to think you ought to win."

"Alex is a wise bird," Florian retorted. "We ought to nick them for a margin of three goals, at least."

"Not with young Hutchinson back in the line-up," Timothy argued. "He'll ride you into the ground."

"You haven't a chance, Florian," Linda put in. "I have two bets out against you."

"Keep it up, you bounders!" Florian laughed. He leaned toward Autumn. "It's a rule of the house. They bet against me to keep the luck on our side."

Autumn looked at Timothy and gave him a supercilious smile in return for the challenge in his eyes.

"I'd like to put ten dollars on Florian's team, even money," she suggested.

"O.K.!" he said. "I don't know any one whose money I'd rather take."

Autumn listened while the talk centered on the fine points of the game, and strove to be attentive to it. Presently a Japanese, whose face was an obliquely discreet mask, appeared in the doorway and announced dinner. They got up at once and made their way to the dining room, Florian taking possession of Autumn as they entered the house.

The sun had already set when they left the table and drifted out again to lounge about the porch.

Florian took Autumn's arm and led her down the crude stone steps into the sunken garden, which was a forgotten wilderness of flowers and fern and tangled brambles. Here were meadow rue, moss pink, forget-me-not and roses, tall blue steeples of delphinium, and white fountains of spirea. Autumn involuntarily drew her breath at the tumbled beauty of the garden. At the extreme end of it a spring trickled over mossy stones and formed a honey-colored pool in the early twilight.

They stood together looking down into the pool. Autumn stared at their reflected images and thought bleakly that if she had not met Bruce she might be happy now, in that careless, untouched way that she had been before. Florian was amusing, attractive, companionable, in spite of his overbearing confidence, which seemed to be characteristic of the Parrs. She moved restlessly, irked by her own heavy mood.

Why had she and Bruce come together again? And why had some mischievous alchemy transmuted them from their own independent selves into two beings, each incomplete without the other? That was what she felt now, she thought wanly—incompleteness. That was what she would always feel whenever she thought of Bruce Landor. But that would never do! She must put that one brief, unforgettable hour behind her forever, that hour she had spent alone with Bruce in the cabin.

Florian had been talking idly and she made a gallant effort now to listen to him. She owed him that, at least, since he was to serve a peculiar purpose now in her struggle to forget her love for Bruce.

"You've made a great hit with the family, Autumn," he told her. "Which is all to the merry, what?"

"What?" she bantered.

He frowned at her, “Are you never going to be serious with me?” he asked gruffly.

With an earnestness that surprised even herself, she laid her hand on his arm. “Do you want me to pretend that I’m serious?” she asked him.

“Hell! I’d rather have that than nothing,” he replied.

“You are more easily satisfied than I am, darling,” she said lightly.

He stooped and tossed a stone into the middle of the pool. The water rippled outward like a sunburst.

“Is there some one else?” he asked after a long silence.

She looked directly at him. “Let’s not be so solemn, Florian,” she pleaded. “Didn’t I hear you say something once about—contempt for life?”

“You did,” he said laconically, “and I meant—just that!” He seized her suddenly and kissed her, then held her close while he smiled down into her eyes.

She looked at him with cool reflectiveness for a moment, then drew away from him and turned toward the house. “I think we had better go back,” she said quietly.

He followed her, and in a moment she began humming a little tune.

“Some day,” he said, taking her arm as he came beside her, “you’ll not treat a kiss from me so lightly, you cold little devil.”

“Perhaps,” she said with a short laugh. “But in the meantime, darling, let’s play together, if you have nothing else to do. It’s so much more fun.”

CHAPTER XIII

BRUCE LANDOR drew his car up beside a score of others that were parked on the graveled roadway at the rear of the Parr house and stood for a moment listening to the sounds of revelry that issued from that great lighted mansion on the bluff. He smiled to himself, wondering how Autumn would be getting along with Florian's delightful pack of hoodlums. Florian would undoubtedly be in fine fettle himself, Bruce thought, after his team's victory in Kelowna that afternoon. Bruce was sorry he had missed the game, but he had heard about it on his way through town.

It was of Autumn herself, however, as some one entirely apart from the others, that he was thinking with a quickened heart-beat as he mounted the steps of the Parr portico, hat in hand, the cool night wind blowing gently across his hair. A half dozen dim figures were hidden among the shadows on the porch as he stepped to the door where he stood for a moment and listened to the babble of voices from within.

"Oh—Bruce!" a voice called from a corner of the porch.

Linda came gliding swiftly toward him out of the shadows and slipped a hand within his arm.

"Hello, Lin!" he greeted her.

"Are you passing me up on purpose?" she reproached him.

He looked down at her and smiled enigmatically. "Not likely. I didn't see you. How's the little girl friend?" he asked, patting the hand that lay on his arm. "You're looking lovely as ever."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm topping! Bored to death, though—until this minute. I've been watching for you all evening. Come on in. The crowd is down in the billiard room playing roulette."

"Who is here?" he asked as they entered the house.

"The same old disgusting crowd," she told him. "Everybody trying to work up the usual Saturday night jag."

A servant took Bruce's hat and topcoat and Linda slipped her hand again into the crook of his elbow and drew it close to her. "It was sweet of you to come," she said. "How've you been?"

"Fine, thanks," he replied, and realized at once that his voice sounded a bit hurried. He straightened his tie with an anticipatory excitement he had

not felt since he was a boy. Somehow, quite unreasonably, he knew, he had expected Autumn to be the first to greet him on his arrival.

"Let's have a drink together," Linda suggested. "I've been waiting for you to share my first one of the evening."

He smiled at Linda in assent, and together they went to the butler's pantry which was used by the family as a bar. Bruce paused on the threshold and looked over the small group of young people who were in the pantry.

"Hello, Landor!" called one of Florian's friends, and three or four others set up a chorus of greetings.

"Well, if it isn't the big wool and mutton man all the way from Cherry Creek!"

"Hello, everybody!" Bruce grinned.

"Step up, Landor, and get close to the source of supply," another invited, and Linda drew him beside her and waited while two glasses were filled.

A red-faced youth and a corn-colored blonde girl were perched side by side on the "bar," swaying to and fro and singing a hilarious and not quite proper song that was a legacy from the war to all such gatherings.

"Let's get out of here," Linda said as soon as they had received their glasses.

She drew him away and started for the porch.

"Don't you think we'd better join the crowd in the billiard room?" he ventured.

"And lose you for the rest of the evening?" she retorted. "Not much! I'm going to hang on till I'm helpless. Are you going to put up with us for the night?"

"Impossible, I'm afraid," he replied. "Mother is much better, and I have a good nurse for her, anyway, but I've got to be on the job."

Linda shrugged impatiently as they stepped out upon the shadowy porch. "The gods are a stingy crew," she said.

They sat together on the porch swing and sipped their drinks. Bruce did his utmost to contain his impatience and contribute a civil share of conversation, but in spite of himself he found his eyes roving anxiously toward the lighted hallway. He paid no heed to the two or three other couples who were near them on the porch, or to their confused talk and laughter.

Linda moved close to him and pressed her shoulder under his arm. Her naïve boldness was familiar to him now, and he was scarcely aware of her nearness in his own preoccupation.

"Anyhow, it was sweet of you to come all the way down so that I could have an hour with you," she murmured.

"I'm sorry I didn't get down for the game," Bruce returned in a matter-of-fact tone. "I hear Florian gave a good account of himself."

"He played the game of his life," Linda said. "I think it was because Autumn laid a bet on him against Timothy. Poor Florian has taken an awful tumble for Autumn."

Bruce smiled to himself. "Serious?" he asked.

"The most serious thing in his young life. He's potty!"

"Florian has been potty before," Bruce observed.

"I believe it's the real thing this time, though. When the Parrs fall, they fall hard, darling." She paused, but Bruce did not offer a reply. "I think she likes him, too. They hit it off together beautifully."

It was not jealousy, Bruce told himself, that smote him as he sat there in the darkness beside Linda. Autumn had come to him of her own volition only two nights ago. He had awakened the following morning when the first sheaf of dawn was reddening the sky, and had lain for a minute or two staring out at that first, most incredible and most wonderful sunrise of his life. It had seemed to him just that—the first dawn of his being. He had gazed out into that rosy light and thought of Autumn lying sweetly asleep within the very heart of that beauty in the east, Autumn—infinitely desirable, infinitely lovely. It had seemed to him then, indeed, that the universe had never been tenanted before, and that now it contained only Autumn and himself, and the rhapsody of their love.

"I'll never believe Florian is in love until I see it with my own eyes," he said. He harbored a warm feeling almost of pity for Florian as he thought of him.

"You'll see it to-night, then," Linda assured him, "though you won't believe it, even then. You're blind, my dear, quite blind."

"I think I know the signs," he declared.

Soft dance music began drifting out to them now from the radio in the drawing room, and presently the couples seated about the portico disappeared within doors. Linda and Bruce were left alone.

She turned her face impulsively up to him, and he was shaken out of his abstraction by the imploring look in her eyes.

"You *don't* know the signs," she whispered, "or you couldn't be so cruel to me."

"Cruel?" he asked.

“Cruel—because you are so kind,” she said, and her voice seemed to him to be almost a stifled sob.

Bruce flushed. “Good Lord, Lin!” he protested. “You can’t blame me for being kind to you. I’m awfully fond of you, girl.”

“Fond—” she said wistfully. “That’s it—damned fond!”

He laughed awkwardly and stood up, lifting her to her feet. “Yes, I am—damned fond of you, Lin. Come on—let’s go in and pick up Florian.”

“I’d rather have another drink,” she told him.

“Nothing more for me,” Bruce answered as he took her arm and started into the house.

In the doorway to the billiard room, Bruce stood for a moment and looked eagerly over the crowd. In the middle of the room a roulette wheel had been set out upon the billiard table, and Timothy Parr was acting as croupier for the evening. The crowd about the table was closely knit, their eyes intent upon the little ivory ball. Above the hum of voices could be heard the snapping of chips and the staccato clink of the ball as it struck the fins. A thin blue cloud of smoke filled the room.

Autumn, in a diaphanous silver dress, was perched on the edge of the table, with Florian standing beside her. In a moment she lifted her eyes and looked at Bruce. He waved to her, but her response was a fleeting smile that was bland and expressionless. Then she withdrew her eyes and turned to watch the game as Timothy set the ball spinning once more.

Bruce experienced a tightening sensation about his heart, and for a second was unable to move. Autumn had seen him—there could be no doubt of that. But something in her manner told him that she was not as he had expected to find her. Or could he be mistaken? He moved toward the table directly, and Florian looked up and hailed him. Linda beside him, he stepped to the side of the table and shook hands with Florian.

“Here’s Bruce, Autumn,” Florian said, and she turned with a curious abruptness and stretched her hand out to him in a hoydenish gesture. Her smile was something entirely alien to him, and she did not speak.

Bruce held her fingers firmly for a moment and looked into her face, his amazement and perplexity freezing into incredulous pain. For an instant she stared at him, her eyes wide and brilliant and vacant, as though she actually did not recognize him. Then, withdrawing her hand quickly, she turned away from him, and began humming a bar or two of the jazz melody that came from the radio in the adjoining room, her arms curved above her head, her body executing a slow, sinuous movement.

Bruce was suddenly possessed of an impulse to lay hold of her and carry her bodily out of the room. But at that moment Linda placed herself directly before him and began to tug at his lapels.

"Snap out of it, Bruce Landor!" she said. "What's wrong with you?"

He looked distractedly down at the subtle smile of Linda's crimson lips.

"Nothing's wrong, Lin," he replied.

"Let's go into the other room and dance," she invited.

"How about taking a crack at the wheel now that we're here?" he said equably. "Dance later."

With a little moue of disappointment which he chose to ignore, Linda pressed forward to the side of the table and looked on while Bruce bought a pile of chips and waited for the next flip of the ivory ball. When Timothy reached for the spindles again, Bruce placed three chips on squares and offered a handful to Linda.

"I'm not lucky," she demurred.

He turned again to the table and waited for the ball to drop into the slot. While he waited he noticed a short, plump man who had had too much to drink pushing his way to the edge of the table beside Autumn. He could not help seeing that Autumn's hands were clenched on the table edge. Florian stepped between her and the boisterous guest and the game went on.

Autumn stood on a gilt chair beside the crowded table and tossed chips on thirteen and black. She knew that she swayed occasionally; Florian, standing below her, supported her with an arm about her slender hips. Now and then she ran her fingers through his hair and Florian turned his face up to hers with an intense and meaningful look.

She lost again on thirteen and black, and as her laughter pealed out she looked up to see Bruce Landor standing beside the table, his arms folded, his eyes toward the broad French windows that stood open on the other side of the room.

Within her a dull voice repeated over and over again, "I must not see him—I must not see him!" He turned his head slowly toward her now, his mouth drawn up in a quizzical smile so that the deep furrow appeared in his cheek. That furrow in his lean brown cheek, which must have been a dimple when he was a child—she had kissed his cheek just there, in an infinite tenderness, only two nights ago. She felt a terrible vertigo all through her being, a sudden collapse of all her defenses. The feeling lasted for only a

moment, however. When he looked at her again she was able to smile with a hard, vivid carelessness.

And then the short plump man lurched toward her, lost his balance, and fell heavily against the chair on which she was standing, clutching Florian in a desperate attempt to right himself. It seemed that before she had reached the floor, Bruce was there, had caught her up and was carrying her out of the confusion through the open French doors and into the sunken garden.

She beat against his breast and sobbed frantically for release. When he put her down at last behind a hedge of honeysuckle, he was breathing heavily. She backed away from him as though to turn and run, but he snatched her hand and pulled her back roughly to him, placing her against the hedge so that she was forced to face him.

"What sort of game are you playing, Autumn?" he demanded.

The silver sheath of her dress seemed to quiver in the starlight. But she stood erect before him, her head flung back, her eyes blazing into his.

"I'm playing—no game," she panted. "Let me go back."

He eyed her coldly. "Either you are playing a game to-night—or you were playing one night before last," he told her.

Her lips quivered over her clenched teeth. "You can judge for yourself," she replied.

He stepped toward her and seized her wrist. "Do you—mean that?" he asked.

She released her wrist with a violent jerk. "Don't touch me—don't touch me!" she cried and shrank from him.

Her voice was a shrill whimper, not loud, not the voice of one utterly beyond control. An incomprehensible pang smote Bruce, a pang of pity, of complete bewilderment.

"Autumn," he said, "what's behind all this? I have a right to know."

"Right?" Her laughter was almost a sob. She crossed her arms over the shimmering bodice of her gown, and her hands clutched spasmodically at her smooth, quailing shoulders. Beneath her arms he could see the vehement rise and fall of her breast. Her russet hair fell back from her forehead, and her eyes were so dilated as they flared into his face that she had the look of a person blind. He drew back from her.

"You are not yourself, Autumn," he said calmly.

"I was not myself the other night, if that's what you mean," she replied. "You see me to-night as I really am—as I intend to be from now on. Ask your mother what I am—she knows what's in the blood."

She made to pass him and he stepped slowly aside.

"As you will," he said quietly.

He stood in the darkness and watched her as she walked toward the house. When she had gone in, he made his way around to the front of the house and entered by way of the portico.

In the hall he met Linda.

"Let's dance, Lin," he said, before she could speak to him. "Or do we hunt up that other drink?"

She looked up at him and smiled slowly.

"I believe you're coming out of your trance," she said, and drew him with her toward the butler's pantry.

CHAPTER XIV

MAY had passed, and June—and now it was July, the month of the wild-rose. Within its fortress of mountains the valley lay besieged by a torrid heat.

Bruce Landor, on his way to his herder's camp that lay beside a creek a good hundred miles away in the hills, brought his car to a halt on a high slope and drew a breath of relief as he paused and glanced back into the valley rippling bluely beneath the blistering sun. He was grateful now for the cool flow of air along his temples, not only because it dispelled his physical discomfort, but because it soothed a mind and heart that had been harrowed during the past few weeks.

Just a fortnight ago, after a day such as this, Jane Landor had died quietly and unexpectedly in her sleep. Bruce's sorrow had been eased somewhat by his melancholy realization that she was spared further pain and misery from an illness from which there could be no recovery, but his grief at her passing had been none the less deep and lasting.

He had seen very little of Autumn Dean since that night in May when he had gone to the Parrs' and had encountered in her a mood which had left him bewildered and harassed every time he recalled that miserable occasion. Only once since that night had he spoken to her. He had called on Hector Cardigan one afternoon and as he mounted the steps to the door, Autumn had come hurriedly out, passing him with a face strangely white and with only a swift word of greeting. He knew she had seen him from within and had rushed away to avoid talking with him.

That visit with Hector had been a doleful affair. The old soldier had been having words with Jarvis Dean's daughter—of that there could be no doubt in Bruce's mind. Hector's grumpy mood had refused to yield to Bruce's efforts at facetiousness. In a moment the old man had burst forth in a voice full of distress. "It's that girl! There's no talking to her!"

"Why get so worked up over it?" Bruce had asked. "Why talk to her?" Even as he spoke, Bruce had known that his comment had been a defensive one.

And then Hector had looked at him for a full minute without speaking, his wrath cooling gradually, his droll smile coming. "There's little to choose between a young fool and an old one—save for a trifling disparity in years," he had said, and had poured a couple of drinks from the decanter of wine on the table.

Bruce was thinking of that afternoon with Hector now as he climbed back into his car and started off along the increasingly difficult trail. The old fellow had reason enough to be distressed, or at least gravely concerned, if Autumn's reputation in the countryside meant anything to him. And Bruce supposed it did. Hector Cardigan had looked after the girl from her earliest years as anxiously as if he had been her godfather. And Autumn Dean was getting herself talked about rather freely among the gossips of the community. People in Kelowna and in Kamloops were busily recounting her escapades with the Parrs, Florian in particular, and with such others as made the Parr home a rendezvous, and who flocked to their hunting lodge in the mountains near Kamloops for week-ends. They had plenty of fuel for their gossip, and Autumn had apparently been setting a deliberate match to it. As old Hector had said, the girl wasn't giving a tinker's dam what they said about her.

The conviction had grown gradually upon Bruce that Autumn was leading this free life of hers with some ulterior purpose. He could not think of her running wild from choice. Nor had he ever been able to understand her violent change of manner toward him, unless the Laird himself had brought it about by something he had told her, by some peremptory ban he had placed upon their relationship. Even then he could not credit the change. Autumn was too willful, too independent, to permit even her father to make up her mind for her. Something else, something of which he was in total ignorance, was behind it all. But whatever it was, there was no other course for him except a harsh discipline in forgetting.

An utter loneliness enveloped him now as he ascended the scantily timbered, wild mountain reaches. Over there, only a short distance toward the north, in the completely still, mysterious folds of the hills, lay the Dean summer range, skirting his own. Across a deep valley, spread over the palely green mountain-side opposite, one of the units of the Laird's flock was dimly discernible. Trained though his eyes were to the ambiguity of vast distances, it was all Bruce could do to distinguish the flock in that brilliant, thin atmosphere. But across the vacancy there came to him, piercingly sweet, the sound of a bell. He knew that bell—there was only one like it anywhere in the Upper Country. It was Autumn Dean's Basque bell. The sound of it had drawn him across the valley on his last trip, nearly a month ago now, and he had spent an hour of the afternoon with the young Irish lad who was one of the Laird's herders. He would never forget the wistful blue eyes of the boy and the eagerness with which he strove to prolong the visit. As the sound of the bell struck across his senses now, Bruce strove grimly to repudiate the significance, to himself, of that sound. It was sheer

sentimentality on his own part that the bell seemed to chime Autumn's name. He resolved that on his next trip into the hills he would leave home early enough to turn aside and spend an hour with the young herder. He would do so to-day but that he had to get back in time for an appointment he had made that night with a buyer in Kamloops.

It was late that evening when Bruce drew up to the curb and got from his car before a gray, weathered building that had served as a trading post in the old days. The structure housed a billiard parlor now, and was known locally as "Sandy's Place." It had become a rendezvous for cattle and sheep men, ranch hands seeking employment, and nondescript transients. But despite the determination of the years to mold it to a less romantic form, there clung about it still some of the pungent, zestful air of times gone by when sourdoughs and chechahcos drifted in for a night's lodging and a game of poker. The proprietor was a rugged old Scotchman who had himself been a prospector on Williams Creek.

There were not more than a half dozen idlers in the front room of the place when Bruce entered. He looked them over and sauntered into the back room, pausing in the doorway to glance about for the buyer he had come to see. He discovered his man in a far corner of the smoke-filled room, seated at a poker table with four others. Bruce moved across the room and spoke to him.

The buyer looked up. "Hello, Landor!" he greeted.

Bruce spoke to the other men at the table.

"Buy a stack and sit in, Landor," one of them invited.

"Not to-night," Bruce replied. "I'm going home to bed as soon as I've had a word with Myers, here."

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Myers.

Bruce lighted a cigarette and watched the progress of the play. He was not sure just what had drawn his attention to a conversation at the table behind him, but presently the mention of Jarvis Dean's name caused him to glance around. Curly Belfort, a rancher from the Ashcroft district, was doing the talking while the others listened. Belfort had evidently been drinking. Bruce gave his attention to the game at Myers's table.

The click of the chips and the monotonous sound of voices lay drowsily upon his senses after a day in the mountains.

Belfort's voice thrust itself boisterously upon his consciousness. Bruce could not help hearing the words.

"—and, by God, if there wasn't old Dean's daughter standin' up out o' the haystack, an' stretchin' herself at seven o'clock in the mornin'. An' I says to young Parr, 'Do you think I'm runnin' a country hotel, or somethin'? Or is this the way they do it in Europe?' I says. But he kept on tinkerin' with his car." Belfort laughed heartily at his own joke. "Some gal the Laird's brat has turned out to be, spendin' the night in a haystack with—"

Bruce had got up abruptly and stepped over beside Belfort, his face gone suddenly white, his mouth fixed in a slight, contemplative smile as he stood looking down at the rancher.

"You've had too much to drink, Curly," Bruce interrupted him.

Belfort's eyes moved in slow insolence up and down Bruce's body. Then his mouth twisted to one side in a drunken leer as he laid his cards down on the table in front of him.

"Who's tellin' me?" he asked.

"I'm telling you," Bruce replied. "Only a drunken swine would talk the way you're talking."

Belfort got to his feet with an oath, but Bruce pushed him back into his chair. Muttering to himself, Belfort sprang up and lifted the chair. Before he could swing it, Bruce's hand had shot out and the man staggered backwards and stumbled to the floor. The other men in the room rushed forward to intervene, old Sandy among them. Before they could prevent it, however, Belfort was on his feet and was rushing at Bruce.

"Stop this, now!" old Sandy ordered.

But even as he spoke, Bruce struck again and Belfort crumpled to the floor.

Sandy flung his arms desperately about Bruce. "Stop it, lad!" he cried excitedly. "Stop it, or we'll have the law on us!"

Bruce shook him coolly off. "Better not step into this, Sandy," he advised. "Belfort has something to say to me or one of us has to take a licking, law or no law!"

Belfort had pulled himself together with painful difficulty. Bruce strode over to him, but old Sandy stepped between them and faced Belfort.

"Here, now," he demanded, "what's all this about? What's it about, Curly?"

"Ask him," Belfort snarled.

"What's it all about?" Sandy begged of Bruce, maintaining his position stoutly between them.

“Belfort knows,” Bruce replied. “He has been talking about a certain young lady whose name—”

“There was another woman with her, damn you!” Belfort screamed, his face livid. “And another man! The car was broke down.”

“What you said was a lie, then, wasn’t it?” Bruce prompted.

“I told nothing but what I saw with my own eyes,” Belfort retorted.

“What you implied was a damn lie!” Bruce challenged, stepping toward him.

Belfort’s head began wagging to and fro as he watched Bruce in a sort of stupid fascination. Presently he nodded. “If you want to look at it that way,” he admitted. “I was only talkin’.”

“Think twice before you talk like that again,” Bruce advised him casually, taking a cigarette from his shirt pocket as he spoke.

A half dozen of Belfort’s friends had got around him and were urging him toward the door.

“I’ll talk to you again,” said Belfort, over his shoulder.

“Any time, Curly,” Bruce replied, and lit his cigarette.

Sandy scratched his head in relief as Belfort disappeared through the doorway. Then he shook his head at Bruce. “Yon’s a bad actor, lad,” he said quietly. “I’d be lookin’ out for him if I was you.”

“I intend to,” said Bruce and turned again to take the seat beside Myers.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAIRD had asked old Hector Cardigan to dinner. It was rarely these days that Hector was invited to dine alone with Jarvis Dean. In the old days he had frequently been a guest at the Castle, but that, as Hector knew, had been Millicent's doing. There had never been anything but the most cordial relationship between the two men, however, but Jarvis had lived too much to himself during the years since his wife's death.

The dinner had been of the best—the very best that poor old Hannah was capable of producing. There had even been a touch of elegance to it. When Jarvis Dean desired to make an occasion of it, he had saddle of lamb for the main course. As soon as Hector had seen Hannah lay a saddle of lamb before the Laird, he knew his presence at the table was something of an event in the life of Jarvis.

It was not until they had left the table, however, and had retired to the drawing room that his host gave any inkling of what was on his mind. The Laird had paused in the hallway and asked whether they would go to the library or sit in the drawing room. Hector had not hesitated in making the choice. The library was the one spot in the house that belonged peculiarly to Jarvis Dean. The drawing room, on the other hand, had been Millicent's and held still some lingering aroma of her presence there. Besides, Hector's hand had done its best in making the room what it was.

"Of course," Jarvis said, when Hector had expressed his preference. "I might have known. Go in and sit down. I'll fetch the brandy."

And now the two men sat on opposite sides of the empty fireplace, their old-fashioned brandy glasses in their hands, pledging each other's health in stately and ancient fashion. The Laird trimmed and lighted a cigar, turning it round and round in his fingers as he contemplated it pensively. Hector drew a cigarette from his own case and lighting it, extinguished the match and placed it carefully on the tray beside him.

"It isn't often," the Laird began, "that I ask a man to help me consider my private affairs."

"It isn't often you have required the advice of another," Hector encouraged.

Jarvis blew a thick cloud of smoke from his lips and sighed heavily. "That's a polite remark, sir," he said as if he were talking to himself, "but it's a prodigious lie, just the same."

Hector knew his host. To be called a liar by Jarvis Dean was no offense, unless the mood itself were an offensive one.

"I know of no law against a man being polite to his host," Hector countered.

"There ought to be, then," said the Laird. "A man would be better off if he heard the truth now and then, even across his own dinner table."

Hector coughed lightly. "The average man is no better off, sir, no matter where he hears the truth."

Jarvis seemed to consider that matter for a moment, then dusted the gray ash lightly from the end of his cigar. "Have you heard about this fracas in old Sandy's back room a night or two ago?" he asked abruptly.

"I was told about it," Hector admitted cautiously.

"Aye—and the whole country knows about it. It's a dirty business."

"But one over which we have little control, I'm afraid."

Jarvis's look sharpened. "We have something to say on what brought it about," he said. "In my day a young woman's name—if she was a lady—wasn't mentioned in such a place."

"I have no doubt young Landor feels much the same about it—even in these days."

"That's not the point, sir. In my day a young woman gave no reason for having her name bandied about over a poker table."

"The times have changed, it seems," Hector murmured.

"It's our own fault, then. We've let these youngsters get out of hand with their racing about the country in automobiles and their abominable cocktails and the like. Where is it going to stop?"

Hector sighed, half-amused, and yet thoroughly aware of what was troubling the Laird's mind.

"They'll probably all marry and settle down and have children of their own to plague them in their turn," he said lightly.

Jarvis leaned forward in his chair and looked fixedly at his guest. "I want your opinion about that girl of mine," he said frankly. "What's she like?"

Hector smiled. "She's your own daughter, sir," he replied. "You ought to know her better than I."

"I don't. She was never anything but a child to me—until now. Since she came back, she's been a stranger in the house. More than half the time she's not here at all. She'll be back here to-night from the Parr Lodge—not alone, either, I'll warrant—and the place will be like bedlam until she goes again."

Hector got up and tossed his cigarette into the empty maw of the fireplace. He walked to the French windows and looked out upon the garden that glowed palely under summer starlight.

"I have been wondering about the girl," he said at last. "I have talked with her, too. She is not happy."

"Happy?" Jarvis grunted. "What does she want that she cannot have?" But his eyes were half closed in self-concealment.

"She hasn't told me that," Hector replied. "I can only guess, at best."

"What's your guess, then?"

Hector returned to his seat and selected another cigarette. "It is my opinion, Jarvis, that the girl has been in love—ever since she came back here."

The Laird frowned. There was no escaping the meaning of Hector's words. "You mean—this young Landor."

"Certainly," said Hector.

Jarvis shrugged impatiently. "Puppy-love!" he exclaimed. "She'll get over that—if she isn't already over it."

Hector looked steadily at the Laird for a moment without speaking. "What you see," he said at last, his voice very low, "is probably the process by which she hopes to get over it. And it would not surprise me to learn that she finds it as painful as you do."

"Tommyrot!" the Laird exploded.

"You have asked my opinion," Hector said with dignity, "and I am giving it."

"If I thought there was anything to that," the Laird replied, "I'd sell up and get out—and take her with me."

"I know you would," Hector observed, "—and accomplish nothing."

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

Hector smiled patiently at the Laird. "You ought to know the breed better than to ask that," he said. "If Millicent's daughter is in love, there's very little that either you or I can do about it, I think."

There followed a long silence at the end of which Jarvis helped himself to another drink and poured one for his guest. They toasted each other as cordially as if there had been no disagreement between them, and then the Laird turned abruptly to talking of things that left no room for difference of opinion.

It was almost midnight when Autumn finally came home, bringing Linda Parr with her to stay for a few days at the Castle. The girls came upon

the two old men seated before the fireplace, their brandy glasses in their hands, their eyes grown heavy from sitting up long past their time for bed.

"Why, Da—we had no idea you'd be waiting for us at this hour!" Autumn exclaimed, after greetings had gone around. "You should have been in bed hours ago."

She laid aside her hat and gloves as she spoke and seated herself in one of the Queen Anne chairs, her feet curled up under her, her elbow resting on the arm of the chair, her chin pressed against her palm. Linda sat near her, comically prim, her hands folded in her lap, her feet placed very precisely on the floor—the image of discreet propriety.

"The hour is no later for me than it is for you, my girl," Jarvis replied, his voice betraying a little impatience as he spoke.

"But we're used to it, Mr. Dean," Linda offered with a smile.

"So I have been informed," said the Laird. "Are you young ladies aware that your conduct is creating a deal of talk in the district?"

Autumn smiled. "You're not bothering your head, Da, over what the gossips have to say about—"

"I'm bothering my head about you, my girl," he interrupted her. "Do you know that your name was the center of a scandalous brawl in the back room of a dive in Kamloops the other night?"

"We've heard all about it, Da," Autumn replied. "It was simply absurd."

"But piquant," Linda put in.

"Belfort is a beast," Autumn went on.

"A girl with any respect for herself doesn't give a beast any excuse for talking," her father observed.

Autumn checked her rising anger. "There were four of us in the party—Lin and I, and Florian and a friend of his," she explained. "We were coming home along the highway from Ashcroft. We got started later than we had intended and when we got as far as Belfort's ranch the car broke down. While the boys worked on the car, Lin and I went to sleep in a haystack close to the road. Belfort towed us to a garage about seven o'clock in the morning."

"Or we should have been there still," Linda added.

"And that's all there is to the story," Autumn concluded.

"I accept your account on its merits," Jarvis Dean said, "but it explains nothing. The whole escapade was a scandal and an outrage, whether Belfort had anything to do with it or not. There'll be no repetition of the like, my girl, if you are to remain in my house!"

Hector Cardigan remained silent, but every now and then a profound sigh escaped him which was to Autumn singularly audible above the deep and vehement tones of her father's voice.

Linda Parr had turned large and wondering eyes upon the Laird. "It's probably not my place to speak, Mr. Dean," she ventured, "but the whole affair was quite accidental and we regret it quite as much as you do. We probably regret it more, since it was we who had to sleep out. On the other hand, young people are quite capable of taking care of themselves nowadays."

Autumn was amazed at Linda's sudden garrulity. At the quick glare of the old man's eyes, however, the girl ceased abruptly, and biting her lip, looked rather hopelessly toward Autumn.

"I'll not have my daughter's name bandied about the country as though she were a common strumpet!" the Laird roared, and brought his hands down resoundingly upon the arms of his chair.

Linda got to her feet with characteristic languor, and begging to be excused, left the room and went upstairs. Autumn surmised, with a cynical affection for the girl, that it was the desire for a cigarette that sent her off, rather than any marked distaste for the scene.

"You are carrying on quite unnecessarily, Father," Autumn observed quietly when Linda had gone. "It isn't good for you—and I'm surprised that you should treat such a simple situation so seriously."

"Simple? Simple?" Jarvis was almost inarticulate. "Have you no sense of decency, girl? You put yourself in a position where men engage in a brawl over you in a gambling dive—and you call that simple!"

"I have tried to explain to you, Father, that it was an accident," Autumn persisted. "We were miles from anywhere. What on earth were we to do, at three o'clock in the morning?"

The Laird drew himself up and his nostrils flared in the magnificence of his indignation. "You had no business being there—or anywhere else but in your bed at three o'clock in the morning. And I'll have no more of it!"

Autumn's eyes narrowed. She glanced sharply at Hector, who was slumped wearily in his chair. "What do you propose to do, Father?" she asked finally in a cold voice. "Keep me under lock and key?"

A dull flush lay like a sultry shadow on the old man's cheekbones. Autumn knew that her words had started the ripples of an old and cruel memory in the depths of his consciousness, and for a moment she was sorry for what she had said.

For some moments Jarvis did not reply to her question. Then, his mouth grimly set, he pronounced his ultimatum. “You will conduct yourself from now on like a lady—or back you go to where you came from! I’ll not have the Dean name made the cause of drunken brawls in public dives!”

Autumn got angrily to her feet. In that moment, all the wretchedness of those long summer weeks came back upon her, those weeks of striving to tear the love of Bruce Landor from her heart, and instantly her regret for the pain she was causing her father retreated.

She confronted him now with wide, blazing eyes. “The Dean name!” she said. “That’s what’s behind all this! It isn’t what will happen to me that you are thinking about. You know I can look after myself. I’ve done it for years without giving you anything to worry about. But the Dean name must be defended! It hurts your pride to see it defended by Bruce Landor. You have been living in the past so long that it’s more real to you and more important to you than your own daughter. Well, let me tell you, Da—I don’t give a damn for a name that needs defending. I’ve suffered what you will never know—ever since I came back—defending the Dean name. I can’t go on—I won’t go on! Let the name of Dean—”

The Laird was on his feet instantly, his huge frame trembling with emotion. “Stop it!” he cried. “Stop it! You’ve gone far enough. You’ve gone—far—enough!”

Autumn stood for an instant staring at him. He seemed to have gone suddenly feeble, defeated. He turned away from her and stretched his hand out to support himself by the mantelpiece. His body appeared to crumple forward, to sag and dwindle as though shrinking from a blow. In that moment Autumn’s compassion for him rose again, and her impulse was to go to him and throw her arms about him in an effort to make peace between them. But Hector was already beside him and was waving her away. She turned silently and left the room.

Long after Linda was asleep in the room next her own, and the house stood in its dark silence, Autumn lay awake, turning over and over in her mind the restive thoughts that had had their incipience in that disconcerting clash with her father. At last, unable to bear any longer the confining darkness of her own room where thinking had become a torment, she got up and put on a dressing-gown and slippers.

She stood for a time in the darkness gazing out of a window into the hot night. Above the velvety spread of the midsummer darkness, the stars hung large and soft and heavy, unsharpened, as tears behind a veil. You lowered

your eyes, and there was the engulfing blackness of the mountains, into which Millicent must have stared on nights like these, with eyes vacant of all but despair. You drew in a deep breath, and the sweetness of the darkened earth that was meant for love caught fiercely at your heart, as it must have caught at Millicent's in her desolate unhappiness.

Noiselessly, Autumn went out into the hall. Her father's hound, Saint Pat, who slept on a mat outside the Laird's door, rose at her approach, but she caressed him reassuringly, and he flung himself down again and Autumn continued on down the stairs and out of the house.

She stole quietly to a secluded nook in the garden where, within the circle of flowering mock-orange trees, her mother's bronze sundial still stood on its low pedestal. Here the smell of roses lay in a still, dark pool of heavy sweetness; in the purple field of the sky overhead the stars leaned down, a white blur stooping to the fainter nimbus of the white and yellow roses. Here Millicent Dean had counted out the days and nights of her last summer. It was because of Millicent that old Hannah had kept the retreat unchanged; it held still the spellbound air of plaintive sanctuary.

Autumn seated herself on a bench beside the sundial and gathered her robe closely about her. A curious vacantness seemed to possess her mind now, a receptivity to some strange reassurance, to some strong and calming influence that drifted in upon her from the sweet cloistered gloom of the flowery crypt that had been her mother's. A quieting affirmation was growing upon Autumn. Millicent Odell was living again, rising above her own tragedy and that of Jarvis Dean and Geoffrey Landor, and the poor, unhappy Jane. Autumn closed her eyes in the buoyancy of her spirit, where the knowledge had dawned that her love for Bruce was an inevitable and inexorable predetermination of life that Jarvis Dean's opposition could neither change nor destroy.

She was startled suddenly out of her absorption by a sound behind her. Turning quickly, she saw Hector Cardigan standing within the dimness of the crypt.

"Hector!" she said softly. "Whatever brings you out at this time of night?"

He chuckled in an embarrassed way.

"It isn't the first time I've prowled around here," he said in a low, oddly strained voice, "but it's the first time I've been caught at it."

She did not have to ask why he had come. Millicent lived for him here, as she was living for Autumn herself.

"I couldn't sleep," she told him, "—after that scene with father."

Hector came and seated himself on the bench beside her. “It was rather bad, wasn’t it?” he said heavily. “But I think I warned you that your father would be difficult, though I had not foreseen—quite this, I confess.”

“What am I to do?” she asked him.

“You will know that yourself—better than I can tell you,” he replied.

Autumn plucked a blossom from a low-hanging branch and held it to her lips. “I love father,” she said simply, “and I love everything I have come home to. I don’t want to leave it.”

Hector was silent for a moment. Then, as though he were talking to some third person who was present beside them, he said, “Autumn is in love with Geoffrey’s son.”

She straightened herself involuntarily against the weird sensation that had come over her.

“Is it so evident as that, Hector?” she said.

“The past is repeating itself,” he said. “My eyes are not too old to see that.”

“It is the past that has come between us, Hector—between Bruce and me,” she said.

Hector leaned forward and patted the back of one hand against the palm of the other. “I shall have something to say about that, my dear, when the time comes that I must.”

Autumn stared at the ghostly blur of a heavily-flowered white rose bush. “If you had told me all you knew—when I first came home,” she said, “we might have been spared much of what happened to-night.”

Hector drew a deep and unhappy breath. “You forget, my child, that there is such a thing as loyalty still left in the lives of some of us,” he said. “If I did not tell you everything I knew, it was because I could not tell it.”

“It doesn’t matter, after all,” she said. “It is too late now.”

“On the contrary,” he replied, “it is still too soon.”

Autumn shifted impatiently. “How long must you hold your silence, then?” she asked him.

“Until I can hold it no longer,” he replied.

A slight wind stirred in the tree above them, and a shower of white petals fell on the grass at their feet.

CHAPTER XVI

On the following morning, when Linda telephoned to the Landor place with the intention of paying Bruce a visit during the day, the foreman, Andrew Gilly, informed her that Bruce had gone to Vancouver on business and would not be back until the end of the week.

"So that will be that!" Linda observed, stretching herself on the couch in the sunlit drawing room and opening a volume of French verse which she had brought down from Autumn's room.

The announcement that Bruce had gone to Vancouver filled Autumn with an unaccountable loneliness and impatience that annoyed her as she thought of it. She knew now that throughout the weeks of their estrangement, the mere fact that he was always there, just a few miles from her, had been a comfort to her, and that in the depth of her consciousness she had never really relinquished the hope that somehow, somewhere, they would come together again.

Autumn sat at the piano and played softly while Linda read. Jarvis had left the house immediately after breakfast, deep in the solitude of one of his unapproachable moods. Hector had returned to town, and the girls had been alone ever since.

Suddenly Linda tossed her book across the floor. "What a fine old maid I'm getting to be!" she exclaimed.

"What's the matter now, Lin?" Autumn asked, turning from the piano.

"It's a bad sign when a girl begins to live vicariously in erotic poetry," she said.

"At least, it saves one a lot of trouble," Autumn remarked.

"And leaves you where you started. There's a little satisfaction in trouble, at any rate. It has the spice of variety in it, if nothing else. I'm dying of nothing to do, Autumn. You can at least work up a good fight in your own family now and then."

Autumn stared moodily at the floor. "I'm not particularly proud of that," she said. "It was rather a mess—the whole affair—innocent as it was."

In her preoccupation with the new evidence she had had of her father's strange fixation, she was scarcely aware of what she said. But Linda must be given no inkling of the shadow that lay over her mind.

"I'd love a mess," Linda commented dreamily, "so long as I could have Bruce Landor to champion me. You're an unappreciative wench, Autumn."

Autumn got abruptly to her feet and went over to the window and stood looking out into the garden, where she had experienced so strange an exaltation the night before. Now, in the spread of the midsummer morning, she knew that that almost supernatural assurance of the night in the garden had been a delusion. There was nothing for her to do but carry on, for her father's sake as well as for Bruce Landor's.

"How can you be anything but head over heels in love with him, Autumn?" Linda asked.

"I? With whom?"

Linda clicked her tongue in exasperation against the roof of her mouth. "With whom? You know very well whom."

Autumn did not turn from the window. "You're getting positively tedious, Lin," she said mechanically.

Linda rolled over on her stomach and looked narrowly at Autumn's straight back. "Do you know what?" she said at last. "I honestly believe you've been in love with him from the very first."

"You must have your own reasons for thinking so, Lin," Autumn evaded.

"I have, my dear. In the first place, your cutting-up doesn't ring true to me. I cut up because I like it. But you—you don't like it."

Autumn turned and walked to a table, picked up a magazine, and seated herself. She thumbed the pages slowly. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said indifferently.

Linda reflected for a moment. "Well—you have no heart in it. You're absent-minded—and you're downright inattentive at bridge." She paused and looked at Autumn. "My dear," she said at last, "you're in love—or I'm a mental defective."

Autumn reached across the table and helped herself to a cigarette. "You're a dear imbecile, then, Lin," she smiled carelessly.

"I'm a fool in more ways than one," the girl replied. "But even a fool may have eyes. Why don't you cut Florian and his gang? You're not in love with the boy and you never will be—and you're bored to death with his friends."

"Not all of them, Lin."

"I'm the single exception, my dear—and I'm catty as the devil. I could have cut your pretty throat that night when Bruce hauled you out of that mess in the billiard room and carried you into the garden. Fancy any man

doing that for me! And I could have cheerfully put poison in your coffee yesterday morning when Florian told us that Bruce had taken it upon himself to defend your honor against Curly Belfort. In this day and age, my dear! Any man I have ever known would die laughing before he could bring himself to do as much for me. But you—you take it out in nursing a grudge."

"Lin, you're positively idiotic!" Autumn protested.

"I know it—I know it! But there's one particular kind of idiot that I am *not*—and never intend to be. I am not the kind that goes on forever when I know there's no hope for me."

Autumn laughed dryly and got to her feet. "Let's take our ride before it gets too warm," she suggested.

Linda stretched in sinuous luxury and rose from the couch. "Which—being interpreted—means, for heaven's sake, lay off!" she said, and went with Autumn to prepare for the ride.

On the following morning, Bruce Landor's foreman drove his car in at the gates of the Castle. Linda Parr had departed for home only an hour before, and Autumn was cutting roses in the secluded recess of the garden. It was no usual thing for Bruce Landor's foreman to visit the Dean ranch, and a swift shock of apprehensiveness for Bruce passed through her. She gathered her flowers together at once and went to the house.

In the yard before the door, Bruce's foreman was talking with Tom Willmar. Autumn hesitated for a moment, but at an odd glance from Tom she stepped down and approached the men.

Andrew Gilly turned his cap awkwardly about in his hands as she came up to him. His expression was one of utter distraction.

"Good morning, Miss Dean," he greeted her. In a fleeting moment of intuition, Autumn felt that there was something vaguely resentful in his attitude toward her.

"Good morning, Mr. Gilly," she returned with a smile. "Has Bruce come back from Vancouver yet?"

The question had slipped from her tongue before she had time to think of what she was saying.

"No," Gilly replied, "he hasn't. And I'm in no hurry to see him, either. I'll have very bad news for him when he comes."

"Bad news? What has happened?" Autumn asked.

Tom Willmar cleared his throat. "Gilly found over thirty of his sheep dead in the pasture this morning," he told her.

Autumn clutched her flowers tightly in hands that had gone suddenly cold. “Not—his prize sheep—the Merinos he was experimenting with?” she asked breathlessly.

“The same,” said Tom Willmar. “Poisoned, they were. Poisoned with strychnine in the salt trough.”

“It’ll come near to breaking the boy’s heart,” Gilly observed in a voice that was shaken with agitation.

“Oh!” Autumn felt an abrupt stricture in her throat that made further speech impossible.

“I come over to see if you folks had had any trouble,” Andrew Gilly went on, “but Tom tells me there’s been none of it here.”

“No,” said Tom quietly. “There’s been a bit of vetch about that’s—”

“Nature had no hand in this,” Andrew interrupted. “It was a sneak that did it—and he must ’a’ crawled on his stomach during the night to get to the trough or the dogs would’ve been at him.”

“Have you any idea who did it?” Autumn ask faintly. It seemed to her that her heart had sunk entirely out of her body.

The man had the sensibility to avoid her eyes. He looked away, but the expression that came to his weathered face was one of bitter fury.

“I have my own opinion,” he said significantly, “and I think I’m not far wrong. I think the boy will agree with me, too. Though a lot of good that will do either of us. There’s no proof—not a whit!”

Autumn knew what he was thinking. “You suspect Belfort, don’t you, Mr. Gilly?” she asked bluntly.

He gave her a direct look from eyes that were angrily misty. “You can make a shrewd guess,” he said. “There’s no doubt in my mind—and that’s something more than a suspicion.”

Tom shook his head. “It’ll be a tough job to get anything on Curly Belfort’s gang,” he remarked. “Gosh, what a shame!”

Autumn stood for a moment helplessly trying to beat back the tears that sprang to her eyes. Then, her emotions collapsing within her, she turned and fled into the house.

As she did so, Jarvis Dean came slowly up the path from the corrals, Saint Pat at his heels.

CHAPTER XVII

It was only a ruse on the part of the Laird to despatch Autumn to town on business that he could have attended to as well himself on his next visit. He wanted the house to himself. He would have contrived some means of getting old Hannah out of the way as well, but there were limits, after all, beyond which a man of self-respect will refuse to go. For that matter, he would have permitted Autumn to remain at home had it not been that he feared the hurt to her feelings which the presence of young Landor in the house would occasion.

For the Laird had asked Bruce to come over and talk to him on matters that could not be discussed with any degree of satisfaction over the telephone. Jarvis, of course, might have gone to the Landor place and talked with Bruce, but some instinct, some sentiment, perhaps, forbade that. Besides, young Landor had not shown the slightest antipathy to the suggestion that he should visit the Laird in his own house.

And now as he sat and waited for the boy, he was strangely moved. In a few minutes he would be talking face to face with the son of Geoffrey Landor, talking as man to man, though it was difficult to think that young Bruce had really come to man's estate. In all these years he had never talked to Bruce more than to exchange a greeting when they met, or to make some polite enquiry regarding his mother's health. In that, he had often told himself, he had not been wholly to blame. The boy had been raised under the influence of Jane Landor, whose bitterness had lasted until the day of her death. Bruce had been quite as aloof as he had been. At Jane Landor's funeral, Jarvis had been deeply moved by the boy's bereavement, and had wished with all his heart that he might have been able to summon the courage to take him aside and speak to him. For in spite of all that had kept them apart, he had never been free of a desire to play the part of a father to Bruce Landor.

Well, he would talk to the boy now. How he *might* have talked had things gone differently with them all! Perhaps he had been unwise, after all, in telling Autumn of the tragedy that had shadowed his life. Far better to have let the knowledge die with him and leave to youth the heritage of happiness it deserved. The hurt to his own pride would have died then, too, and that would have been an end to it all. And yet—there was no way of telling about such things. Destiny had a way of forcing its destructive way into the lives of the innocent. The iniquities of the fathers! Better,

undoubtedly, to tell the whole truth and pay the cost, here and now, and bequeath some measure of security to the future.

The sound of a car coming to a stop before the house brought Jarvis to his window. He saw Bruce step from his car and approach the door. He turned from his window and seated himself in his big chair before his desk. Presently he heard old Hannah's voice in the hall below and in a moment Bruce Landor presented himself in the library doorway.

Jarvis looked up as his visitor announced himself. It might have been Geoffrey Landor himself, he carried himself with such ease of manner and a bearing so erect and challenging. He was dressed in riding breeches and a soft gray shirt that was open at the throat.

"Good morning, Landor," Jarvis greeted him, without getting up. "Come in and sit down."

Bruce entered the room and remained standing before the Laird. "You wanted to talk to me," he prompted.

"Yes," Jarvis replied. "Sit down, sit down."

He waved a hand to a vacant chair and Bruce seated himself and glanced quickly about the room. There followed an awkward pause which Bruce sought to break at once.

"I hope you are well, Mr. Dean," he ventured with determined cordiality.

From beneath his shaggy brows, the Laird's severe eyes pierced Bruce with a look that would have brought discomfort to any one with a less easy conscience.

"Well enough—well enough," Jarvis replied. "A man of my years doesn't find fault if he's taken with an ache or pain now and then."

"You're good for a long while yet, Mr. Dean," Bruce said.

"Quite possible, quite possible," the Laird said, taking a cigar from the box on his table and nipping the end with his teeth. "Better smoke, Landor," he said then. "We'll both talk better. I'd offer you a cigar, but you young fellows—"

"I have some cigarettes with me, thanks," Bruce told him as he took a package from his shirt pocket and selected one. He struck a match and held it to the Laird's cigar, oddly moved by this momentary intimacy with a man who had been a mysterious and forbidding figure to him as long as he could remember.

"You have lost some sheep," the Laird began as soon as Bruce had seated himself.

"Thirty-four," Bruce replied.

"Your prize Merinos, they were."

"Yes, sir," Bruce said.

"Too bad, too bad," Jarvis observed. "Gilly tells me they were poisoned —strychnine in the salt trough. You're sure of that?"

"The vet's report was waiting for me when I got home."

"Aye—so I understand. He tells me, too, that you suspect this man, Belfort."

"We have no proof of it," Bruce said. "I have my own opinion, and it amounts to a conviction."

"You might be wrong, of course."

Bruce smiled. "Certainly, sir, but I don't think I am this time."

The Laird leaned forward and tapped the ash from his cigar. "I admit the man would do it—he's the kind that would, if he had any reason for it. But even a bad man doesn't act without a motive."

"I supplied him with a motive, I'm afraid," Bruce replied directly.

"Aye—I was coming to that. You had some sort of a rumpus with him in town last week, I'm told."

"I had," Bruce admitted.

"It was over something that Belfort had to say about—my daughter—wasn't it?" the Laird asked.

"I should have done precisely what I did, sir, whether it had been your daughter or any other woman."

Jarvis dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand. "Certainly, my boy, certainly. But that has nothing whatever to do with the business." He paused and drew a deep breath, then relaxed into his chair. "You are still a very young man, Landor," he went on, "—and I am an old man. My opinion may count very little to a man of your years. But if a young woman chooses to make a trollop of herself, I don't see how it improves matters to make it the cause of a public brawl."

"Your daughter has not made a trollop of herself, sir," Bruce protested. "Besides, I did what I did because I had little choice in the matter."

"Would it not have been better if you had left well-enough alone, instead of making both my daughter and yourself the laughing stock of the countryside?"

"I'm afraid we can't agree on that, sir," Bruce replied. "I am, of course, sorry for any unpleasantness it may have caused either you or Autumn."

Jarvis Dean's face darkened. "Be that as it may, Landor," he said, "I'd prefer to look after such things myself, in the future, when they concern me or one of my own house."

"Very good, sir," Bruce returned, his lips tightening.

"In fact, my boy, I mean to do whatever I can to wipe out the unfortunate results of this affair. How much do you figure those Merinos of yours were worth to you?"

Bruce flushed. "I haven't figured that out, exactly, Mr. Dean," he replied.

"Put your own price on them, then, and let me know what it is. I want to make it good to you."

Bruce looked at Jarvis, aware of a quick surge of feeling within him. He was silent for a moment. There were times when a man might pardonably give way to anger, but this was not such a time, he told himself in a resolute effort at self-control. After all, the Laird was making what he undoubtedly felt to be a generous gesture.

"I understand what you mean, Mr. Dean," he said at last, "but my loss is my own. I brought it on myself and I'll foot the bill."

The great hands of Jarvis Dean came down heavily upon the arms of his chair as he leaned toward Bruce. "You don't mean—you are not refusing my offer?" he demanded harshly.

Bruce laughed outright. "You surely didn't expect me to accept it?" he replied. "I haven't come to that yet, sir."

A livid vein stood out upon Jarvis's forehead. He got to his feet with astonishing and fiery swiftness. "That, Landor, is—is sheer impudence!" he gasped.

Bruce, who had risen promptly when Jarvis stood up, looked steadily into the older man's eyes.

"Are you not being a bit unreasonable, Mr. Dean?" he asked.

The Laird snorted. "That's enough, sir—and more than enough!" he replied. "I have made you a gentleman's offer—and you have refused it. Do I understand you aright, sir?"

"I couldn't think of accepting it, Mr. Dean."

"Very well, Landor—very well! You may have it your way, then. But from this day forward there will be no dealings between us, do you understand? You are a stranger to us—to me and my daughter—for the rest of our days." He stepped toward Bruce and thrust his great head forward. "Do you understand that?" he demanded.

“Perfectly, I think,” Bruce replied, and fumbled in his breast pocket for another cigarette.

The hand that struck the match was not altogether steady, but he knew now that he had his feelings under control. When he turned toward Jarvis Dean again, he was startled quite off his guard at the shocking change that had come over the old man. The Laird was leaning heavily with one hand on the back of his chair, his head bowed forward, his other hand passing uncertainly across his eyes as though to brush from them something that obscured his vision. Bruce took an apprehensive step toward him, but immediately Jarvis drew himself erect. Although his face was drawn and white, he made a curt bow.

“Good day, Landor!” he said, and stood awaiting Bruce’s withdrawal.

Bruce looked at him for one brief moment in frowning perplexity and with a feeling of some unfathomable uneasiness. Then he bade the Laird a quiet good-by and turned away. As he left the room, Jarvis Dean slumped heavily into his chair and sat listening to the sound of Bruce’s footsteps descending the stairs.

The Laird was still in his library an hour or so later, when Autumn returned from town. When he heard her mounting the stairway presently, he closed the large, leather-bound journal in which he was writing and laid it carefully away in the drawer of his table. He locked the drawer and returned the small key to its wonted place above the desk.

He turned as Autumn came into the room.

“You’re back,” he said. “It didn’t take you long.”

“I’ve been gone three hours,” she remarked. “There wasn’t much to do.”

“Did you see Snyder?”

“I found him in his office. He’ll be out to see you to-morrow afternoon.”

Jarvis got up from his table and stood before the fireplace. “I had young Landor out to see me,” he said abruptly.

“Hannah told me,” Autumn replied. “Was there some—some trouble between you? Hannah says—”

“Hannah talks too much,” the Laird interrupted. “Whatever trouble there was was of Landor’s own making. He’s turned out to be an impudent young whelp, that.”

Autumn moved to the window and looked out toward the west where Bruce Landor’s ranch lay. “Are you sure you are being quite fair, Da?” she

asked quietly.

"He doesn't need you to defend him, my girl," Jarvis reproved her.

"I know that," Autumn replied, "and I don't mean to defend him, either. After all, I know nothing of what passed between you."

"I offered to pay him for the Merinos he lost," Jarvis informed her.

Autumn turned from the window. "He didn't accept it, did he?"

"What? Why shouldn't he accept it?" the Laird demanded. "Whose fault was it that he lost them?"

Autumn regarded her father silently for a moment. "It was my fault, Da," she said at last. "I admit it. But the score between us could not be settled—like that."

"Perhaps you can suggest the proper form of settlement, then," Jarvis said scornfully.

"I'm not sure that it can ever be settled," she said.

"It's settled now, then," Jarvis replied. "From this day forth there will be nothing more between young Landor and the Deans."

Autumn looked quickly at her father. "Did he accept that?" she asked.

"I didn't ask him," the Laird said. "I told him it would be so—and I have a right to demand compliance with my wishes, my girl."

Autumn smiled patiently. "You have always had it, Da," she observed, then turned away and went to her room.

CHAPTER XVIII

For the remainder of the day, Bruce was unable to shake from his mind the oppressive thought of the virulent and altogether disproportionate resentment which the old Laird bore toward him. He gave it as little thought as he could, however, and went furiously to work on the building improvements he had planned earlier in the season. With the help of his foreman, Andrew Gilly, he laid out the ground for his new dipping plant. While he helped to prepare the ground for excavating, however, or while he hauled cedar posts for the framework, his mind remained heavy with the knowledge of Jarvis Dean's violent bitterness toward him. He realized, too, that until now he had never really given up the hope that Autumn might come to him at least with a fair explanation of her conduct. That hope was dead within him now. Henceforth, Autumn Dean and he would take their separate ways through life and the past would be forgotten. Forgotten, especially, would be that one mad moment in which he had held her in his arms, and in the spring night outside—the rain falling through darkness.

At the end of the day he found himself on edge with his men and his work and himself, and in an altogether unadmirable frame of mind. He hurried through his supper with scarcely a word to Gilly, who sat opposite him. The motionless heat of the evening droned in his senses; insects crawled up and down the window screens with tiny, unpleasant activity; against the violet-tinted rectangle of twilight beyond the screen door, he could already see the bats swooping down in black and noisome parabolas. When he had finished his meal, he got up abruptly and with a brief word or two to Gilly, left the table and went out of the house.

Half an hour later, he tied his horse to a birch tree near his herder's cabin in the ravine, rubbed the animal's muzzle affectionately, and gave him a lump of sugar in response to a peremptory whinny. Within the cabin, Bruce undressed quickly, threw about himself the old bathrobe he had brought along, and with a towel on his arm, emerged and walked down into the ravine and up the creek to where the mountain stream narrowed and deepened.

After a dip in the cool water and a brisk toweling, he tied his robe about him and stood for a moment listening to the mountain voices that drew from the steeps above him, plaintive, spaced in piquant intervals, sometimes all but unheard: a hoot-owl's reproachful enquiry, the sleepy, last note of a bird dropped like a soft jewel into the twilight, the scurry of some small animal

into the underbrush, the sigh of a dying wind in the tall pines. But the beauty and significance of the night conspired against him, tore down the defensive structure he had erected about his being. It had all converged suddenly into an intense desire for Autumn Dean.

In a rage at himself, he turned brusquely and made his way back to the cabin, where he dressed hurriedly in the half-darkness. He was gathering up the things he had brought with him when he heard his horse whinny, and a moment later a sound at the doorway caused him to glance up quickly.

Softly outlined against the deepening dusk, Autumn Dean stood, as she had stood one other night, in her black riding clothes, her manner half diffident, half audacious.

Bruce tossed the dressing-gown and towel down upon a chair and came with slow deliberateness to the door. He placed one hand against the door-frame and the other on his hip, and stood looking down at her, a contemplative half-smile about his mouth that drew his right cheek up into a quizzical long hollow—that hollow that she had pictured in all her tormenting thoughts of him. He was waiting for her to speak.

"Bruce—" she began, and knew how desolately her voice faltered—"Mr. Gilly told me I should find you here. I've been wanting to talk to you."

"You too?" Bruce remarked. "The Dean family has suddenly acquired a vivid interest in me, it seems."

She fumbled with her gloves. She raised her head and looked at him with blank eyes. "I should like to come in, if you please," she ventured.

Bruce laughed caustically as he opened the door for her and stood well to one side. "You are quite welcome," he said. "It happens I have no kerosene in the lamp. I wasn't expecting a guest."

He lighted a cigarette and offered the package to her. Autumn shook her head. "As you will," he said, and replaced the package in his shirt pocket.

Autumn seated herself in the dim light close to the door, while Bruce leaned against the table's edge with his feet crossed idly before him. She could see him looking at her reflectively through the dimness, and the half-smile did not leave his face.

"You were over to see father this morning," she began.

"At his invitation," Bruce replied. "He wished to reimburse me for some sheep I lost."

"He told me so."

"He should have told you, also, that we were to have nothing to say to each other in the future."

"He told me that, too."

"Is this visit, then, just another little gesture on your part?"

"A gesture—of what kind?"

"Disobedience to the Laird—and contempt for me," Bruce supplemented.

"Father has no suspicion that I have come to see you," Autumn explained. "And if I wanted to show contempt for you, I should have stayed away."

"As you have done all summer," he observed.

Autumn clenched her fists in her lap as she felt her anger rise. She had not come here to have him bait her. "I should hardly expect you to understand that," she said.

Bruce's smile was sardonic. "It isn't so difficult to understand," he replied. "You found people of your own kind. I am not blaming any one for that. It was just my misfortune that you should have called on me here that night—before you found the others."

"That was a misfortune?" she asked him.

"Not a serious one," he admitted with a smile. "It was rather good, while it lasted."

She was on her feet at once, confronting him with eyes that burned in a face gone suddenly white. "Bruce Landor," she cried, "I came over here to-night to ask you if we couldn't be friends, in spite of what my father said to you this morning!"

"Your pride must have suffered before you came to that decision," he returned coldly.

"That is my own affair," she retorted. "Why don't you tell me at once that I'm wasting my time?"

"I could have done so," Bruce said quietly, "if you had told me at once what had brought you over. I decided, long ago, that you and I cannot be friends, Autumn."

She threw back her head in a proud gesture. "I shall not ask you the reason," she said, and turned toward the door.

Before she was aware that there had come any change in the immobility of his posture, he had seized her wrist and turned her about so that she stood facing him.

"I should like you to know, just the same," he said.

As he spoke, he drew her violently to him. For an electrifying instant, she knew that all her resistance had crumpled within her and that she was

responding to his almost brutal kiss with a fierce and overwhelming joy. Then, with all the strength of her arms, she beat against him, striving to tear herself away from his crushing embrace.

With a low laugh, Bruce grasped her shoulders and flung her from him, so that she reeled backward against the wall of the cabin. She stood, gasping in rage and terror, unable to speak, while he lighted another cigarette and lounged indifferently again on the table's edge.

"Now—you have the reason," he said. "You had better not come here again."

She looked across at him, unable at first to give place to the terrifying conviction that had come suddenly upon her. She had done more than cure him of his love for her—she had destroyed even his respect for her.

In a moment she was out of the door into the blindness of a dying sky, a dying world, into a forlorn space that was hollow with the moan of death.

CHAPTER XIX

AUTUMN had gone to the drawing room immediately after dinner and had seated herself at the piano. During the hour she had sat at the table with her father, she had done her best to bring him out of his solitary brooding. But her own frame of mind had been too desolate to make the task easy. She was sorry for him, inexpressibly so.

Jarvis Dean had lived his life here under a tragic shadow from which there was no escape. It was easy enough to accuse him of having permitted his pride to become a vicious passion that had goaded him to cruelty and injustice in his treatment of others. But Jarvis had suffered through the years in defense of the only thing that had been left him out of the wreck of his hopes—pride in a worthy name. Fate had dealt cruelly with him. He had been doomed to solitary battle against a world that had yielded him little for his pains.

For weeks Autumn had watched him fighting alone, retreating before the heartless bludgeonings of his own conscience, recovering himself again and beating his way back to a position of self-respect and renewed faith in himself. And always Autumn knew that his love for her was the one precious thing in his life. It was because of her, the daughter of Millicent, that he refused to give up the fight, and because of the memory of Millicent that lived in her.

It was only natural, perhaps, that he should be blind to the fact that by his stubborn struggle he was drawing his daughter into the conflict. He had thought to avoid that by keeping her where she would never have known of it. Had she been content to remain in England, Jarvis would have fought through to the end and died in the comforting knowledge that she could at least begin her own life and live it as she pleased, without the unhappy heritage of the past.

If there had been no more to it than that, Autumn might have rejoiced that she had come home and heard the story her father had told her on that terrible night when she had sat with him in his library. She could have borne the burden of the tragic past on her own youthful shoulders. But her coming had forced a crisis that had brought a crushing defeat to the Laird—a defeat from which he would never recover.

And now another evening was coming serenely to a close, as though the stars of the night before, when she had gone alone to see Bruce, had not shrunk out of the sky, as though all beauty had not become ashes in her

heart. Jarvis had gone to his library after dinner, and Autumn sat at the piano, her hands lisping idly over the keys, her eyes inattentively noting the blue dusk that stole from the open window and made a strange, impalpable color of a great bowl of yellow roses.

Presently her hands fell from the keyboard and lay listlessly in her lap. At a sound from the hall, she turned and saw her father standing in the doorway, his cigar in his fingers, his eyes fixed upon her with an unwonted tenderness.

"What was that you were playing, Autumn?" he asked after a moment.

"That was Gröndahl's *Serenade*, Da," she told him.

"I've heard you play it before—and I've asked the name of it," he said, "but I can never seem to remember. Play it again. I like it."

He came into the room and went to a large chair that stood to one side of the French windows where he sat gazing out into the fitful light of the garden as Autumn played. When she came to the end at last, he did not speak, and Autumn got up and moved to the console where the roses stood. She caressed an opulent, full-blown, yellow bloom with thoughtful fingers.

"No more music?" Jarvis enquired at last, a wistful note in his voice that hurt the bruised part of her being.

"Perhaps—later," she said quietly.

"Aye," he said, "I suppose one must be in the mood for it. But that bit, now—the one you just played—means something. It brings a light to one when he hears it."

Old Saint Pat ambled into the room and settled himself on a rug at his master's feet. Autumn left the roses and walked to a chair near her father's.

"Da," she said gently, "what would you say to my going back to Aunt Flo?"

The Laird turned slowly in his chair and looked at her across his shoulder. She glanced at him insouciantly, almost without interest in how he should respond to her question. She had really not meant it for a question so much as an announcement.

But the helpless, almost childlike look of dejection that appeared promptly in his eyes gave her a moment's disquietude.

He bent forward and clasped his hands. "You wish to go, Autumn?" he asked, his voice grown wistful.

"Da," she replied, "one can't always do just what one would like to do. I came here because I wanted to—and I've managed to make a mess of everything since I've come."

Jarvis sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, my dear. It hasn’t been your fault, either.”

“It’s the fault of no one in particular,” Autumn said. “It was just in the cards.”

“Aye. I know. You’re still thinking of Geoffrey’s son. Isn’t that it?”

“I’m thinking—of everything,” she responded. “I can’t go on living here—with things as they are. I’ve done my best, Da—or my worst, perhaps, you would say. It will be easier for every one concerned if I get back to the other side of the world.”

She got up again and went to stand before the window. There followed a long silence burdened with the impasse to which their emotions had come. She heard her father clear his throat with a deep rumble, and then she knew that he had risen and was coming slowly toward her.

His hand lay for a moment gently upon her shoulder, but she did not turn to look at him.

“I’m sorry, my girl,” he muttered. “I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I had hoped—somehow—that you might be happy here—after a time—in spite of everything. I had hoped for too much, it seems.”

“I had, too,” Autumn replied. “But it wasn’t to be.”

“I shall miss you more now than ever,” Jarvis said, and then, after a long silence: “But you must not stay because of that, Autumn.”

“You are making it easy for me to go,” Autumn said, somewhat abruptly in spite of herself.

The old man went back to his chair. “Autumn,” he said at last, “don’t be impatient with me to-night. I’m tired—and your music—”

“I didn’t mean that, Da,” she said quickly and went to him at once.

The Laird’s head sank forward, his eyes staring out upon the garden. “I’d be just as glad if I could make it easy for you to stay,” he said. “Sometimes I think you—”

His voice stopped and he swept his eyes with his hand. Autumn threw her arms about him and pressed him close to her in silence. Presently he freed himself gently from her embrace.

“You think of your father as a coward, Autumn,” he said stoutly. “I may have more courage than you know. Yesterday—when the boy came to see me—I thought I might tell him—tell him all that I told you one night upstairs there. I have my senses still, and I can see things still—with my own eyes. All your silly carrying-on this summer with that mad crowd of Elliot Parr’s—it didn’t blind me to the truth. I’ve known from the first what

was behind it. I've spent days and nights thinking about it. And when the boy came—before he came to me, I thought—I thought—the right thing to do would be to tell him—so that he'd know—so that he'd understand. Then, I thought—he could do what he liked—and you could do what you liked—and I wouldn't raise a hand to stop it, one way or the other. But—there's no way of accounting for these things, it seems. He came to me—and he stood there as if he had been Geoffrey Landor himself—proud, insolent, careless—and I offered him money for the loss of his sheep. I don't think I expected him to take it—but his manner stirred something in me. It stirred the bitterness and the hatred and the pride that have filled me for twenty years—and I turned him out!" He paused for a moment. "And now—I am turning you out, it seems."

"No, Da," Autumn protested, "it isn't so. You mustn't say that. I am going back—as I told you—because I think it will be best for us all."

Jarvis Dean drew himself up. "Have him over—to-night—in the morning," he said. "Bring him here—and I'll tell him. I'll tell him all I told you. When he has heard—"

"Father, please!" Autumn pleaded. "That would only hurt him—and it would only hurt me. You would be doing that for me, and it would be quite useless. If I love Bruce Landor, it's only another of my silly blunders. I'll get over it—with the ocean between us it ought to be easy. I'm not so hopeless that I shall go on forever breaking my heart over some one who doesn't care for me."

The Laird raised his head and looked at her. "You mean—he—"

"I mean—he doesn't love me, Da," she said, smiling down at him, "though there's nothing so strange about that."

Jarvis was thoughtful for a moment. Then he got up quickly and stood looking at his half-smoked cigar. "I didn't think he'd be such a damned young fool!" he said.

Autumn laughed suddenly, but the Laird looked at her sternly. "It'll be as you say, then," he said. "It's better so. I'll sell up in the fall and join you."

He patted her shoulder in awkward and inarticulate compassion, and turned away. She could hear his retreating steps on the polished floor, heavy and measured and pondering. To her defeated spirit, it seemed that those footsteps sounded the inexorable, iron stride of the past crushing down the present and the future.

She looked out upon the blurred garden with eyes dull in resignation.

CHAPTER XX

DURING the days that followed, Jarvis Dean's spirits were lighter than they had been for months. To be sure, it was not pleasant to think that Autumn was leaving the place to which she had come such a short time ago, her heart swelling with anticipation of what the future held for her, her mind full of plans for the new life she was entering. He was sorry for her. And yet, the irking uncertainty of those weeks had been almost more than he could bear at times. Autumn's decision to return to the Old Country had relieved him of that, at least. His own resolve to sell everything and follow her as soon as it could be managed without too great a sacrifice had brought its regrets, its pang of loneliness, but that had passed. He had a clear road before him now. He would leave behind him the past and all its burden of unhappiness and spend the rest of his days in a manner befitting a man of ample means whose declining years might easily be his brightest.

It was strange, too, how much more he saw to delight him now even in the world about him. His mind, relieved of its carking fear, was free to admire much to which he had been blind before. For the first time, it seemed, he realized that Autumn was no longer the rangy youngster he had once known, the unmanageable tomboy he had sent off to England with the hope that his sister would be able to exercise the control over her which he had lost. He had never known, except once before, in a time that he had striven to forget, how lasting and complete is the satisfaction a man may feel in the discovery of beauty in a woman.

It was some such feeling that possessed him as he looked at Autumn now, sitting opposite him at the breakfast table. He had ordered an early breakfast so that he might leave in good time on his journey into the hills to inspect his flocks and to take up some supplies to old Absolom Peek. Tom Willmar had been making the trips back and forth during the summer, but Jarvis was in the habit of going himself at least once during the season. Besides, he had given instructions to have the young Irish lad, Clancy Shane, drive out the few hundred sheep that had been culled from the range and were being brought down to be sold. He wanted to spend a half hour with the boy and assure himself that everything was coming along as it should.

"You might make the trip in with me to-day, Autumn," he suggested, "if you have nothing else to do. It would be company for me and the drive would do you no harm."

"I thought of it last night," Autumn said. "It will be my last chance to see the flocks before I leave."

"Aye—that's so. Well, get yourself ready and I'll wait for you."

"I'll change in a jiffy, Da," she said, and left the table.

"Put enough lunch in the box for the two of us, then," Jarvis told Hannah. "We'll be back for dinner late."

They were on the road before the day was more than a bright flame on the eastern hilltops and Autumn was guiding the car over the smooth trail at a speed that made her father grip the edges of the seat with both hands.

"The trail will be rougher higher up, Da," she explained once when she glanced sideways at him and saw the grim set of his face. "We'll make good time now and loaf later on."

Noon brought them within sight of the small flock that Clancy Shane was bringing down from the upper ranges and Autumn waited in the car while her father walked down into the valley. Half an hour later he came back.

"I think I'll stay along with Moony," he said. "If you want to go along by yourself and have a word with Absolom, you can pick me up on the way back."

"I'll do that, Da," she said. "Have you any message for Absolom?"

"Just give him the box of stuff there in the back of the car and tell him I'll be up myself maybe in a week or two."

Autumn started the motor and put her hand on the gear shift.

"Here, now—wait a bit!" Jarvis shouted. "We'll eat first."

With a laugh, Autumn shut off her engine and jumped out of the car. In a moment they were seated side by side on a fallen log, helping themselves from the box that Hannah had filled. A mountain creek sang over its stony bed at their feet, and above them a brisk breeze shook the boughs of an ancient pine. The smell of pine and mountain rose was sweet on the air and from the valley below came the constant bleat of Clancy's flock.

For a full hour, Autumn and her father talked and laughed together as they had not done since she was a child. When she got up to go at last, Jarvis went with her to the car and leaned over to kiss her before she started away.

"So long, darling," Autumn called as she put the car into the trail again. "I'll be back before you know it."

Jarvis stood shading his eyes against the mid-day sun, until the car vanished around a bend in the trail, and an inexplicable sadness came over

him. He had been too happy for the past hour. He turned and picked his way slowly down into the valley.

It was not until Autumn's visit with Absolom Peek had come to an end and she was preparing to hurry away that she found the courage to tell him that she was bidding him good-by for the last time. She had stayed with the old herder much longer than she had planned. The sun was already approaching the hilltops in the west and her father would be anxiously awaiting her return. But she had found it impossible to tear herself away from the quiet valley and its flocks and the hungry chatter of the old man.

"You'll be comin' up again, like as not," Absolom said as they strolled together toward Autumn's car.

"I'm afraid not, Absolom," she told him. "I'm never coming again."

"Eh?" The old man looked at her in surprise.

"I'm going back again—to England, Absolom."

"Now, now! What's wrong, eh?"

"There's nothing wrong, Absolom. I'm just—out of place here."

Absolom thrust his fingers under his weathered hat and scratched his head.

"Well, well," he said at last. "It isn't much of a place for a young girl, I know. It'll go hard with the Laird, I'm thinkin', losin' you again just when he's got used to havin' you round."

Autumn hesitated before she made her reply. After all, it would do no good to tell him that her father had decided to spend the rest of his days abroad.

"I haven't been much of a help to him, I'm afraid," she replied.

"He's past help, that man," Absolom said suddenly. "Not but what he's been a great man in his day. But he's not *livin'*, Miss Autumn."

"Poor Da," Autumn murmured. "He hasn't had an easy life."

"That's right enough. He hasn't. But he won't make it easier by packin' you off to that—"

"He's not sending me away, Absolom," she hastened to assure him. "I'm going because I want to."

Absolom regarded her quizzically. "There's more behind it than that, I'm thinkin'. Though I'm askin' no questions, mind."

They had reached the trail where the car stood. On the slope below her now, she could look back for the last time upon the slumbrous gray-white

flock moving gently, as though driven by shadows, toward their bed-ground for the night. Ah, the tenderness, the peace of that scene, with the wandering, infrequent music of the Basque bell coming to her across the mountain stillness!

She was staunchly cheerful in her farewell to Absolom, but a hot mist came between her eyes and that unforgettable picture there on the hillside below them. And then, in a moment, she was gone and old Absolom had turned again to his solitary task.

Very late that night, when Autumn lay awake and allowed her mind to drift sleepily back over the journey into the hills, it seemed to her that what she had beheld in the cycle of that day had been sunrise and sunset on the moon, or on some bizarrely landscaped planet hitherto only a fantastic dream in the mind of man. Early morning had clawed great, long scars of black valleys down the pale, colossal faces of the hills, frightening and thrilling in their report of what this land had been in ages gone. Noon had made insubstantial islands of the mountain tops, swimming in their mists as on the white lambency of some primordial sea. And in the twilight, the dark patches of pine that marked the valleys in that broad expanse might have been the spoor of creatures unthinkable, in an unthinkable chaos of the earth.

No more of that now! Back again to the artificial, the purposeless life she had known with Aunt Flo. Forget that there had ever been anything else. Forget the reverent somber brow of a mountain bared to the moon. Forget a star unfolding like a bloom of sweet loneliness in the luminous, unnameable color of a summer sky. Forget the drift of mountain rain in the spring, and the flamy torches of Indian paint brush on the gaunt hills. Forget Bruce Landor, and the curious, heartless, dear ways of love, forever.

CHAPTER XXI

On an evening within a week of the time set for Autumn's departure, Florian Parr telephoned from Hector Cardigan's place and invited her to go with him to the Hospital Benefit Ball that night in Kamloops.

"Linda is here with me," Florian said. "I had to come up on business, but I see no reason why we shouldn't mix in a little pleasure with it. We brought our duds and we're all dolled up. We haven't seen anything of you for two weeks. I'll run out in the car for you if you say so. How about it?"

"I don't know, Florian," she temporized. "I'm not much in the mood for it."

"Oh, come on!" he urged her. "Where's your community spirit? The natives will never forgive you if you don't support the cause. Hector has promised to chaperon us."

Florian laughed in a meaningful naïveté which nettled her disproportionately.

"Even you think I ought to have some one to look after me," she replied.

"Lord, Autumn, what's come over you?" Florian reproached her. "You need a shaking up. I'll be out for you around eight."

"Will Lin be along?"

"Not on your life—not with me," Florian replied. "She has made other arrangements."

"Of course."

"Bruce is coming in to look after her. We'll make it a nice little foursome when we get together. Any objections?"

"None whatever," she replied lightly. "I'll be ready when you come."

When she mentioned the affair to her father and asked him if he would not like to come along, he drew down one shaggy eyebrow and elevated the other humorously.

"Me? Scarcely," he said. "But buy me a ticket—buy me half a dozen. It's a worthy cause. You run along and enjoy yourself. It'll probably be the last spree for you in this part of the world. Put on your glad rags and show 'em what it means to be a Dean!"

Autumn laughed a little tremulously and kissed the sere and bristling eyebrow. "I'll do that very thing, Da," she told him. "Though you'd cast

more glamor on the name than I can, if that's what you want, you old Roman!"

He tweaked her ear, and Autumn ran upstairs to dress.

When she heard Florian's car outside, at a little before eight, she gave herself one last swift glance in the long mirror of her room. The black, clinging chiffon of her gown with its daringly low back, her russet-tinted hair swept back from her ears and brow and falling in a rich cascade of clusters at the back of her head, gave her a palely romantic look, she observed with skewish humor. She decided to wear no jewelry, and dismissed as absurd the bouquet of sweetheart roses that Hannah had painstakingly arranged for her. The roses would live longer, anyway, she reflected, in their vase on her dressing table. It was well that the only brilliance about her should be the hard twinkle of the rhinestone buckles on her black satin pumps. And her eyes, she thought—they appalled her as she looked into them in the mirror. Their unnatural vividness was a disconcerting betrayal. But it was just possible that she could slip into the dance and out again without encountering Bruce. If only Linda had enough intuition to keep them apart!

Florian, turned out flawlessly in evening clothes, was waiting impatiently in the drawing room below. His quick flush as she approached him, the silver web of her evening wrap on her arm, would have been sweet to the light vanity that had been hers in a day gone by. Now she heeded it only with a feeling of faint vexation. Florian came forward and lifted a cool and waxy corsage of white orchids from the small table near the door.

"Permit me, most beautiful!" he said, bowing elaborately from the waist. "And if you tell me you hate orchids, I'll make you eat 'em!"

Autumn laughed and brushed the delicate aristocrats with her finger tips. "Extravagant wretch!" she said, and fixed them to her gown. "They're beautiful, Florian. There! Thank you so much!"

She did, as a matter of fact, detest orchids, and in her imperious days at Aunt Flo's she had never thought twice about spurning them. But that was before this curious possession of pity had come over her.

"You haven't seen father, of course?" she said as they turned to leave.

"I crashed the gates with Hannah's assistance," Florian said. "Is the Laird still peeved about the haystack episode?"

"No," she replied. "He has forgotten that, I think. But he has his bad days."

"Probably feels low about your leaving him so soon again."

"Scarcely that. He may be joining me in the fall."

They had got into Florian's car. "We're going to miss you like the deuce," he said.

"It's something to know I'll be missed, anyway," Autumn murmured.

Florian put out a hand and crushed her fingers within his own, then let them go and grasped the wheel. "Damn it!" he muttered. "If you would only listen to reason—"

The hall in which the dance was being held was packed when they arrived. Japanese lanterns and gay streamers festooned the ballroom and across the bobbing sea of faces came the giddy blare of a jazz orchestra. Autumn looked down from a balcony upon the throng, with heavy-lidded eyes behind which there was a searching glow.

"Some crush, eh?" Florian observed, standing close beside her. "Shall we go down at once and get our shins kicked? Or shall we wait awhile? They're using everything down there from the Ark gallop to the latest wiggle of the rumba."

"Let us look on for a while first," she suggested.

As she spoke, her lashes swept low over her eyes. In the comparative freedom of the outer fringe of dancers, she had seen Linda and Bruce Landor. Above Linda's head, Bruce's eyes moved cautiously along the rim of the balcony, paused for an imponderable instant as they met Autumn's, and moved on in indifference.

"There's Lin and Bruce," Florian said suddenly, "down there near the wall—to the right."

Autumn looked, pretending not to see at once. "I see them now," she said finally.

"You could pick them out of a million," Florian said admiringly. "They make the rest of the crowd look like also-rans. Let's go down and give them a little competition, Autumn."

"So you got here?" It was Hector Cardigan speaking at Autumn's elbow. She turned upon him a radiant smile and extended her hands.

"Hello, darling!" she cried throatily. "How gorgeous you look!" She seized the lapels of his dinner jacket and surveyed him with wide eyes. "Are you going to give me a dance?"

"You flatter me," Hector said in his courtly fashion. "Do you guarantee to bring me safely out of the mêlée?"

"She brings us all safely back—out of everything," Florian put in.

"Are you so afraid?" Autumn asked, as if she had not heard Florian's remark.

“Those young things down there—they terrify me,” Hector said.

“And you a soldier!” Autumn bantered.

Hector smiled. “I was younger then than I am now,” he said. “And stepping all over one’s toes was considered against the rules.”

Autumn and Florian laughed, and the three made their way down to the dancing-floor, the men on either side of Autumn, her arms drawn lightly through theirs. They stood chatting for a moment beside a great potted palm, and then Autumn waved back at Hector as Florian swept her away into the dance.

“The next one, Hector, remember,” she said over Florian’s shoulder. “I’ll meet you in the lounge.”

Hector nodded, but when she was out of sight he frowned. Bruce Landor had just come off the floor with Linda Parr. They strolled toward him, saluting him from some distance away as they approached. It occurred to the old soldier then that Autumn’s wish to dance with him had been merely a ruse. Her real desire was to avoid dancing with Bruce.

“Hullo, Hector!” Bruce said warmly as he came face to face with him. Linda, with a nod toward Hector, had been caught up by some one else and was already moving away into the crowd.

“Good evening, Bruce,” Hector said with a stern smile. “You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“Immensely,” Bruce replied with a promptness that brought a slight lift to Hector’s eyebrows.

Hector toyed with the ribbon guard of his glasses. “The hospital ought to benefit from this,” he remarked. “It’s the best crowd I’ve seen for years.”

“Everybody’s here,” Bruce agreed.

They stood for a moment and watched the dancers swirl past them.

“I think I’ll get out of the crowd a bit,” Hector said at last. “What would you say to a smoke, my boy?”

“I’d be all for it,” Bruce replied.

“Let’s go to the lounge, then,” Hector suggested.

They made their way to a corner of the lounge where there was a measure of privacy and seated themselves in two chairs that made an angle facing the entrance.

“I haven’t seen much of you lately,” Hector said as he offered Bruce his cigarette case.

“I haven’t been out much, except on business,” Bruce replied. “I’ve had a busy summer of it, one way or another.”

"Yes, yes, of course. I was sorry to hear about your prize Merinos. There was underhand work in that affair, eh?"

Bruce lit his cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke as he settled back in his chair. "I can't talk about it, Hector," he said. "It makes me want to fight when I even think of it."

"Naturally, naturally," Hector said. "The less you think about it the better, I should say." He smoked a moment in silence, then cleared his throat softly. "I understand you are going to lose your young neighbor soon," he remarked casually.

"You mean Autumn Dean?" Bruce said without a flicker of expression revealed to the shrewd look that Hector turned upon him.

"Yes."

"Lin told me to-night that she plans to go back to England," Bruce said.

"Next week, I believe. And you are letting her go?"

Bruce cast a quick glance at the old man. "I'm letting her go? I wasn't aware that I had anything to do with it," he said in an off-hand manner.

Hector smiled slowly as he looked at Bruce, then sighed reminiscently. "The age of chivalry seems to have passed," he said, shaking his head.

Bruce gazed at his cigarette smoke with narrowed lids. "I don't follow you, Hector," he said. "I can't see what chivalry has to do with it when a girl takes it into her head to run off to Europe."

"Do you know, my boy," Hector replied, after a moment of silence, "I suspect that this younger generation they talk about so much nowadays—I suspect they're a pretty faint-hearted crowd compared with their fathers—or their grandfathers, for example."

"I'm not in a position to question you, Hector," Bruce said. "If your reference to the faint heart has anything to do with the fair lady—"

"Of course it has!" Hector put in. "In my day, if a young man had notions about a young lady, she wouldn't get a chance to run off to England and leave him in the lurch."

Bruce laughed lightly. "Hector," he said, "you're barking up the wrong tree, old boy."

Hector bristled immediately. "I don't bark—" he began, then halted abruptly and got to his feet. "Here comes Autumn herself," he said, his pleasure and annoyance making a curious gnome-like mask of his face.

For an almost imperceptible instant, Autumn paused in her approach to them. Hector saw her quick pallor and put out a hand toward her. Bruce rose and made a slight, formal bow with an ease that was disconcerting to Hector.

After a brief “Good evening!” to Bruce, Autumn turned at once to Hector.

“Our dance, Hector!” she announced. “Or haven’t you finished your smoke?”

Hector waived her question and then drew himself up sternly. “You are planning to leave for England next Saturday, I understand,” he said to Autumn.

“Next Saturday morning, Hector,” she replied.

“I am inviting you two”—he said, and looked aggressively from one to the other—“to dinner at my house next Thursday evening. Will that suit you both?”

There was a silence in which Hector, the spectator, saw the clash of humorously blue eyes and clear, stricken, sea-green eyes. Bruce thrust one hand idly into the pocket of his coat and stood in a lounging attitude, looking pleasantly down at Autumn as he replied.

“Thursday will suit me, Hector.”

“Why, certainly, darling,” Autumn said breathlessly, turning to Hector. “How sweet of you! Shall we dance now?” She took Hector’s arm and led him away.

Bruce watched them go, then smiled as he seated himself.

Poor old Hector, he thought wryly. Making a last gallant effort! And how gamely she had taken it! Came right back at him, her eyes flaming in rage. Oh, well—what the devil! He buried his cigarette angrily in the earth of a potted plant that stood near at hand, then got up and strolled out, the leisurely figure of a young man who had no scar on his spirit.

The evening was no more than half spent when Autumn begged Florian to take her home. She pleaded a headache—from the noise and the heavy air of the place. Florian protested, but finally agreed. They found Linda and together arranged for one last night at the Parr hunting lodge before Autumn should leave them. Autumn would drive up from home and meet them at the lodge. The day was set and the girls kissed each other good night. For once, it seemed, Autumn was more languid than Linda.

CHAPTER XXII

FIFTY miles southward, and ten more off the straight trail to Kelowna, was the distance that Autumn must go to the Parr hunting lodge. She had left home early to attend to some business in Kamloops and to assure Hector that she would be on hand for his dinner party on the following evening. It was a matter of indifference to her that Florian would be at the lodge, too, but the thought of meeting Linda warmed her heart. It would be difficult to say good-by to her. In her frivolous, unsentimental way Linda had shown her more unconscious sympathy than she could ever guess.

It was barely dusk when Autumn drove her car in through the rustic gate that led to the lodge. She got out promptly and glanced about, anticipating that Linda and Florian would be on the lookout for her.

"Hello!" Florian came hurrying toward her from the doorway of the lodge.

He took her gloved hands in a firm grip and stood looking down at her with a strange, inscrutable smile.

"Hello, Florian!" she returned, her voice a little unsteady. "Gosh, I've been driving like a fiend!"

"Go on in," Florian told her and gave her shoulder a little squeeze with his hand from which she shrank with instinctive uneasiness.

He jumped into the car and drove it hurriedly into the garage cabin. Autumn started toward the lodge, but Florian caught up with her and opened the door for her to enter. Within the large room, familiar to her now with its antlered heads projecting from the walls, its bear and cougar skins scattered about the floor, its deep stone fireplace, its properly rustic but comfortable chairs and deep divan, its buffet littered with bottles and glasses which would be an eternal adjunct to any furnishings of the Parrs—there was not another soul but herself and Florian.

Autumn turned upon him. "Where's Lin?" she demanded.

Florian had closed the door. He was leaning against it now, his hands thrust nonchalantly into the pockets of his corduroy jacket. His blond head shone in unruly picturesqueness against the stained log surface of the door. His dark eyes smiled at her, half closed in contemplative pleasure.

"Lin came down with tonsilitis this morning," he told her.

"Why didn't you telephone me, then?"

"We did, but you had already left home."

"Why didn't you have Elinor come along with you?" Autumn demanded, vexed at Florian's manner.

"Lord, Autumn, don't get all worked up over nothing," he replied. "Elinor doesn't go out with me. Besides, isn't it all right this way?"

"You know it isn't—as well as I do," she told him.

He took a step toward her with easy indolence. "Don't be a simp!" he said. "Give me your things."

Autumn looked at him coolly, surveying him hostilely as he regarded her with his smile of assurance.

"Certainly not," she said. "I'm going back home right now. You know I wouldn't have come if I had known you were to be alone here."

She moved toward the door, but Florian grasped the shoulders of her loose automobile coat and pulled it off her.

"Don't be such a fool!" he said. "Now that you're here, sit down and be pleasant about it. I'm not so old-fashioned as to make any assaults on your virtue, if that's what's on your mind. My God, I had to come up here to tell you, didn't I?"

"Now that you've told me—I can go," Autumn replied.

"You're not going to get out of here till we've had a drink and a bite to eat. After that you may do as you please."

Autumn seated herself and took a cigarette from her case. She lit it and sat without speaking while Florian carried her coat to a closet and hung it up. When he came back he poured a couple of drinks at the buffet, one of which he handed to Autumn. Then, glass in hand, he stood before her and laughed sardonically.

"So little Autumn was afraid her Florian was going to stage a regular old-time, knock-'em-down-and-drag-'em-out scene, eh?" he observed.

"I wasn't afraid," Autumn told him.

"As a matter of fact, I really should do something about it," he went on. "Come to think of it, you've succeeded in making a fool of me all summer."

"I see," said Autumn. "You'd like to get even. I didn't credit you with being vindictive."

He flushed darkly. Then a pathetically boyish and disappointed look came over his face, so that for a moment, in spite of herself, Autumn felt sorry for him. Perhaps it had been unsporting of her to play with him all summer when she had known from the first how he had felt about her. Florian threw himself into a chair and sat with his hand shading his eyes.

"No," he replied slowly, "you've got me wrong, Autumn. I'm not saying anything about what I would do if I could. But—not against your will, my dear. I admit I was glad when Lin found she couldn't come out. I was glad of this chance of being alone with you. I was silly enough to think that perhaps—alone with me for the last time—you might relent a little."

"I'm sorry, Florian," she said wearily. "I have tried to make it clear from the first that we could never be more than friends."

"You have your reasons for that, no doubt," he said. "Am I so—so absolutely impossible?"

Autumn sighed and turned her eyes to the window. "I seem to have made a mess of things, all around," she said.

He shot her a quick look from beneath lowered brows. "It's Bruce Landor, of course," he said, with a sharp inflection bitten with hopelessness.

Autumn avoided his eyes, her gaze upon the window where, the curtains drawn back, the redolent, piny air of the mountains drifted gently inward.

"I knew it," he said disconsolately. "I've known it for weeks. That's why you're going away. You're running away from him."

Autumn got up and stood by the window, looking out across the hills where evening was already settling down. She had been standing there a long time, neither of them speaking, when Florian got impatiently out of his chair.

"Let's eat!" he said suddenly. "You're probably starved."

She looked at him and smiled dimly. "I could do with a little something," she agreed. "What is there? I'll get it ready."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he retorted. "You'll sit down and have another drink while I fry the bacon and eggs."

Fifteen minutes later, they were seated amicably across from each other at the little table before the fireplace, feasting on bacon and eggs, bread and butter and marmalade, and the really excellent coffee Florian had made. Florian, remarking with a derisive smile that they might as well have it as romantic as possible, had made a fire in the fireplace and had moved the prosaic lamp to a secluded alcove.

Their talk was desultory and was concerned chiefly with the Parrs, since Autumn was reluctant to speak of her impending journey. Linda, he told her, had found herself a new passion, the object of which was a bemedaled war veteran who had come to the Okanagan and bought himself a fruit ranch.

"Just a matter of changing from sheep to fruit for Lin," he remarked. "It's great to have an easy conscience."

And so they talked in quiet amiability, while the firelight flickered pleasantly on the ruddy pine beams of the ceiling and coquetted with the shadows that lurked about the furnishings.

Ever since Autumn had left that morning, an inexplicable sadness had lain upon Jarvis Dean, a heaviness of heart that was more than mere regret at her going. She would be back again to-morrow, he told himself, and they would still have a few brief days together before she left the Castle for good. It would be for good this time, and when he joined her in England in the fall, that would be his own farewell to this land in which he had known the heights and depths of all passions. Searching his heart for the cause of his melancholy, he came with acute anguish upon the truth. Jarvis Dean had reached an end—an end of everything that had really mattered in life. An abyss of nothingness yawned before him.

Without these stark hills and unguessable valleys that had witnessed with silent compassion the drama of his life, he would be as a player upon a stage without an audience.

Frequently during the day, his eyes had roved hungrily over the noble prospect that had been his for more than a quarter of a century. By toil of mind and body and soul he had made it his own, and his being, in turn, had been delivered over in its entirety to the magnitude of this earth. All that he had known of joy and sorrow, hatred and love, the saga of his failure and triumph, was written across the bright tablet of this land, inscrutable to all but himself; when he left it his epitaph would be graven there.

For an instant, as he paused in his work that morning, an impulse, wild and thrilling, came upon him to abandon his plan of joining Autumn and chance her return here, whatever the consequences. For that brief, free moment, Jarvis Dean was himself, identified only with that essential thing that had informed his life—his beloved valley. In that one exalting interval he was released from the devouring obsession of Geoffrey Landor that had made a slave of him. But the moment passed and had any one been watching him, he would have observed strangely that Jarvis' form seemed to change in a twinkling from the figure of a man in his vigorous, unhindered prime to that of a vast ruin.

The sun marked noon, and the less explicit hours of the west. Toward the latter end of the day Jarvis went on foot to the temporary camp where his young Irish herder, Clancy Shane, was tending the few hundred sheep he had brought down from the range to be sold. It had been a matter of great

pride to the boy that he had brought the band down single-handed and Jarvis had expressed his dry pleasure by raising the lad's salary.

In a wooded hollow before he reached the rise from which the flock could be seen, Jarvis halted abruptly to listen. An unwonted clamor of excited barking was coming from the direction of the flock, mingled with the mad bleat of sheep. In alarm, Jarvis scrambled up through the woods to the crest, where a furious spectacle met his eyes.

The low, red sun shone obliquely across a turbulent, livid sea of gray bodies, a sea which, while Jarvis stared at it aghast, seemed to become a vortex spinning closer and closer to the brink of a deep arroyo, a sandy cleft in the ground that had been washed deeper by freshets of the last spring. The dog, in a frenzy, was striving to head the crazed flock away from the danger. Suddenly the Irish lad leaped into the maelstrom and began beating his way toward the churning center. Jarvis shouted a hoarse warning and began to run.

Before he reached the arroyo, however, the outer fringe of the band had run off tangent-wise and were plunging headlong into the gaping earth. Instantly the whirlpool broke, the main body of it following the mad course of the first few into the arroyo. When Jarvis came at last and looked over the edge of the cleft, he found the pit filling with writhing, kicking, screaming bodies. A few had escaped and were straggling up the steep bank, bleating dementedly, their oblique, crazy eyes aglare.

In the thick of the struggle, flailing out with both arms and sobbing frantically, Clancy Shane bobbed about, with hideous ludicrousness, like a cork. Jarvis yelled to him and plunged down the embankment, hurling out of his way the few half-stunned animals that rushed up at him. With all the strength of his powerful frame he fought his way to the boy, lifted him bodily above the descending stream of gray forms, and flung him free.

As he did so, a dozen grizzled shapes came down upon him and Jarvis fell back among them.

Bruce Landor was driving home from town. On a sharp decline in the road where it approached the Dean place, his gaze was arrested by a wild figure that rushed frenziedly toward him, apparently from nowhere. Bruce drew to the side of the road and stopped his car. The madman was young Clancy Shane.

The boy collapsed against the running board, his breath a raucous wheeze. Bruce leaped from his car and lifted him to a sitting position.

"What's wrong, Clancy?" he demanded.

The boy flung out an arm toward the pasture. "Over yonder!" he gasped. "The master—in the gully! Go quick!"

With only a swift glance of horror into the blood-stained face of the youth, Bruce sped away.

The sight that met his eyes in the arroyo froze his veins. There was a scattering of sheep, running and bleating idiotically still, with the dog valiantly struggling to bring them together. But across the gap in the earth there had risen a solid isthmus of dead or dying bodies. Of Jarvis Dean himself there was no sign. Bruce stood in stony horror. The sheep lay in the arroyo, ten deep.

Two men came running from the direction of the Dean place.

A strange quiet seemed to have fallen upon that land, when—it seemed to Bruce an eternity later—the western sky drew down an emerald curtain upon the glory that had been there. Three men stood back from their work, their bodies wet, and lowered their heads. The battered, still form of Jarvis Dean lay where they had placed it on the ground at their feet.

Clancy Shane had told them the brief and tragic story of what had occurred. An eagle had flown down on the flock and terrorized a few stragglers that had wandered a short distance from the others. They had raced back and spread the contagion of fear in the flock. The rest of the story they could read for themselves in the havoc that had been wrought during the brief moments of the hopeless struggle.

Hannah, in the kitchen of the Castle, lifted her tear-drenched face from her hands. "You will have to go and fetch her, Bruce," she sobbed. "She is stopping the night with the Parrs at their lodge. You know the place?"

Bruce looked down at her. "Yes—I know where it is," he replied.

"Will you go, then?"

His lips tightened. "I'll go," he said.

In a few moments he was on his way, the dusk thickening about him as he sped along the winding trail that led southward into the mountains. Two hours later he climbed up out of the troublous dark heat of the valley into the sheer, cool starlight of the hills. Now the road became narrow and capricious, and the black spires of the dense pines made a cathedral ominousness against the sky. How like Autumn, Bruce thought with frowning admiration, to have driven over this road alone! One false swerve of the wheel and she would have been at the mercy of this solitary

wilderness until some one found her and brought her out. He strove to keep his mind on the deviousness of the way so that he might be possessed of a measure of composure for the difficult task that lay before him. He was glad, with a self-effacing bleakness, that her friends were with her—Linda Parr and Florian. They would be able to offer her comfort, as he himself was not qualified to do.

He had telephoned to Hector Cardigan from the Dean place. It had seemed proper that Hector should be the first to be informed of the tragedy—and, if possible, to break the news to Autumn. Bruce would have given much to have had the old friend of the family with him on this sorry mission, but Hector had not been at home and Hannah had urged that the tragic news should be carried to Autumn without delay.

The road began to steepen treacherously as Bruce approached the comparatively open shelf on the mountain where the Parr Lodge stood. From somewhere in the shrouded darkness far above him came the sinister, feral wail of a cougar, a trailing sound of wounded malevolence. Closer at hand an owl hooted as though in mockery of that other more menacing cry of the wild.

A gleam of light through the dark weft of the pines, and Bruce was driving in at the open gateway to the lodge. He turned his car about, deferring for a painful moment the duty that was before him, and formulating in his mind, with all the gentleness he could muster, the dolorous words that he must speak. As he got down from his car he could hear a door opening in the lodge behind him. A moment later he was face to face with Florian Parr.

Even in that instant, when his own distress of mind was uppermost, Bruce detected embarrassment in Florian's manner.

"Hello, Florian," he said as he extended his hand.

Florian took the proffered hand in a brief clasp, then seemed to draw back hesitantly. "Bruce!" he exclaimed softly. "You're the last person I expected to see here to-night."

Bruce glanced toward the house. "I've come with some pretty bad news, Florian," he said in a low tone. "Autumn's father was killed this evening."

Florian fell back a step. "Killed? Good God! How?"

"He was over visiting the flock young Shane brought out to be sold. The boy says an eagle frightened the sheep and they got to milling. Shane tried to break up the jam and they got into a ditch on top of him. Jarvis jumped in and saved the boy—but he never got out of it himself."

Florian ran his hand across his brow, speechless from shock. Bruce saw him glance abstractedly toward the house.

"My God!" he groaned at last. "This will just about kill Autumn!"

"You'd better go in and fetch Lin," Bruce said tersely. "She'll be the best one to break the news to her."

But Florian was regarding him in blank consternation. Bruce, puzzled, began to feel an impatience at his singular attitude.

"There's no sense in delaying it, Florian," he said harshly. "She has to be told. And Lin is the one to talk to her."

As he spoke he glanced toward the house. It came to him that there was something strange about the place. It seemed deserted, somehow, and although the windows were open no voices came out to them from within.

"Lin isn't here," Florian said heavily. "Autumn and I are alone."

Bruce stared at Florian through the gloom with eyes that seemed to go dim and lifeless with the dull flush that had suffused his whole being after that first sharp stab of incredulity.

"Oh!" he said then, in a voice that had died before the sound issued. "Oh —I see!"

Florian's face was turned toward him in the darkness. For a moment he did not reply. "You don't see at all, you damn fool!" he broke forth at last. "Lin couldn't get here. We were just getting ready to leave when we heard your car coming up the hill. If you think—"

"Shut up!" Bruce rasped. "You don't have to apologize to me. Go in and tell her. She's needed at home—to-night. I'll drive ahead. I don't think I can be of any more use."

With his fists doubled up so that his nails were like blades in his palms, Bruce tore himself away. He had experienced for the first time in his life the exhilarating and horrible impulse to kill. Blindly he staggered to his car, swung it through the gate so that it lurched crazily toward the brink of the trail before he righted it, then paused to await the sounds that told him that Florian and Autumn had started from the lodge.

All the way back down into the valley, with the shameless and heartbreaking sound of that other car following behind him, it seemed to Bruce that the stars rocketed through a delirious sky, and that the night with its burden of madness would descend and annihilate him.

CHAPTER XXIII

STRANGE, AUTUMN thought with the objective detachment that emotional exhaustion brings, how this gold and white drawing room that had been Millicent's preserved its aloof and reticent singularity, impervious to any unwonted experience of the other quarters of the house. She sat huddled listlessly in a deep chair, part of her consciousness attending Hannah, who was bidding a smothered good-by at the front door, to Snyder, the lawyer, the other part aimlessly adrift on that curiously attenuated sunlight that filled the room. Sunlight—no shadows here, in the room that had been peculiarly Millicent's! How oddly ironical! Even now, when the rest of the house seemed to mourn in sympathy with the Laird's deserted study upstairs, where Saint Pat alone kept his dumb, broken-hearted vigil, this room was a mystically serene denial of death. Or, rather, it was an affirmation of life beyond temporal things.

Autumn pressed her fingers against her eyes at the feeling of light-headedness that was coming over her. The ordeal of listening to Snyder read her father's will had undone her completely. And that extraordinary codicil, that footnote that he had written into it to Bruce Landor only a short time since—

But here came Hannah, with a steaming pot of tea! Snyder had refused tea—had helped himself generously to the Laird's choice brandy, instead. Funny how resentful one could become, in times of emotional upheaval, over a small and irrelevant thing!

She glanced at the tiny watch that hung on a cord about her neck. Hector Cardigan would be here again soon. He had been coming faithfully every day, and now she felt that without him she would be utterly lost.

A shadow, unobtrusive, gentle, fell across the threshold, and Hector entered through the French windows from the lawn. Autumn rose and drew another chair close to her own beside the low table on which Hannah, with a silence that marked her own personal grief and not the decorum of a servant in the house of bereavement, had placed the tea things. With pale humor, Autumn had noted how Hannah had taken the loss of her master unto herself, after a due observance of the amenities in consoling the master's daughter.

Hannah withdrew noiselessly, and Hector seated himself beside Autumn.

“One sugar, I believe, Hector!” she said, with an effort at briskness. “And lemon?”

“Quite so,” Hector returned.

Her very hands, she thought as she poured the tea with an uncontrollable tremble, seemed to have lost their character. They looked weak and purposeless.

Setting her cup on the table beside her, she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “I’m adrift, Hector,” she murmured. “Absolutely adrift.”

“Now, now, my dear,” Hector stammered. “Life must go on, child. Even after—after terrible things happen to us.”

“Life must go on? Why?” She opened her eyes and gazed at him, as though in genuine wonderment.

Hector shifted uneasily. He looked worn and shaken, she thought with idle compassion. His friendship for Jarvis had been a long and tried one; he was the only living being who had witnessed the extraordinary drama of that ill-starred soul from beginning to end. Perhaps it was unfair to inflict upon poor Hector the irony of the epilogue.

“That is an absurd question, Autumn,” Hector said gruffly. “The daughter of the Laird *will* go on. You are shocked and exhausted, my dear —”

“I have not been the daughter of the Laird for a long time,” Autumn interrupted in a pensive voice. “I know now that father died twenty years ago. The ghost of him came back now and then—and on one of those visits he wrote a note in his will to Bruce Landor.”

Hector started. “A note?”

Autumn rose slowly and went to the desk at the farther end of the room, where Snyder had sat with her and Hannah a half hour ago. When she returned she held an envelope in her hand. She removed from it a narrow sheet of paper.

“Father must have written this on the bottom of his will immediately after Bruce came to visit him one day, at father’s request. Snyder could make neither head nor tail of it, of course. We shall have to give it to Bruce.”

Hector took the paper from her hand.

He read, in the Laird’s bold, impatient hand: “To Bruce Landor, the admission that I may have been wrong in many things. At this moment’s writing I seem to see a light. But it flickers and goes out, leaving an old man in darkness. I cannot help it if I blunder through the night that envelops me. Life has played me false, making of me that which I would not be.”

For some seconds Hector sat looking attentively at the writing. Then his eyes lifted and Autumn was surprised at the solemn radiance of his face. It was a look of relief, almost of happiness.

"Yes," he said, as if to himself. "It must have been as you say—the ghost of him came back. I myself have thought something of the kind. I have thought it often. Poor Jarvis! His obsession with the past distorted all his thinking. He wrote this in a moment of—of lucidity. You should be glad he did, my dear."

"Glad?" Autumn said absently. "It alters nothing, Hector."

"On the contrary, my dear," Hector protested, "it alters much." He tapped the paper lightly with his fingers. "This is the equivalent of a retraction of everything that Jarvis had against Bruce Landor."

"Even so, Hector," Autumn said wearily. "What good can that do now?"

"It will not hurt Bruce to know that Jarvis Dean held no real bitterness in his heart toward—"

"Certainly, Hector!" Autumn broke in. "Forgive me, please! That was a selfish thought."

Hector laid the paper on the table and placed his hands awkwardly on his knees. "I see," he said softly. "What you would have preferred, perhaps, would have been your father's written consent to—"

"Oh, Hector!" Autumn interrupted again. "I wasn't thinking when I spoke."

"I can see that," he said. "The fact is, when a young woman is in love she interprets everything in the light of that one fact. Well, my dear, this retraction—small as it may seem to you—may have some bearing even on that."

Autumn looked at him and smiled resignedly. "You don't understand, darling. Bruce has made up his mind about me."

"You are sure of that?"

"I haven't told you," she said hesitantly, "about the night he came to the Parrs' lodge to tell me what had happened to father. I had gone up there earlier in the evening. Bruce found me there alone with Florian. Hannah had told him that I had gone to spend the night at the lodge. I had intended to, but Linda was to have been there, too. She became ill that day and couldn't leave home. Florian met me there—to take me back home, of course. But we had supper together in the lodge and before we were ready to leave—Bruce arrived. You know yourself what he must have thought. Florian tried to explain, but Bruce wasn't in a mood to accept his explanation."

"Hm-m," Hector said, knitting his brows. "Has Florian done nothing more about it, then?"

"Florian was incensed, of course, at Bruce's attitude. He will undoubtedly have a talk with Bruce—and force him to listen, but he's away just now on a business trip for his father. It won't make any difference to Bruce, though. You see—he had changed toward me before that."

Hector frowned and cracked his knuckles. The romances of these young creatures were too much for him. He had been given to understand that young love of the modern variety held the conventions in light esteem. Now, in his day—ah, well, in *his* day!

"You're a pair of young fools!" he blurted out suddenly, and poured himself another cup of tea.

Autumn got up and stood looking out of the wide spread of windows into the garden. Hector was endeavoring, she thought to herself, to bring her out of the ghastly enchantment that had imprisoned her since that dreadful night when Bruce had come for her at the lodge. Only isolated images remained in her memory of the events of that shocking time, brilliant and horrible as exploding stars. The ride home—a nightmare in which the staggering knowledge of her father's death clashed against her knowledge of Bruce's reaction to finding her alone with Florian. Then, suddenly, Hannah taking her in her arms—Hannah, white-faced and speechless. And the closed mask of a door—the door of the little back parlor, behind which her father lay. The comical little undertaker, with the cone-shaped bald head, at whose appearance Autumn had fled to her own room to scream into her pillows with hysterical laughter, until Hector had come quietly in and sat on the bed beside her. From somewhere—Hector had come. She learned later that Bruce had finally reached him by telephone. Then, in the depth of night, the moan of Saint Pat, the deep-throated, forsaken moan of Saint Pat!

Yes, Hector was trying to bring her around. It was sweet of him, of course, but where was the use of their talking any more of Bruce Landor? Bruce seemed more unguessable to her now than ever, in the numbness of her fatigue. It was difficult to remember clearly what he looked like, or to recall the timbre of his voice. It seemed years since she had seen him, severe and silent, at the entrance to the Castle, where he did not turn in after his car had escorted her and Florian home.

Autumn turned and faced Hector.

"Fools?" she said. "Yes, darling—and past redemption."

He looked at her with curiously bright eyes. "Probably, my dear, probably," he replied. "What, for example, are you going to do about that—

that little note your father wrote into his will?"

"I don't know yet," she replied. "I should like Bruce to know about it, naturally. I shall think of some way—"

"With your permission," Hector suggested, "I shall attend to that myself. I should like to, if you don't mind. Or perhaps you would prefer to look after it in your own way."

"I'd like you to do it," she replied. "It would be simpler."

"I'll make a copy of it now, then," Hector said, and took the paper to a small desk at the end of the room where he sat and wrote while Autumn smoked a cigarette in silence.

Presently he got up and folded the sheet of paper as he came toward her. Her eyes followed him with a slow, spent interest as he thrust the paper into his pocket and drew out a slender packet tied with gold cord.

Hector unbound the packet, and with fingers strangely reverent, lifted from it a letter that lay uppermost.

"These letters," he said in a gently modulated tone, "were my reason for asking you and Bruce to dinner at my house that night. As it turned out—you could not come, but I had wanted you both to read them, even then, difficult as it was for me. These letters belonged to your mother. They were written to her by Geoffrey Landor. Before she died she entrusted them to me. I am giving them to you now so that you may read them when you are alone. In them he tells of his efforts to leave the country with his wife and son when his life here became hopelessly involved."

Autumn drew a quick breath. "You mean—he tried to get away?" she asked softly.

Hector cleared his throat with a painful hesitancy. "He did. I myself know how he tried—quite apart from anything he wrote here."

"I did not know that," she murmured.

"Your father did not tell you that, because to him it was not important," Hector went on. "Jarvis never had a true perspective of the thing that happened to him—to all of them. He was obsessed. Jealousy will drive a man to do things for which he is not altogether accountable. Your father believed it was Geoffrey's plan to leave and have Millicent join him later. But Geoffrey's property at the time was heavily burdened—and Jarvis held the bag, as we say. He had Geoffrey at his mercy."

Autumn sat on the edge of her chair, her fingers tightly interlaced in her lap. Her eyes burned fixedly upon Hector as he talked.

"I shall leave the letters with you, then, to read when you wish. But this —" he tapped lightly the letter he had selected from the packet—"this one I want you to read now—while I am with you. It was your mother's wish that I should give it to you when—and if—I should ever think it necessary to do so."

He removed a fragile, folded sheet from the yellowed envelope that enclosed it.

"Why haven't you told me about this before?" Autumn asked him.

Hector flushed painfully. "You forget, my dear, that your father was my friend. It has been difficult enough for me to decide to tell you even now. Nothing but your resolution to leave this country and spend the rest of your days in England convinced me that the time had come for me to place these letters in your hand."

He unfolded the letter and took from within it a short note that had been enclosed with the longer one.

"This," he said, handing Autumn the shorter one, "you may read before the other."

Autumn took it in trembling fingers and let her eyes dwell upon the delicate, paling script.

"Hector, my dear friend [Millicent had written], I do not think that I shall recover. Please do not forget your promise to me. I trust that the task I bequeath to you will bring you no unhappiness. In gratitude, Millicent."

With unseeing eyes, Autumn stared for moments at the slip of paper in her hand.

"Now, my dear—you may read this," Hector said, handing her the letter he held.

When at last she was able to govern her emotions, the phrases seemed to burn into her eyes with a ghostly incandescence.

"To my beloved daughter, Autumn [she read]. When you read these words, if you ever do read them, it will be because Hector Cardigan has deemed it proper that you should do so. They concern things which I myself should have wished to tell you if events and circumstances had made it necessary—or possible.

"I want you to know, dear Autumn, that neither your father nor Geoffrey Landor was to blame in the unfortunate accident that took Geoffrey's life. Geoffrey had done his utmost to get away and forget me—and help me forget him. Hector can tell you why it was impossible for him to go. Since that terrible day, in the spring, your father has brooded constantly over the

death of the man he once called friend. I fear that it may become an obsession from which he shall never escape. I am the one who is to blame, Autumn, if any one is to blame for hopeless love.

"I can never tell you, my darling girl, how love came to me at last, after years of groping. I can only tell you that it came, after you were born, but that I never forgot the vows that had made me the wife of your father. I can tell you, too, that love—when it is love—is a woman's whole life and being. She can never escape it though she go to the ends of the earth.

"I do not know what lies before you here. Jane Landor is a strong-willed woman and she has already made it clear that she intends to continue at her own ranch, discharge all her obligations, and bring up her boy in the valley. You and he will be growing up together, Autumn, and the time will come when you must be friends or enemies—according to the will of his mother and your father, who hate each other now. It is my wish, Autumn, that you see things clearly and without prejudice, and that you refuse to be influenced by this tragedy of the past. I should like to think that you would be a friend of Geoffrey's boy. It might help to pay the debt of, Your devoted mother, Millicent."

By the time Autumn had reached the end of the letter, the words were moving like a dimly silver caravan beyond her tears. The clairvoyance of the dying! Perhaps Millicent had even hoped that there might be more than friendship between her daughter and Geoffrey Landor's son—and effectuation of that destiny which had begun in her and Geoffrey. Autumn glanced across at Hector where he had seated himself again at the windows, and folded the letter pensively in her hands.

"Thank you, Hector," she said, "—for showing me this."

He did not turn from the window, and Autumn laid the letter beside the packet on the table and went to him.

"You've done your part," she said, "and I'm grateful to you."

He turned and put an arm about her. For a moment he seemed on the point of speaking. Then he patted her shoulder affectionately and turned away.

"I'll be going, I think," he said brokenly. "Come to see me."

Without another word he left her, picked up his hat from the small sofa on his way out, and walked away, his thin, straight back soldierly and unflinching. From the windows, Autumn watched him go, her teeth biting down into her quivering lip. Then she turned and went to her room.

CHAPTER XXIV

BRUCE LANDOR, in loose gray flannels, swung his considerable length of limb out of his modest automobile and proceeded carelessly up the steep steps to Hector Cardigan's door. He was somewhat mystified, though he had resisted any suspicion of intrigue, by the urgency with which Hector had pressed him to come to dinner.

Hector, obviously at a tension, ushered him in, took his topcoat and hat and hung them on the rather insecure rack in the hall, a rack which, Bruce supposed, one should admire as having belonged to Cleopatra, or perhaps Confucius.

"I'm glad you came, my boy," Hector said, drawing himself up solemnly and looking at Bruce with a penetrating eye. "Come along in. I have an appetizer waiting for you."

"Right, Hector!" Bruce said, following his host into the dining room where one end of a long refectory table of solid, gloomy old oak was spread tastily with fine linen and silver and china, and a surprising array of edibles.

Bruce had here, always, a disconcerting feeling that he was about to see the wraiths of antiquity emerge from the draperies on the walls and repossess with jealous hands these treasures that furbished Hector's home.

He stood by while Hector filled two glasses, one of which he handed his guest with a courtly bow.

"To good fellowship, my boy!" Hector proposed, and held his glass for Bruce to touch it with his own.

They drained their glasses at once and Bruce held his forward with a smile.

"One more, Hector—to the spirits of the past!" He waved a hand toward the tapestried walls as he spoke.

Hector looked at him quickly, then filled the glasses again with an excitement in his movements that caused Bruce to wonder. But he smiled across the top of his glass as he bowed once more to Bruce and drank.

"Well," he said, when the glasses were empty again, "you must be ready for supper, my boy. Let's sit in."

"I hope I shall never be hungrier," Bruce replied and took the chair to which his host invited him with a wave of the hand.

The wine was excellent, as were the cold meats and the salads. Hector's first excitement seemed to subside as the meal progressed, and he talked in a leisurely fashion. They talked of Jarvis Dean's death and the impressive funeral that had followed, of the Dean estate and of Autumn's plans to live in England—but always in an impersonal tone that gave Bruce no hint of what was in the old man's mind.

When they rose from the table, Hector spread a cloth tidily over the dishes and led Bruce into the drawing room, closing the dining room door behind him.

"The skeletons will be at the feast," Bruce thought, smiling to himself.

The evening having turned cool, Hector had kindled a small blaze of pine logs in the Dutch tiled fireplace, and now they seated themselves before it with their brandy and cigarettes.

"I suppose you would be uncomfortable in the presence of modern furniture," Bruce remarked, glancing idly about the room. "You have lived so long with the ghosts of the past."

A strange glow warmed Hector's eyes. "In more ways than one, my boy," he observed pointedly. "But I have never permitted my ghosts to haunt me. That Elizabethan wine-cup, now—" he pointed to an elaborately wrought chalice that stood on the top of a china closet—"who knows but what the death of some gallant courtier may have been drunk from its brim? But does it make the cup less beautiful, less precious to our time?"

"Rather not," Bruce replied. "On the contrary—"

"The past," Hector said, warming to his subject, "is a dim avenue down which we may walk and find the diverging paths of terror and beauty and passion. If we stand at the entrance to that avenue and peer within, remote times telescope into our own immediate past, so that with clear eyes we may note that the events of antiquity and of a few decades ago have the same values. Or do you follow me, sir?"

Bruce regarded his host with mounting curiosity.

"I believe I do," Bruce said, swept involuntarily into Hector's stately mood.

Hector waved a fine brown hand toward the Spierinx tapestry on the wall to their left. "The accomplished fact of the past," he continued, "may be compared to a tapestry like that—upon which we can look with disinterested sympathy and compassion and admiration at the quaint desires and ambitions and tragedies and loves of our forefathers. To the rational mind even a generation ago is such a tapestry, my boy."

Hector was leading studiously to something. His oratory was not without a definite object, of that Bruce was sure. He settled himself in his chair and resolved to wait patiently for the disclosure of his purpose.

"Do you remember that line from *The Tempest*? 'What's past is prologue.' You will excuse me," he apologized suddenly, "—I am an old man—and given to romantic indulgences."

Bruce smiled. "Go ahead, Hector! I've had some such ideas in my own mind, though I've never been able to put them into words."

Hector favored him with a shrewd glance. "Of course you have, my boy. Of course you have! You have thought of the past that lies behind you, no doubt—your own father's death, for example."

Bruce tossed his cigarette into the fire. "It was that I had in mind, Hector," he admitted.

There was a brief silence in which Hector leaned forward and turned his brandy glass thoughtfully about in his fingers.

"Would you mind it very much if I asked you something about that?" he said finally.

"There is nothing much that I can tell you, Hector," Bruce replied. "You probably know more about it than I do."

"Have you any very clear opinion concerning how your father came to his death?" Hector asked abruptly.

"I have understood that he took his own life—because of his love for—for another woman," Bruce returned.

"You know that?"

"I have put two and two together, Hector," Bruce replied bluntly. "I know they were in love—the rest I have guessed."

"You have talked with Autumn about it?"

"A little—a very little—one night just after she came back," Bruce admitted.

"You came to that conclusion together, then?" Hector asked. "I hope you don't mind my questioning you in this way. It's scarcely good manners in a host."

"It can't make the slightest difference, Hector," Bruce replied. "I see no reason why you and I should stand on ceremony."

"Certainly not! Certainly not! Because of that, I mean to tell you the truth about that episode, if you can bear the telling of it."

Bruce bit meditatively at his under lip while his eyes studied Hector's face.

“I’m of age, Hector,” he said. “I guess I can stand hearing it—if you can tell it.”

The old man drained his glass and set it on the table. “Then—listen until I’m quite through with it,” he said.

Bruce felt ridiculously like a child who was about to be told the facts of life for the first time. But in spite of his mildly derisive mood, the piquant articulateness of Hector’s ancient furniture and clocks and silver and porcelain gave him a strangely warm feeling of receptivity. However shocking Hector’s disclosures were to be, it seemed true to him now at least—whether or not the mellow personality of the room had hypnotized him—that the past was the past, yesterday flowing back into the Renaissance, into the Middle Ages, into the lush glow of prehistoric times, sealed and separate from to-day.

Three clocks, in various shadowed recesses of the room, struck eleven. Bruce had heard all of Hector’s story, and the two men had sat for minutes without speaking a word.

Hector got up from his chair, looked briefly at the youthful figure seated across from him, elbows propped on knees, head resting on hands, and poured out two more drinks of brandy.

“A night-cap, my boy,” Hector said sturdily, as he offered the glass to Bruce.

Bruce came suddenly out of his reverie, and took the glass from Hector, then sat for a moment staring into the sparkling liquor.

“How much of this does Autumn know?” he asked.

“Everything I have told you,” Hector replied.

“I see,” Bruce said quietly. “Did you tell her?”

“Jarvis Dean told her—one night—soon after she came back.”

“You don’t happen to remember—about what night that was?”

Hector thought for a moment. “Not very clearly. She called here the next morning—I think—on her way to visit the Parrs.”

“That was on her first visit, wasn’t it?”

“I believe it was,” Hector told him.

“It must have been,” Bruce said. “God—it just about killed the girl, I guess.”

Hector looked at him for a moment. “Why do you think she has been playing the fool ever since?”

Bruce tossed off the brandy and set his glass aside. “It’s a crazy world,” he said. “One night—only a week ago—I learned how it feels to want to kill a man.”

Old Hector, standing above him, raised his eyebrows. A light seemed to dawn in his eyes and he smiled whimsically down upon the roughly tousled head of his guest.

“That was good for your soul, my boy,” he observed. “You learned something that ought to mean much to you in the future.”

Later, when Bruce got into his car, Hector stood within the little, cowl-like porch of his abode and noted that the Milky Way was a pearly bridge built from mountain top to dark mountain top. Bruce called a good night and Hector waved a response. And as the car sped away he looked up at the sky again and thought how much younger the stars had been when he was young.

CHAPTER XXV

AUTUMN walked across the grounds to the Willmar cottage, her wide-brimmed leghorn hat in her hand, the light, warm wind blowing the skirt of her white organdie dress into a billow about her. As she approached the cottage, three children rose from the tall field of white daisies that grew in the hollow between the Castle and the foreman's lodge. The Willmar brood —Dickie, Simmy and Laura—started toward her with excited cries, their hands full of the white daisies they had been gathering. Trotting behind them came the ubiquitous Mo-mo, still possessed of his woolly tail, and bearing himself with considerably more dignity than when he had gone wandering with Simmy in the early Spring.

Autumn stooped and gathered the children into her arms, then turned and stretched her hand to rub Mo-mo's velvety nose.

Laura, the ten-year-old, pressed her blonde head close against Autumn's cheek and wound her arm tightly about her neck.

"I don't want you to go 'way, Autumn," she said, her voice full of pleading. "Mamma says we'll have to go away, too, if you go. We don't want to go."

Autumn's eyes darkened with the anxiety she had been feeling for the past week. "Nonsense, dear!" she protested. "You will stay here no matter where I go."

Dickie and Simmy broke into a duet of lament. "We can't have Mo-mo any more. The man says he's goin' to take Mo-mo."

"Oh, you dear sillies!" Autumn scolded them. "No man is going to take Mo-mo. Come along, let's go in and see mother."

With a warm little-boy hand in each of hers, and with Laura walking sedately ahead of her and Mo-mo following closely behind, Autumn proceeded to the Willmar cottage.

It was baking day for Mrs. Willmar. As Autumn entered the kitchen with the children, the woman turned from the table where she had been rolling out cookie pastry. The troubled look in her eyes changed swiftly to a resolute smile as she dusted the flour from her hands.

"Good morning, Miss Autumn," she said, brushing a loose strand of pale hair back from her warm brow. "My goodness, you young ones shouldn't hang on Miss Autumn's dress that way! Don't let them do it. Come away, Dickie—your hands are a sight!"

Autumn laughed and rumpled Dickie's hair. "Hands and dresses can be washed, can't they, Dickie?" she said.

Mo-mo's hoofs clattered across the kitchen floor to a basket of vegetables that stood in one corner.

"Simmy—look after Mo-mo." Mrs. Willmar sighed wearily, and wiped her face with her apron. "If you children can't mind that lamb he'll have to be kept outside. He's getting too big to be in the house, anyhow."

When the children had lugged the sheep out of the house and had gone romping into the yard, Autumn seated herself beside the kitchen table and Mrs. Willmar went on cutting out the cookies with the cover of a baking-powder can.

"Tom says you'll be leaving us soon again, Miss Autumn," she said quietly.

"Not for another two weeks or so," Autumn told her. "There is a lot to do with straightening everything up in a place like this."

"Ah, dear! I don't know what we're going to do!"

Autumn glanced quickly at her and saddened. Tom Willmar's wife was a wistful-eyed little woman who had won her way back to health when she had come to live here ten years ago. The Dean ranch had meant life itself to her. And now—the fear of being ousted from her contentment and her modest security haunted her eyes.

"I've been wanting to talk to you about that, Mrs. Willmar," Autumn said gently.

The woman turned her face toward her in an utter hopelessness that wrung Autumn's heart.

"Talking about it won't change anything, I'm afraid, Miss Autumn," she replied resignedly. "Snyder was talking to Tom last night in town. He's a hard man, that Snyder."

"What was he saying, Mrs. Willmar?" Autumn asked.

"Tom told him he'd like to stay on here—it's been home to us for over ten years now. But Snyder says his clients, as he calls them, have plans of their own and there won't be any more place for us here."

Autumn clasped her hands in her lap. For days, ever since the evening of her last conference with Snyder and the men who were considering the purchase of the ranch with all its stock and equipment, her mind had dwelt almost constantly upon the Willmars, and Hannah, and poor old Absolom Peek, and the others who had given their years of faithful service to Jarvis Dean. At the outset of her negotiations with Snyder, Autumn had supposed

that her father's old dependents would remain where they were and go about their work as they had always done. Hannah, of course, would have to be looked after, but Autumn had already resolved to take her along with her and make her remaining years as comfortable as she could in the service of Aunt Flo. Snyder had been as diplomatic as possible. He was anxious to complete the sale without delay and in a manner that would be quite satisfactory to both parties to the transfer. When Autumn had expressed her wish that the staff should remain to carry on the work, Snyder had been unwilling to commit himself. His clients, of course, would have plans of their own. He would do what he could, certainly, to bring them to accept her suggestion. In the end, Autumn had refused to put her name to anything until the point was satisfactorily settled. The transaction had been delayed—and Snyder had been annoyed.

Autumn looked at the pitifully brave smile on the face of Mrs. Willmar. This little woman was only one of that small community of souls who, with the toil of their hands and the unquestioning courage of their spirits, had brought richness and well-being to this valley. And now that community was to be disrupted, flagrantly, ruthlessly, with no thought of the injustice that was being done to these humble people whose loyalty to Jarvis Dean was no part of the bargain that Snyder was making. In that brief moment Autumn looked inward upon herself and saw that in her pampered life she had taken these honest folk for granted, just as carelessly she had taken for granted the substantial revenue from her father's estate. Here was a heritage from the past which she had not recognized.

"I know, Mrs. Willmar," Autumn said at last. "Mr. Snyder is being very difficult about it—though, of course, he is not altogether free to do as he chooses. He must meet the wishes of his clients. But they will never find any one better than Tom to manage this place. I have told them so."

"There's precious little comes of telling people what they don't want to hear, Miss Autumn," Mrs. Willmar replied.

"I know," Autumn said. "But I don't want you to worry. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall see to it that you and Tom have a good position before I leave."

Mrs. Willmar had placed the cookies in a pan and turned now to put them into the oven. When she straightened again, she looked at Autumn with a small, sad smile.

"That's awfully kind of you, Miss Autumn," she said. "But you shouldn't trouble yourself about us, really. We shall get along—somehow. And it isn't so much a question of where we'll go as it is—just our leaving

here. The Laird was always too kind to us, I guess. He—he spoiled us. No other place will ever seem like home to me. You see, I got my health back here—and my two youngest were born in this cottage. It makes a kind of difference—to know that we're leaving home."

Leaving home! The words cut across Autumn's heart with a cruel import. The woman could never guess what they meant to her, of course.

"Oh, Mrs. Willmar!" she cried. "If you only knew how—how terribly I understand!"

She was on the point of saying more, but suddenly, utterly bewildered by the complexities of her own feelings, she got up and went to the little woman and threw an arm impulsively about her shoulders.

"I've talked too much," Mrs. Willmar said, the tears starting to her eyes.

"I'm glad you have," Autumn said quickly. "But I don't want you to worry about it any more. I *know* it will work out, somehow, for the best."

There was little comfort in that, Autumn thought, but words were so futile, after all.

Mrs. Willmar hastily dabbed at her eyes. "I'm behaving badly, I'm afraid, Miss Autumn," she said brokenly. "I've no right to carry on this way. It's not proper, at all."

"Proper, fiddlesticks!" Autumn replied. She turned suddenly and looked out of the door where the children and Mo-mo were at some game in the yard. "I'll have to run along now, Mrs. Willmar." She opened the door and then looked back at the foreman's wife. "Those cookies smell awfully good. Do you suppose you could have one of the children sneak some of them past Hannah for me?"

Mrs. Willmar smiled. "We might try," she said.

A little later, when Autumn slipped in through a side door of the Castle, she surprised Hannah in the small sitting room in the act of wiping her eyes with the corner of a dust cloth. Hannah straightened severely and contrived a cheery smile which in no wise deceived Autumn.

"Hannah!" she reproved. "What's the use of carrying on like this?"

Hannah flicked the cloth indignantly over the rungs of a chair. "Who is carrying on? Not me!" she denied vigorously.

Autumn gave her a narrow look, then went into the drawing room where she seated herself at the piano, thinking to break the heavy enchantment of the house with the sound of the melodies she loved best. But after a random bar or two her hands fell dismally away from the keys and she stared from

the windows into the garden, her spirits sinking under the burden that had lain upon her for almost a week.

Uppermost in her mind, above all the questions that arose out of her perplexity, was one thought that bore constantly upon her mind. Hector Cardigan had told her about the evening Bruce had spent with him, when he had unfolded the past, withholding nothing of the story of Geoffrey Landor and Millicent Dean. Autumn had lived through four days of unspeakable suspense, hoping for some gesture from Bruce, some sign of his relenting toward her. At last, in utter despair of ever hearing from him, she had turned her mind toward preparations for her departure. Her resolution to leave all behind her and begin life anew might be both cowardly and selfish, but to her defeated spirit there seemed no other way.

CHAPTER XXVI

LATE in the afternoon, when it seemed no longer possible to cope with her problems, Autumn went to the rose garden to spend an hour with her own thoughts among her mother's flowers. She had been there only a few moments when Hannah called to her from the house.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Autumn," Hannah told her as she came up the porch steps.

"Is it Mr. Snyder?" Autumn asked, with the ever-recurring, breath-taking hope that this, at last, might be Bruce calling.

"I don't know. It didn't sound like him—though I don't hear like I once could."

Autumn went to the telephone and picked up the receiver. The voice was Florian Parr's. He had just come back from his business trip to Vancouver and insisted on Autumn's returning with him to Kelowna. He had talked with Linda on the telephone, he said, and it was her fervent wish to have Autumn down for a day or two so that she might meet Linda's new fiancé. Besides, Linda was planning to go to Europe on her honeymoon. There would be plans to discuss with Autumn.

"I'd love it, Florian," Autumn said impulsively, glad at the prospect of any relief from the depression that had weighed upon her all day. "I'll be ready when you get here. Hurry!"

"Right-o, old thing!" Florian chimed back. "You won't be able to see me for dust once I get started. I have a few things to do yet before I leave, but you can count on me in—make it about an hour and a half, say. How's that?"

"The sooner the better," Autumn told him. "I've had a terrible day of it, one way or another. I'm dying to talk to some one."

"And I'm dying to talk to you," he replied. "I'm the original old die-hard, Autumn."

She left the telephone with a sudden feeling of relief. Florian was a good sort, after all.

After telling Hannah her plans to go to Kelowna for a couple of days, Autumn hurried upstairs, took a refreshing cold shower, and proceeded to dress with an attentiveness to her appearance which had, in times past, helped to brace her flagging morale.

Presently she stood back from her pier glass and surveyed herself. The past few weeks had taken their toll; her eyes looked frightened and too large in the hollow pallor of her face; the backward clustering of her hair seemed too heavy for her head. And this severely tailored suit of white linen, smart though it was with its mannish silk blouse, gave her an almost ascetic look. Florian would have a shock when he saw her, she reflected indifferently. But the wonder that thrust sharply into the background of her thought was what Bruce might think if he came face to face with her now.

She selected a half-opened pink rose from a vase on her dressing table and drew it through the lapel of her jacket. The effect was chastely sweet, she decided. Well, one had to contemplate the trivial details if one kept going at all—especially when the important things of life seemed bent on one's undoing. Bruce Landor might just possibly call while she was away—no, no, there must be an end to such thoughts as that! She tightened her lips as she heard Hannah's voice calling her from the foot of the stairs. That had been Florian's car, then, that she had heard entering the driveway.

"I'll be down in a moment, Hannah," she called back, and hastily dabbed a powder puff to the shadows under her eyes.

She had almost convinced herself that she was gay when she descended the stairway and approached the drawing room door. On the threshold, she paused abruptly and checked the greeting that was ready on her lips. The young man who rose to meet her was Bruce Landor.

"Hello, Autumn," he said quietly as he came toward her. "I was afraid I might not find you at home."

She felt the wild, hot flush that covered her cheeks. "Why—Bruce! I had no idea it was you. I was expecting Florian."

In her confusion she knew, of course, that she had stumbled wretchedly there.

"I'll not stay more than a minute, Autumn," he said, with a diffidence that brought her a quick marveling of incredulity.

"Oh, please!" she breathed. "Sit down—until he comes, at any rate."

What on earth was she saying? She felt as if her wits had left her completely. What she had just said, in effect, was that he might leave the moment Florian arrived. But perhaps Bruce would not care to meet Florian—after their last encounter.

She seated herself and Bruce took a chair near her. Somehow she could not bring herself to glance directly at him in her sharp awareness of the distraught look on his face. Every instinct of her being, alive to his nearness

once more, informed her that Bruce Landor had been suffering even as she herself had suffered.

"I had hoped you might come," she found herself saying, the words stumbling out recklessly.

He darted a quick look at her. "Had you, really? I—I wasn't sure you would care one way or the other."

"Oh!" She was not sure whether or not she had spoken. Her fingers twined tightly together in her lap.

"I dropped over to say good-by, Autumn," Bruce went on. "Tom Willmar says you are planning to leave for England in a few days."

"I haven't set the time yet," Autumn replied. "It won't be for another ten days, anyway."

"I am going into the hills for a couple of weeks," he continued. "I'm leaving early in the morning. You'll probably be gone before I get back."

Her voice, when she spoke again, seemed to limp like some injured thing. "Oh," she said, "it was nice of you to come."

He opened his cigarette case and offered it to her. She was obliged to make her fingers rigid in order to control their trembling as she held the cigarette while he lit it for her.

"I came, Autumn," he said at last, his voice strangely tense, "because I did not want you to leave with the feeling that—that we are not friends."

A desire to give way to tears almost overwhelmed her as she looked at him now and recognized what it meant for him to speak so frankly. She could have gone to him in that moment and wept in his arms.

"I have had no such feeling, Bruce," she said with difficulty.

"I couldn't blame you if you had," he said. "I think I told you—one night—that we could not be friends."

She smiled at him but did not speak, smiled frozenly, in a silence that was unbearable.

"I wanted you to know, before you left, that we shall always be friends—because we must be. I had dinner with Hector the other night."

"He told me so," Autumn said.

"I heard the whole story—*our* whole story," Bruce went on, with evident emotion. "I wish you had told it to me before."

Autumn lifted her hands toward him slightly in a gesture of appeal. "I wanted to tell you, Bruce, but you must know why I could not."

"I understand that perfectly, Autumn. I should have felt the same about it myself—and would probably have acted as you did."

She forced herself to look squarely into his eyes. "It has all been terrible—for both of us."

"Forget it, then," Bruce said firmly. "What's past—is past!"

As he spoke, a car drove up before the door and came abruptly to a stop. Bruce got up and walked toward the window.

"That must be Florian now," Autumn said.

"It is," Bruce told her. "I'll be on my way."

He came toward her and held out his hand. She slipped her hand into his and thought in swift panic that she was losing him now, forever.

"Did you mean what you said—that the past is past?" she asked him hurriedly, as Florian's footfall sounded at the door.

Before he could reply, Florian had hailed them from the doorway. Bruce drew back a step and Autumn turned to meet Florian, who was coming toward them, his usual easy self, his hand extended.

"Hello, folks!" he greeted them. "Great to see you again, Autumn! And you, too, Bruce! How's the big sheepman? Gosh, I haven't seen you for an age!"

"The last time we met—" Bruce began, but Florian interrupted him.

"Say, the last time you spoke to me—you had murder in your heart."

"I admit it," Bruce said with a smile.

"You're great on that defending-a-woman's-fair-name stuff, Bruce. You'll get a reputation if you're not careful. You looked ready to kill me that night—kill me with your two hands, as they say in the thrillers."

"I know I was," Bruce admitted. "I owe you both an apology for what I thought that night."

"Don't spoil it, now," Florian admonished him. "You know, you really should have lived in the days when knights were bold—and all that rot—when running a man through was just part of the day's work." He laughed at Bruce and then turned to Autumn. "Give us a drink, Autumn. I'm as dry as a salt mine."

"Sorry I can't stay with you and join in one," Bruce said. "I've got to get into the hills first thing in the morning and I've got a lot to do before dark."

"Sorry," Florian replied. "I was hoping we might have you down at the ranch for a little party this week-end. Autumn is coming down to help us celebrate her going away. In fact, Lin told me she intends to telephone you to-night about it."

"I'd like to go," Bruce assured him, "but I can't put off the trip another day. Tell Lin for me, will you? I'll not be home to take her call."

"You're not leaving to-night?"

"No, but I'll be staying up at the cabin in the ravine to-night," Bruce replied. "I have some work to do up there on some new corrals I'm putting in."

"Well, business is business," Florian observed, "and I've had enough of it to last me for a month. How about that little drink, Autumn?"

"I'll say good-by, then," Bruce said, and gave Autumn his hand once more.

Autumn held his hand for a moment without speaking, then turned away as Bruce started for the door.

"Call me up when you come out of the hills," Florian suggested as Bruce waved him a farewell.

"Right!" Bruce replied and was gone.

Florian turned to Autumn as the door closed. "Come along, darling—one drink and we'll hit the trail."

Autumn brought the ingredients and permitted Florian to mix them. He kept up an incessant chatter concerning his trip to Vancouver and the scores of small interests that had occupied him since their last meeting. Autumn did her best to listen but found it impossible to keep her mind on what he was saying. When at last Florian filled the glasses and handed one to Autumn, she sipped it once and set it aside.

"Come on, darling," Florian urged. "We'll have to be making tracks."

She looked at him. "I can't go with you, Florian," she told him.

"What!"

"I'm sorry," she replied, "but something has come up—since you telephoned. I've got to stay here to-night."

Florian was puzzled. He knew from her manner that there was no use in urging her to come with him. She had made up her mind.

"That's rough on me," he said, "but you've become a woman of affairs, and there isn't much I can do about it, I suppose."

"There's nothing any one can do—about me," she said, "except myself."

Florian was silent for a moment. Then he helped himself to another drink and lifted it in his hand, regarding it thoughtfully. At last he looked at her over the rim of the glass.

"You know, Autumn," he said slowly, "I have a hunch you will not go to England at all."

"I don't know, Florian," she admitted.

"You don't want to go," he told her.

"You know I don't."

"I thought as much," he said, lifting his glass. "Well—here's luck!"

Autumn lifted her glass and drank with him. When she set it aside once more, she got to her feet.

"You are going to stay for dinner," she announced abruptly, and in spite of his protests she went to the kitchen to confer with Hannah.

The sound of Florian's car on the highway was still audible to Autumn as she hurried to her room and began removing her white linen suit. She changed quickly to her black riding clothes and fastened a bright green scarf about her throat, her hands trembling with an unaccountable excitement.

Her flight down the stairs and out of the house brought from old Hannah a mere despairing click of the tongue. She had long since given up the struggle of trying to cope with the vagaries of her young mistress.

The sun had gone and the new moon had cut a barely perceptible silver curve in the pale sky as Autumn mounted her horse and turned him westward. She was glad, shamelessly, that her gaze fell full upon it, and neither over her right shoulder nor over her left.

Beneath the serene dome of evening the mountains had drawn into their blue secrecy. The drowsy murmur of the range drifted toward her and overwhelmed her senses with its prophecy of fulfillment.

Bruce had told Florian that he would not be at home. He would be in his cabin. She turned from the trail and rode over the hills straight in the direction of the ravine. As she came to the white birches and looked ahead, she saw the cabin among the trees, almost hidden in the dusk. There was no light in the window, and her heart fell at the thought that he might not be here, after all. If he had already gone—

She rode up the narrow trail and dismounted among the birches, leaving her horse to graze as she approached the door. She did not knock, but pushed the screen door quietly open and stepped within.

Bruce was on his knees in the middle of the floor, packing a heavy box with supplies. He looked up quickly, then got to his feet and faced her in the

shimmering gloom of the place. She retreated a step and leaned her back against the frame of the doorway.

For a moment neither spoke. Then he stepped toward her.

“Autumn!” he said, his voice quick with excitement.

“You did not answer my question—this afternoon,” she said.

“What question?” he replied.

Autumn strove to speak but her voice failed her. Bruce came and stood looking down at her.

“What question?” he repeated.

“Did you mean it—when you said—the past is past?”

“I meant—just that!” he told her.

“Forever?”

“Forever—and ever!”

She looked at him for a moment before she spoke again.

“And you told me once—that I should never come here again,” she said, smiling up at him. “Did you mean that, too?”

The slender furrow deepened in either cheek as he leaned toward her.

“I meant that, too,” he said. “I meant it—then.”

She caught her hat suddenly from her head and flung it across the room.

“I’m here!” she said. “That’s why I’ve come.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Prologue to Love* by Martha Ostenso]